

Importance of Libraries to Family Historians

Have you ever worked on a family research project and wished you had a partner? Someone who had tons of resources and lots of answers? Maybe you're in need of a partner that would provide step by step guidance, or research tips to find an elusive ancestor. Family research often conjures images of solitary pursuit, but it doesn't have to, especially when there is an eminently qualified partner waiting to help - the library!

Libraries, large or small, have continually placed their emphasis on information content, regardless of the medium. They have extended their resources to virtual collections, global access, and databases dedicated to genealogical research. Of course the internet is a valuable tool in building your family history and a great deal of information is available through a simple Google search. But, a library can go beyond being an effective tool and become your partner in the excavation and reconstruction of your ancestral past.

Genealogy Collections in the Library

Historically, donations of books, like those endowed as early as 1638 by Reverend John Harvard populated bookshelves of prestigious schools. These rare books, rich with genealogies and family research materials, are held in special collections of public, academic, and private libraries around the world.

Large public library collections date back to the late 1800's - Los Angeles Public Library, 1889, New York's 1895, and New Orleans library in 1896. Even small town libraries have preserved their local histories in cherished collections. These may include rare books, unpublished manuscripts, memoirs, and old newspapers that could lead you to uncovering your ancestor's past.

But, not all library resources are searchable on the Internet. In an effort to preserve and digitize local histories, often librarians and volunteers index or create quick reference guides of their holdings for internal use. A recent ancestral search that led me to Aberdeen, South Dakota, a town of about 26,000 citizens, yielded information hidden from the internet. The Alexander Mitchell Public Library, like many others, has the ultimate goal of digitizing their indices and even some of their holdings for the internet. But for now, librarian Kim Bonen references a non-digitized card index of obituaries published in the Aberdeen America News from as early as 1893.

Bonen, who acknowledges the valuable tool the internet offers to researchers, encourages the family historian to verify data through library sources. She reminds us, "*You don't always know what you are getting with an internet search,*" and the accuracy of your family trace depends on reliable sources.

I have heard it said that “librarians were the first search engines.” They typically know the idiosyncrasies of their library, systematically catalog and retrieve needed information, and suggest reference materials that will help you find answers to your queries. These skills were demonstrated recently when I solicited research assistance from librarian Jean Lythgoe at the Rockford Public Library, Local History and Genealogy Room in Winnebago County, Illinois. Lythgoe, a Rockford resource expert, help solve my genealogical mystery by referencing a local collection entitled *Rockfordiana* that she'd maintained for 15 years. The *Rockfordiana* is a collection of indexed clippings, pulled from various Rockford historical newspapers. Its collection predates the popular NewsBank database entries for Rockford. With an eye on local history preservation, this library's collection holds newspaper issues dated as early as 1840, but a few, like the Rockford Posten (Svenska Posten) a Swedish newspaper, 1889 - 1911, are only available on microfilm.

Rockford's library also holds an impressive collection of yearbooks, and Lythgoe shared that *"Rockford High School issued the 2nd school memory book made in the USA in 1892 making it allegedly the second publication of its kind."* Although of historical interest, early school memory books did not identify students. But, what a great way to gather clues about the social culture of your ancestor. Resourceful librarians, like Lythgoe, staff nearly every library in the US and are particularly valuable to local researchers.



Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library

If the heart of a library is its librarian, then its personality can be found in its special collections. Often these prized holdings are kept in genealogy specific research rooms staffed with librarians who specialize in local history.

Jeremy Drouin, of the Missouri Valley Special Collections at the Kansas City Public Library, bolsters the idea that local libraries are powerhouses for your family research. Drouin cautions that we would be remiss as family researchers if we failed to peruse the holdings of a local library: *"Patrons expect to find everything online. The Internet has raised expectations to unrealistic. Sometimes you still have to pull up microfilms for copies of records, or reference a non published index, or material not yet digitized."*

Drouin's point was illustrated when I set out to confirm (or deny) a client's family folklore. I visited the Missouri Valley room to determine if a Kentucky born subject ever lived in Kansas City between 1899 - 1902, where he supposedly fathered a child. He was not listed in the Kansas City, Missouri's city directories. Matter of fact, during his life-time he appeared in the Kentucky census enumerations without fail.

However, ensconced in the Missouri Valley Room Special Collections, a rare book positively placed him in Kansas City as a student of the University Medical College. In this historical account of the long forgotten school that dissolved in 1913 there were two mentions: 1) with the 1901 graduating class 2) a short blurb that accurately recorded his hometown and his death date.

Specialty Libraries and Family Research

Family researchers may overlook resources held at specialty libraries. But for the genealogist, libraries of all types should be suspected of holding clues to an ancestor's life. Even some presidential libraries are awaiting the family researcher. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) in Springfield Illinois has been proactive in preserving pre-twentieth century genealogy. Quarterly ALPLM updates its *New Titles of Interest to Genealogist* on the library's website: http://www.alplm.org/library/New_Genealogical_Publications.pdf.

Also hosted on this presidential library website is "*Generations of Pride*" an interactive African American chronology from 1619 to present day; and a listing of *African American Genealogy Resources at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*. Visit http://www.alplm.org/events/aa_history/AA_History_Timeline/aa_timeline.html.

