

**Genealogy for Beginners:
From Both Sides of the Reference Desk**

by
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Conference Abstract: Library employees and genealogical researchers often see each other as at-odds in accomplishing each other's purposes. Learn why these two groups should be important to each other, as well as glean helpful tips for helping staff to better assist these researchers, as well as to help genealogists to better serve their own research needs.

[PowerPoint presentation](#) (in .pdf format)

I am an amateur genealogy buff. I have been working diligently at this hobby for one year, and am continually amazed by what I have discovered, how I have discovered it, and how simple and, simultaneously, how difficult it can be to uncover one's past through the numerous clues revealed in one's family tree. I am also a librarian. I have been working in libraries since August 1993, which is almost thirteen times longer than I have had any inclination at all towards genealogical research. In those many years working in libraries before I began genealogy research, I observed many unfair treatments of those seeking out genealogical information in public libraries. When I began working on my own family research and experienced the unkind treatment on the "other side" of the reference desk, it made me wonder what it is about these two groups of people that rubs each other the wrong way. Is it possible for the two to get along? These questions led to the development of this program for the 2006 Tennessee Library Association's Annual Conference.

From a library staff point of view, genealogy researchers can be tricky, at best. You know them the instant they walk through the door and head toward the reference desk. Typically, they look like they are traveling (because they often are). They come complete with folders, notebooks, sometimes even rolling backpacks and laptops. They want to know where your genealogy materials are: microfiche/microfilm machines, census

records, books about local cemeteries, and more. They want to know what the area looked like and how it functioned when their great-great-grandparents lived here. Their questions seem endless, and often impossible. Their demands are great. They have questions and they want answers. They took vacation leave from Pennsylvania, Ohio, or further away, just to come to your fair town and seek out this information. Why aren't you doing more to help them?

The simple truth, more times than not, is that the typical library employee is not so interested in genealogy. This lack of interest often means that they also do not know how to efficiently and/or effectively assist the out-of-town research renegade. Rather than train them to search genealogical materials more successfully, thereby eliminating many uncomfortable interactions for them and for library patrons, we stand by while they hobble through sloppy reference interviews about the topics at hand and hope that they don't get crushed by this past-tense profiler. Instead, we should find ways of helping staff who are going to help "those people" by providing effective training and exposure to the genealogical resources in our libraries and information centers. Encourage staff to explore the genealogy databases and the numerous fantastic web sites available (often for free). Armed with knowledge, staff can share invaluable time-saving tips with those people searching for long-lost relatives whose names mean nothing to us and whose stories are much less meaningful to us than to the researcher. In the long run, effective training will save time for both our library employees and our researchers.

The face of genealogy has changed radically in the Information Age. Just as libraries no longer utilize the old fashioned card catalogs and Gaylord machines for checking out materials, many genealogy researchers are becoming tech-savvy themselves. Databases from companies such as Ancestry.com and HeritageQuest are making it easier than ever to search census and other official records. The census records have been transcribed and are sold to libraries and, in the case of Ancestry.com, to individual customers. More often than not, libraries with lots of genealogy traffic find these services to be a wise investment, since most library users (and therefore genealogy researchers) know, or can learn, the basics of database searching. That is not to say that census transcriptions are 100% accurate, and even when true to the original, the original record may not be correct. The transcriptionist's task is typically to transcribe exactly what has been written down on the original census forms, including typos,

misspellings, and all. In this regard, genealogy sleuths need library staff members to remind them gently of appropriate search strategies. They need to remember to allow for alternative spellings, try searches using broader parameters, and sometimes to think outside the box of normal searching. For example, I spent literally weeks using my local public library's HeritageQuest subscription looking for my great-great-great-grandfather, Jackson Monroe Davis. I started in Grayson County, Virginia, because that is where I had found him (along with his mother, older sister, and younger brother) in the 1860 census. I still have not located him in an 1870 census. In 1880, however, I found him still in Grayson County, now married with children. As there is no 1890 census to examine for clues¹, I moved on to 1900 looking in the same place. I broadened my search to the entire state of North Carolina, since he had been listed on the 1860 census as having been born in North Carolina (and because Grayson County is adjacent to North Carolina, where both of his parents had also been born, according to census records). All of this, with no luck – I couldn't find him as Jackson, nor as Monroe. So I dropped the first name altogether. Did this bring up many false hits? Yes, it did, but hidden among the useless items was my great-great-great-grandfather in Tazewell County, with his wife and several of their ten children. His name had been transcribed as “Monre.” Sometimes, answers are there, we just have to have patience and persistence to uncover them.

