GENEALOGISTS AND RECORDS: PRESERVATION, ADVOCACY, AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT: Drastic budget cuts and insufficient political heft can leave archives with insufficient resources. This article argues that genealogists can be influential political allies for archives in this tough fiscal climate. Archivists who cultivate family historians as patrons may be able to call on genealogists' advocacy with politicians; their voluntary labor for better records access; and their financial support for the archive. By examining several successful collaborations between archival repositories and genealogists, the article provides specific suggestions for ways for archivists to build cooperative and mutually productive relationships with family historians.

Introduction

According to surveys conducted in 2000 by Maritz Marketing, 60 percent of all Americans over 18 are interested in genealogical research, up from 45 percent in 1995.[1] Some say genealogy is the second most popular hobby in the United States, though hard data are sparse.[2] MyFamily.com, Inc., a privately held San Francisco company, offers access to census and other data through its Ancestry.com Web site. In October 2002, the company claimed it had reached 850,000 paid subscribers, double what it had a year ago. The genealogical Web site of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at www.familysearch.com gets nine million hits *per day*. When the Ellis Island Web site first allowed Americans to search on-line immigration records, the site was inundated with 27,000 hits *per second*.[3] According to a recent survey, 85 percent of users of the National Archives are researching their family history.[4]

Archivists and public records managers seem to share many of the interests and goals of genealogists. Funding for records preservation, digitization, and use are at the top of each group's agenda. But genealogists are often viewed as second-class users of archives and public records repositories. In her article "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," Elsie Freeman Finch notes:

> In fact, we have what can most kindly be called adversary relationships with genealogists, one of our largest clienteles, and with most other avocationists. That one can do research for fun seems not to fall within our categories of acceptable use; thus we distinguish between the serious researcher and all others.[5]

Archivists sometimes view genealogists as needy amateurs or huddled masses waiting to overwhelm an archives' staff. Certainly this view holds a kernel of truth: many genealogists are inexperienced, and there are a lot of them. But I view genealogists as some of archivists' best customers who have potentially strong political power to aid archives and public records repositories in obtaining funding and to work toward mutual goals. This article will examine the types of issues that inspire genealogists to act politically and the mechanisms and organizations that they use to coordinate that activity. Second, it will discuss how archivists would benefit from making strong connections with genealogists in their communities.

The Federation of Genealogical Societies and Political Advocacy

The most important organization for national political action by genealogists has been the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS). FGS was founded in 1975 to "provide a clearinghouse—a center for the exchange of information—for organized groups to avoid duplication of projects, efforts, and keep informed on activities, conferences, and projects being undertaken in North America."[6] Its members—local, state, and national genealogical societies—are tied together with a quarterly newsletter and an annual convention.

Beginning in 1980, FGS began to campaign actively for access to vital records. Some vital records were being used for fraudulent purposes, genealogists recognized, but legislators needed to be informed of the value of these records in family research. FGS endorsed model legislation that members felt properly balanced the concerns of privacy and scholarship, including "The Bill to Open Vital Records for Genealogists," "The Bill to Prevent the Fraudulent Use of Birth Certificates," and "The Bill to Microfilm Old Vital Records Prior to 1900." FGS efforts met with moderate success: several states adopted vital records legislation that specifically took family historians' needs into account.

FGS also coordinated a huge letter-writing campaign to save a genealogical library. In 1980, the Sutro Library in San Francisco, which has extensive genealogical holdings, was threatened with closure. FGS rallied its members nationwide in a successful effort to lobby California senators to fund and maintain Sutro under the auspices of the California State Library. For the first time, FGS proved that "record access and preservation concerns in one state could be witnessed and acted upon by genealogical and historical societies throughout the country."[7]

At the national level, when President Reagan's budget cuts threatened the staff and programs of the National Archives in 1981, FGS urged members to campaign for the independence of the National Archives and Records Service. Joining forces with the historical community, genealogists conducted vigorous lobbying until 1984, when Con-

gress passed a bill to restore independence to the National Archives by separating it from the General Services Administration. FGS has taken an active role in debates surrounding selection of important NARA leaders, encouraging members to write letters in support of candidates recommended by FGS, and testifying at congressional hearings.[8] John Carlin, the current archivist of the United States, has maintained a dialogue with the genealogical community by providing updates about proposed NARA action in newsletters and by speaking at genealogical conferences.