Interlibrary Loans

In a time of budget cuts and purchasing limitations, libraries have extended research materials available to their patrons through interlibrary loans. With a network of approximately 122,000 libraries in the USA, researchers have access to not only their own local library's resources, but to books and reference materials offered by others. Although most Special Collections materials are not in circulation and cannot be borrowed, through the interlibrary loan process it is possible to request pages to be copied (usually for a fee).

Recently, I traced a rare book on the WWII 69th Infantry at the Allen County Public Library, in Fort Wayne, IN. Although the book could not be borrowed, through the interlibrary loan process, I was able to obtain the needed biography and roster pages, by using the library's Quick Search Service (<http://www.genealogycenter.org/Services.aspx>).

Quick Copy		
Up to ten (10) identified pages from a specifically cited source.		<input type="checkbox"/> \$7.50 per source & name
Source:	_____	
Pages:	_____	
PAYMENT SCHEDULE FOR ADDITIONAL PHOTO-COPIES PER QUICK COPY REQUEST:		
2-4 Pages = \$2.50	5-7 Pages = \$5.00	8-10 Pages = \$7.50
Example: 15 total copied pages = \$12.50 (\$7.50+\$5.00=\$12.50)		
TOTAL ORDER: _____		
Name:	_____	
Address:	_____	
City:	State:	Zip Code:

Allen County Public Library Quick Search Form

Allen County Public Library, the home of the largest genealogical and history periodical index - Periodical Source Index (PERSI) - should not be overlooked by family researchers. Curt Witcher of the library stated "*Without checking genealogical periodicals, researchers miss out on arguably 25%-30% of the available knowledge on a given topic.*" All issues of the periodicals indexed in PERSI are held at the Allen County Library, but you may find a needed periodical at your own local library.

Libraries Gone Global

Using WorldCat and armed with a local library card, the family researcher can access the collections of 72,000 libraries in 170 countries and territories. This large library network seamlessly transforms the small town's library into your own family research repository of millions of books, journals, dissertations, audio-visual materials, and manuscripts. Chances are, if it has been published, it's listed in WorldCat.

Another global research option for the family historian is the collection held at the Library of Congress. Its Local History and Genealogy Reading Room website states, "*Through generations of international giving, the Library's collections contain more than 50,000 compiled family histories and over 100,000 U.S. local histories. The Library also collects local histories from around the world. Researchers doing foreign research will find strong collections for western Europe, especially the British Isles, Ireland, and Germany.*" The Library of Congress may hold the only known copy of a resource and generally their holdings are not digitized, but, this library's massive catalog and its website should not be overlooked by the family researcher. Visit <http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/>.

Inarguably, the world's largest repository of genealogy records are held at the Family History Center Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City. Over 700,000 patrons visit the library annually to research on site for free. The FHL extensive catalog is available online; and, its non-digitized microfilm collection can be requested through one of the "*over 4500 family history centers [that] operate in more than 100 countries.*" (See <https://familysearch.org/locations>).

Databases and Technology



Midwest Genealogy Center

Most libraries offer researchers a slew of databases to access at no charge. Across the country they have invested in popular genealogy databases (ancestry.com, footnote.com, etc.). Although most are subscription based, the library absorbs the cost, leaving the researcher only the task of seeking ancestral clues. But they may also provide other family search tools.

The Midwest Genealogy Center (MGC) in Independence Mo, a branch of the Mid-Continent Public Library, is dedicated to genealogical research and extends its services and resources to family researchers outside its district (fee applies). MGC patrons have free access to 273 research databases of which 266 can be accessed remotely. An example of a lesser known genealogy database remotely accessible using a MGC library card is Historical Map Works. This tool identifies family plots owned by ancestors and may provide additional historical facts of your ancestor (i.e. origin, occupation, etc.). Visit <http://www.mymcpl.org> for more MGC information.

Other Library Offerings

Many libraries extend their walls to offer social networking events, workshops, and expert and volunteer programs. Patrons may find assistance with beginning a family research project, or be offered tips to solve a family mystery. Programs like "*Appointment with a Genealogy Expert*", promoted by MGC, offers patrons free one-on-one assistance. Imagine getting "next-step" tips, assistance with foreign research, and other brick wall break-through guidance from a network of experts! The Archives blog has a plethora of information on this topic – visit <http://www.archives.com/blog>

One of the most difficult task waiting for the family researcher is to unscramble and document their findings for future generations. But innovative library programs are sprouting up nationwide to encourage the family historian to share stories and record family histories. According to Reference Librarian Cheryl Lang, MGC offers the "*Tell Me A Story Project*" tailored after NPR's Story Core. This project allows the family historian to record (audio) memories that can't easily be put in writing. Lang stated that this project "*is designed to document family history for future generations, whether it's sharing military service, school memories, life growing up in the south in the 1960's, or the stories Grandma used to tell me.*"

Partnering with Your Favorite Library

The library of today is far-reaching and equipped to partner with genealogists. The American Library Association website (<http://www.ala.org/ala/research/index.cfm>) boasts that more than nine thousand public libraries, almost four thousand academic libraries, and a choice of government libraries are available for research. With an interest in preserving family histories, each library has unique offerings and collections. Often it is through these special collections, local histories, and workshops that the family researcher finds that elusive ancestor, or uncovers a family secret. Admittedly, libraries are just one tool for family research, but, to ignore the wealth of resources, experts, services, and programs is to miss out on perhaps the most personally rewarding and enriching experiences of family research.