The Information Age has also equipped a vast number of genealogy seekers with the basics for doing online research – the amount of “information” available via the Internet is amazing and sometimes overwhelming. I can find many online-published family trees (through sources such as Family Tree Maker and Legacy Family Tree), free for the taking, so to speak. Sometimes, in their zest to get beyond a “brick wall” or to prove some long-held family story, genealogy buffs will be lured into accepting false leads as fact. As with all Internet searching, library staff should remind those seeking their family histories online to treat these family trees as unproven, unless there are substantial resources cited and shown such as census records, birth certificates, marriage licenses, death certificates, etc. This is true whether the information is located through sources such as user-submitted family histories on Ancestry.com or even through the highly-esteemed Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

As further safeguarding, library workers may also remind patrons that formal records then could be (and often were) falsified or incorrectly

recorded. Last September, my grandfather's oldest brother accompanied us to the cemetery where their parents were buried. He was indignant when he realized that their mother's year of birth was incorrect on her tombstone. "If she told me once, she told me a hundred times," he said directly to me, knowing that I had the video-camera on, "I don't have to listen to him' (Dad) 'because I am older than he is – two years older!" I began looking through census records the next evening and found that my great uncle was indeed correct. My great-grandmother was two years older than her husband. It may forever remain a mystery how the incorrect date was put on the stone and why no one had mentioned it in the 50 or so years since her passing.

Another example is my paternal grandparent's marriage license. They eloped and crossed the state line from Grayson County, Virginia, into Alleghany County, North Carolina, because my grandmother was not yet eighteen. To make a long story short, the trip ended up being quite an adventure, including sneaking around after her father had threatened my grandfather with his rifle, crossing a river by ferry, and arriving at the home of a justice of the peace around midnight, disturbing his slumber as many young couples had no doubt done. In the exhaustion from all that had happened, my grandfather answered truthfully when the gentleman asked their ages. After promptly being told no, that he could not marry them because the bride-to-be was too young, my grandfather explained that her father really would kill him if he took her back to Virginia and they weren't married. The Justice's wife talked him into it, realizing that my grandfather was very serious and would likely face kidnapping charges or worse if he crossed the state line with the 17-year-old girl. Once convinced that marrying the couple was the right thing to do, the Justice asked (since he had to lie on the paperwork anyway) how old the couple wanted to be. My 18-year-old grandfather puffed out his chest and answered "21," and my 17-year-old grandmother grinned playfully and responded, "22." And those ages are precisely what is recorded on their marriage license. And how do I know these details? I obtained a copy of the marriage license and then had the good fortune to be able to ask my grandfather, now 94 years old, for the story behind the math that did not add up.

DNA Genealogy could very well be another program unto itself, so I want to touch on it only briefly. Many things that we have not been able to prove or disprove with written records are now coming to light with DNA Genealogy. DNA is a complex subject, and relatively new. Many times, older individuals

are unsure of what it can and cannot be used to show, as well as how or where to begin searching for the best sources to use in order to become part of a surname project, etc. Between 60-70% of genealogists are women; according to Ancestry.com, the figure is 63% ([Smolenyak 2003](#)). However, unless you are seeking Native American ancestry in your family lines, only men's DNA really “matters.” Females' DNA is mitochondrial, and therefore cannot be tested to prove relationship among generations of men (Y-chromosome DNA). Men, then, can show the DNA of both of their parents, while women carry only the DNA of their mothers. Another trick of DNA genealogy is that what it reveals is based on a continuous line of the same sex. That is, in order to find out how your great-great-grandfather matches DNA samples from a distant cousin, it has to be a continuous-male line (one of his sons to one of his sons to one of his sons, etc.). One generation without a male fouls up the whole line. Fairly often, people are discovering that their heritage is not what they have been led to believe at all, mainly because of what is referred to in DNA Genealogy circles as “non-paternal events” – in other words, your mother is your mother, but your father may not be who you have been told he was at all. This can be troubling, at best, and devastating, at worst, and anyone considering delving very far into their family history (whether through traditional outlets or through DNA testing) will need to be aware that “family history” has not always been portrayed honestly. Numerous online resources and books deal well with the topic of DNA Genealogy and it might be best to refer patrons to these types of resources; make sure that your library staff knows the resources so that they can make the referrals.