In 1996, the FGS and the National Genealogical Society (NGS) joined in establishing a Records Preservation and Access Committee. The committee is composed of liaisons from each state. It advises genealogists how to ensure access to vital records, affect legislation, and encourage proper preservation policies and practices. In 2000, for example, NARA proposed to revamp the system and fees for providing copies of military service records, bounty-land warrant application files, and pension application files. The committee distributed information about the proposed changes through national, state, and local genealogical society newsletters and various genealogy mailing lists.[9]

FGS has also learned to collaborate with government agencies, volunteering genealogists' donated labor to index large record groups. In 1991, for example, FGS, in collaboration with the National Park Service, the Genealogical Society of Utah, and the National Archives, embarked on a massive indexing project called the "Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System" (CWSS).[10] Information from all existing Civil War rosters is being entered in a huge, free database, which may be searched by name, regiment, or company. The CWSS database currently contains approximately 3.5 million soldier names from 30 states and territories. By coordinating huge numbers of volunteers, FGS allowed the collaboration to focus its resources on buying and supporting the technology, rather than on personnel and time-consuming indexing work.

This example shows how genealogists can play a productive role in providing access to existing collections, but what about records that have not yet been collected or are threatened with destruction? How do genealogists act as volunteers in the collection and preservation of important records?

The FGS Web site offers guidance to genealogists who wish to preserve records, specifically discouraging a panicky response and encouraging dialogue with record keepers. Concerned genealogists, it advises, should do their homework. They should obtain specific factual information about the problem and find out about the regulations that govern the records involved. Unified action is the last step in the process:

> Marshall your fellow individual genealogists. Your voices will be better heard in larger numbers. Urge them to be firm but reasonable in their letters and phone calls, and to indicate their long-term concern in this and other records issues. Genealogical mailing lists for your state are a quick way to contact people. [11]

The recommendations urge firmness, but not stridency.

Perhaps many of these records would not be as attractive to an archives as they are to family historians (how many family Bibles do most archives want to collect?), but there will be times when interests coincide. Both groups would probably consider records of

local women's groups and churches and architectural drawings to be worth preserving. If responsible people have the time and energy to negotiate for the preservation of records, archives should be prepared to take advantage of their efforts, at least when they agree that the documents are worth the resources necessary to keep them.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)

The LDS Church is another important genealogical records advocacy organization. The LDS genealogical library in Salt Lake City was founded in 1894 to gather genealogical records and to assist members of the church in tracing their family histories. One of the church's tenets holds that a descendant can retroactively secure salvation for an ancestor, even if that ancestor was not a church member. Church members have an obligation to determine the identities of their ancestors so that the "sealing" rite can be performed.

The LDS Church has methodically gathered genealogical records from many countries and all of the states. The church approached governmental record keepers and volunteered the money and expertise to microfilm the records. The local governments cooperated in the process and received copies of the microfilm in exchange. Millions of rolls of microfilm are housed in the library in Utah and are circulated to local Family History Centers throughout the world for a fee of $4.00 per roll. Part of the reason family historians may seem so unreasonable to mainline archivists may be because the LDS libraries raise genealogists' expectations. Volunteer staff is generally friendly and happy to help researchers find the records they seek, even if they are not members of the church.

Recently, Americans received the gift of the Ellis Island Database from the church. Transcribing the immigration arrival records of 22 million individuals who arrived at the Port of New York took approximately 5.6 million hours of labor and seven years to complete. The records accounted for almost 71 percent of all United States immigration records. It is now a hugely popular World Wide Web destination and has helped to attract thousands of visitors to the Ellis Island American Family Immigration History Center.[12]

In light of the enormous resources that genealogists have donated to preserve records, it is puzzling that many archives are hesitant to build collaborations with them. Harnessing that volunteer labor could enhance access to a repository's records while increasing use and visibility of the institution. To see how archivists can tap into the genealogical network, let us examine how genealogists communicate with one another.

Genealogists Spread the Word through Newsletters, Mailing Lists, and Web Sites

Print and on-line newsletters often warn genealogists of upcoming legislative issues. For example, 14 of the September 11 hijackers obtained social security numbers illegally. In November 2001, the Associated Press described the Social Security Administration's practice of selling the social security death index to business subscrib-

ers. Links to the article were listed in HeritageQuest's weekly *Local History & Genealogy Librarian News* on November 13. Since both of the largest on-line genealogical libraries and the LDS Church are subscribers to the data, genealogists were highly interested in the Congressional investigation of the practice. The newsletters thus distributed word of governmental action very quickly to the interested audience.

Through newsletters and discussion lists, genealogists learned about and debated the merits of the U.S. Census Bureau's sampling technique and archival electronic format.[13] They broadcast news of the passage of the Freedman's Bureau Preservation Act (44 USCS § 2910 [2001]).[14] Indeed, whenever Congress considers funding programs to increase access to records of high genealogical potential, the community's newsletters and mailing lists recount the heroic action of the politician who promoted the grant. Archivists who tap into genealogical networks can access a large number of potential political advocates. Genealogists are individuals who care deeply about preserving the documents of the past and through their large numbers can wield significant political influence. An archivist need not subscribe to multiple print newsletters to keep connected to the genealogical community. Participation in on-line forums can provide sufficient access.

To some degree, Web sites fulfill the notification role that printed newsletters once did. Unfortunately, these Web sites must depend on the labor of volunteers and so sometimes display unevenness and untimeliness. Nevertheless, the variety of issues presented indicates the range of issues that interest genealogists:

- A bill to prevent vandalism in public cemeteries
- A bill to require records creators to make those records available to the public in the same format in which the agency uses them
- A bill to give recourse to the public when agencies hamper access to public records
- Privacy issue bills
- Appropriation for California Newspaper Project
- Not-for-profit fund-raising bill

Many genealogists (even the older ones) use the Internet.[15] The advent of the Internet has made it easier and cheaper for family historians to track down facts. A genealogist needs one piece of information that only a handful of other people care about: the Internet is the obvious way to connect with them. Only a few years ago, people paid money to place thousands of queries in genealogical magazines such as *Everton's Genealogical Helper.* On-line, it is easy to make these connections; E-mail makes exchanging the information instantaneous. This is one of the major reasons there has been an explosion of the number of genealogists in the last five years.[16]

Local Actions Promoting Access to Records

Archivists can also make connections with regional and local organizations of genealogists. These groups impact access to local records in a way that is somewhat different from that of the national organizations. As on the national level, they often lobby legislatures about open records, privacy, and vital records laws. In fact, several states require that a genealogist sit on State Historical Records Advisory Boards or that a local

genealogy society be officially notified of the intended destruction of records.[17] Some states allow a person researching family history greater access to vital records.[18]

Jack Brissee, past chair of the NGS/FGS Records Preservation and Access Committee and current president of the Wisconsin State Genealogical Society, offered his thoughts about genealogists and records access:

> I have no empirical evidence (it is strictly my impression), but I feel that records management, particularly at lower levels, is basically oriented to determining how soon we can get rid of stuff so we can make room for more (sadly, this is understandable). The long-term historical value of records does not rate a high priority. Professional archivists need to be intimately involved in (control?) records management, and in my opinion, it would be very desirable to involve historians and genealogists as well. Records management is not just a space problem.[19]

He also indicated that he knew of no scholarly articles related to the collective action of genealogists for records access and protection. He stated that during his term as president of the committee, local societies were given support for the situations they faced, and that legislators paid far more attention to local people than to outsiders.