Library staff and genealogy researchers can get along, but not without compromise on both sides of the reference desk. Those seeking the secrets to their families' pasts need to be realistic about what they can and cannot ascertain through records, in general, and also what they can discover in just one or two trips to a library, regardless of whether it is in their own hometown or 1000 miles away. Those doing research should be gently reminded that some answers may take longer to uncover than others, and that some people work on their “brick walls” for decades without ever finding conclusive evidence. Genealogy researchers also need to be able to accept dead ends in library research; sometimes, what they seek just cannot be found at that time or place. At this point, a rational approach may put the researcher in the library staff's good graces. With a good relationship in place, the staff may be willing to let the researcher know if further information about that particular family is acquired by the

library (in terms of a book, family file, etc.), or the researcher may be encouraged to check back periodically to see if any such resources have been acquired. "Periodically" should not mean that the genealogist phones weekly to unnerve the library staff, but a few calls annually to check on additions in the genealogy collection is appropriate, especially if the researcher lives far away and may not be aware of publications being produced by local historical/genealogical societies. Additionally, library staff should certainly make all genealogy researchers aware of local societies. Lists of appropriate local historical and genealogical groups and collections could be a handy resource at the reference desk.

The key to getting along for both sides of the reference desk in typical genealogy encounters is patience and understanding. Library employees can teach genealogy buffs much about what resources are available in the library. Likewise, they may be able to learn much from the person seeking the information such as local history knowledge, and new genealogical resources (products, web sites, etc.). Genealogists can learn the nuances about different libraries that they utilize for their research, and can also share some of what they have learned. For example, even though the 1830-1850 censuses are not listed in the searchable Federal Census records on HeritageQuest, they are included in the product. However, they have not yet been transcribed and must be searched without the benefit of a names index. Using these records is somewhat like looking through old microfilm, without all the noise and the potential for getting all wrapped up in your work, literally and figuratively. If either party enters into the situation in a defensive manner, the interaction will almost certainly leave a bad impression on both sides. When we are willing to teach each other and likewise learn from each other, genealogists and librarians can truly make a difference to the work the other party does, on both sides of the reference desk.

References

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Additional Resources

Facts About Cousin Marriages. Cousin Couples: Get the Facts
<http://www.cousincouples.com/?page=facts> (accessed June 11, 2006).

"Genetic Testing May Reveal Son Is Not Husband's Child" (Dear Abby).
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(accessed June 10, 2006).

Kalb, Claudia. (February 6, 2006). "In Our Blood; DNA Testing: It is connecting lost cousins and giving families surprising glimpses into their pasts. Now scientists are using it to answer the oldest question of all: where did we come from?" (Cover story). *Newsweek* p46
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X and Y and You; Laboratories that can help trace your lineage (Cover Story). (February 6, 2006). *Newsweek* p53

http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/594/814/86355768w7/purl=rc1_ITOF_0_A141452332&dyn=9!bmk_2_0_A141452332?sw_aep=tel_a_etsul (accessed June 5, 2006).

Some General Sites for Information on Genealogy/Family Research

About.com – Genealogy – Beginner’s Corner
(<http://genealogy.about.com/cs/beginnerscorner>)

All Info About... (Genealogy) (<http://genealogy.allinfoabout.com>)

Ancestry.com’s Learning Center (<http://www.ancestry.com/learn>)

Cyndi’s List (<http://www.cyndislist.com/beginner.htm>)

FamilyHistory.com (<http://www.familyhistory.com>)

FamilySearch.org (<http://www.familysearch.org>)

Genealogy.com’s Genealogy Learning Center
(<http://www.genealogy.com/genehelp.html>)

GenealogyForum.com’s Beginner’s Center
(<http://www.genealogyforum.com/#beginner>)

GenealogyForum.com’s Tennessee Research Files
(<http://www.genealogyforum.com/files/TN/index.html>)

Genealogy Today (<http://www.genealogytoday.com>)

New River History Notes (<http://www.newrivernotes.com>)

RootsWeb (<http://www.rootsweb.com>)

USGenWeb (<http://www.usgenweb.org>)

Selected Subscription Databases and Family Tree Organizational Tools

Ancestry.com – See <http://ancestry.com>

Family Tree DNA – See <http://www.familytreedna.com>

Family Tree Legends – See <https://www.familytreelegends.com>

Family Tree Maker – See <http://www.familytreemaker.com>

HeritageQuest Online – See <http://www.genealogydatabase.com>

Legacy Family Tree – See
<http://www.legacyfamilytree.com/LegacyVsFTW.asp>

MyFamily.com – See <http://www.myfamily.com>

¹ A basement fire in the Commerce Building in Washington, D.C. destroyed most of the 1890 federal census.