Often the best way genealogists have to impact access to local records is to donate money and labor to enhance the usability of specific groups of local records. Since local record repositories are often government entities, coordination of projects with them constitutes political action. In collaboration with the institutions that hold the records, organized family historians help create indices and finding aids. The following three projects demonstrate how these collaborations work:

1. At the top of the homepage for the Michigan Department of Community Health, a notice directs users to "the Most Accessed Pages"—and the top link is to the Genealogical Death Indexing System (GENDIS).[20] The Michigan Division of Vital Records and Health Statistics provides the Web portal through which the data can be viewed. The data in this system were obtained from microfilmed death ledgers for Michigan, which have been transcribed by Michigan's local genealogical societies. The Talbert & Leota Abrams Foundation provided funding for the service through the Michigan Genealogical Council. (The Library of Michigan's genealogical collection was also funded by the Abramses, and received a grant of $155,000 in 1998 and $100,000 in 1997).[21] GENDIS contains information on 170,000 Michigan death records from 1867 to 1884 and, when completed, will span the years 1867–1897 and contain information on approximately 481,000 deaths.[22]
2. Volunteer family historians helped the Wheaton Public Library in suburban Chicago complete a local vital records indexing and transcription project. Genealogists provided the labor, but the librarians provided access to technology such as the Text-to-MARC program that allows the records to be searched on the library's OPAC or from their WebCat.[23] Librarians also provided access to the grant-making agency, through the Library Services and Technology Act, which awarded $30,000 for the project.[24] *Hennen's Index* selected Wheaton Public Library as one of the top 10 American libraries for towns of 50,000 to 100,000 for three years in a row: 1999, 2000, and 2001.[25]

3. In Lake County, Illinois, also in suburban Chicago, the county clerk developed a cooperative partnership with the Lake County Genealogical Society to catalog and preserve fragile, deteriorating records dating as far back as 1839. The records are being reproduced on acid-free paper. "This project's value is priceless, for these records have been rescued from further deterioration. The volunteer genealogists have saved significant taxpayer dollars and created a new, permanent resource for the people of Lake County and their descendants," says Lake County Clerk Willard Helander.[26]

How Can Archivists Better Collaborate with Genealogists to Preserve Records?

The preceding three examples demonstrate that genealogists' labor can be effectively applied to create access tools for archived records. The work, of course, is primarily self-serving: genealogists are the primary users of the information tools they help to create. It is time for archivists to reach out to genealogists more systematically. Even though "denigrating genealogists has been a cherished avocation of archivists ever since we began scratching our way up the ladder toward professional status," it is time to reevaluate the relationship.[27] Surely, the needs of traditional archives users must be balanced against the demands of genealogists. Collectively, genealogists can seem like a 900-pound gorilla to an understaffed archives, but outreach to family historians has strong rewards for archives in volunteer labor, strong information networks, and financial and political support.

Volunteer Labor

Archivists could consider attracting the aid of genealogists to transcribe or index documents that interest a large range of users. For example, at RootsWeb.com, a large, free genealogy site, users can subscribe to a mailing list populated by people studying one particular surname. In all, RootsWeb hosts 26,000 different genealogy-related mailing lists. An archives holding a collection of Civil War letters or personal family papers need only post a notice on the appropriate surname mailing list to receive enthusiastic responses to aid in transcription.

Genealogists frequently are moved to tears when they find letters or other artifacts related to their ancestors in archival repositories. Descendants would be only too happy to promise a typed transcript of a manuscript. Archivists, perhaps understandably, might hesitate to give up intellectual control of making transcriptions, perhaps fearing that the transcription would not be made carefully enough. Frankly, this is an issue of trust. Archivists tend to notice the beginning genealogists, who need extensive hand-holding and education, but many genealogists have years of experience. A fair number have advanced degrees and take time off from their legal or medical practices to research their family histories. Archivists who encounter knowledgeable family historians might offer them free photocopies of manuscript records in exchange for their transcriptions. Building collaborations with users increases users' commitment to the archive itself.

Archivists must make difficult decisions about which materials in their collections merit the intense attention transcription requires. Handwritten family correspondence of more recent vintage, for example, might not be considered to be of wide enough interest to merit such an investment of time. Descendants of a letter writer, on the other hand, are often motivated to spend much more time trying to accurately transcribe a family manuscript. In addition, the family historian may know the identities of all of the people named in the manuscripts. Genealogists have expertise and knowledge that archivists need, so the relationship between the two can be mutually productive.

Collaborations between archives and genealogical societies can be fruitful in other contexts as well. In a presentation before the National Forum on Archival Continuing Education, Dr. Thomas R. Dirksen, the president of the Augusta, Georgia Genealogical Society, recounted the preservation of the city's loose records, some dating to colonial times.[28] Following the tip of a government "Deep Throat," the society learned of "50 garbage bags tossed from [the] Marble Palace in the street and into a van." Dirksen contacted an archivist at the State Archives of Georgia, and both then contacted the Mayor of Augusta and convinced him that the attempted destruction was illegal. The Georgia Archives gave guidance about how to preserve and order the loose papers and the Augusta Genealogical Society began trying to organize them. The records are now cleaned and sorted, and the society will begin microfilming them shortly. Dirksen offered this advice: "[C]ultivate a genealogy society, offer them a little space, some meeting and program assistance, and they in turn will provide you with volunteer effort. But they will need some education."

Strong Information Networks

Every U.S. county has its own genealogical Web site hosted by USGenWeb, and genealogical mailing list hosted by RootsWeb.[29] Archivists who need emergency funding or advocacy help can appeal to users who frequent these sites and lists. Genealogists often research ancestors who lived in another state and subscribe to county-specific on-line mailing lists. These nonresident individuals may be interested in the county's historical families, religious organizations, and institutions and may respond to pleas for help from local organizations. Although local politicians hear the voices of their own constituents most clearly, out-of-towners can emphasize the amount of money they spend when they come to visit the locality to find a grave, check the local archives, and check in at the region's genealogical society. They can also help provide details and knowledge about the historical significance of families who migrated through a region on the way to somewhere else.

Conversely, genealogists and archivists benefit from ensuring that genealogists have a voice in archival networks as well. Certainly, there are plenty of archivists who understand and value family history research, but making sure that your local genealogical society stays informed about archival issues can reduce misunderstandings and friction caused by genealogists' misapprehensions about the amount of resources and energy available to help them.

Financial and Political Support

In 1998, FGS set a $1.25 million goal for its Stern NARA Gift Fund, specifically targeted toward microfilming War of 1812 pension and bounty-land warrant records and the United States Colored Troop Compiled Service Records.[30] The Abrams Foundation of Lansing, Michigan, has provided several hundred thousands of dollars to the Library of Michigan and the State Archives for genealogical purposes.[31] Smaller-scale projects can also have important impact: the Kalamazoo Valley Genealogical Society is currently raising money to preserve and rebind records in the Kalamazoo County Clerk's office.[32] Many genealogists have substantial incomes and sometimes they donate money to promote records access and preservation.

In addition, family historians are often owners of important family documents. Archivists may determine that making contacts within a genealogical community increases the contact with potential donors of important manuscripts. Particularly, as the popularity of genealogists in different ethnic groups grows, archives may find that connections made among these researchers promote donation of materials that may be underrepresented and highly desired by the archives.

Catering to genealogists' needs can have political benefits as well. In the early 1980s, the Illinois State Archives began to orient many of its programs toward its main users, genealogists. It reconfigured reading rooms and microfilm viewers to make their research more comfortable. Genealogists responded by becoming vocal advocates of the archives.[33] Their focused interest also prompted the development of public services such as automated access and improved finding aids.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the many issues that motivate genealogists to act politically in support of records preservation and access. The archival literature does not often discuss genealogists and their needs. Perhaps most archivists believe that serving genealogists is something they do when they have time, but is not their first priority. Part of the problem is that archivists *do* have limited resources and time to devote to genealogists, and it is so hard to tell eager people "no." Still, it would seem that people who do research for fun can be serious archives users and should be paid more attention in the scholarly debate about the use, function, and future of archives. They do, after all, constitute a large portion of the people who use archives.

Both archivists and genealogists can benefit from accessing each other's communication networks because their interests often coincide. Genealogists support records access and preservation through the strength of their political voice with legislators and other government leaders, including managers of records repositories. They buttress this support with gifts of their money and volunteer labor. Many archivists would profit from cultivating and respecting their company and collaborating with them to preserve our cultural heritage.

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