Genealogy’s popularity is booming. Yet the public record repositories that support genealogists’ research have seen significant decreases in in-person patrons over the past twelve years. This paper examines the link between the widespread use of online genealogy databases and the drop in visitorship to public record repositories through qualitative feedback from interviews with professional genealogists and state archive employees.

This study also discusses the relationship between archivists and genealogists and offers suggestions as to how archivists can better serve genealogists and recoup lost visitation numbers through enhancing archival websites and digital collections.

Headings:

Archives, state

Public records

Archival materials – Digitization

Genealogy

Genealogists

Information needs
TOGETHER MAKING DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS: PUBLIC RECORD ARCHIVISTS
AND GENEALOGISTS IN THE AGE OF ANCESTRY.COM

by

Kimberly L. McCray

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.
Chapel Hill, North Carolina
May 2012

Approved by

Helen Tibbo
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. ................................................................. 2
Literature Review. ......................................................... 5
Methodology. ................................................................. 15
Findings. ........................................................................... 18
Conclusions. ................................................................. 30
Appendix A – Interview Questions ................................. 34
Appendix B – Environmental Scan ................................. 38
Bibliography. ................................................................. 42
Introduction

In 1983, when Roy Turnbaugh, then Head of Information Services at Illinois State Archive and future State Archivist of Oregon, was asked about the nature of the relationship between the archive and its genealogical users, he replied that it was “Simply put, the best kind of relationship, one based on mutual need.”¹ The statement was simple yet profound, for although archivists and genealogists had worked in each other’s presence for generations, sharing the close quarters of archives had never been enough to foster a cooperative relationship. Rather, as many archivists catered to government officials as their benefactors, and to historians as much esteemed scholarly researchers, genealogists received comparatively little regard. It was not until the final decades of the 20th century that genealogists began to be seen as serious researchers.

Yet, whereas many archivists saw genealogists as burdensome researchers of “amateur” history, Turnbaugh and others saw them in their truest light: as resolute and determined researchers who formed, then and now, the largest constituency of public record archival patrons, and thus should not be ignored.²

---

Today, almost thirty years after Turnbaugh wrote those words, the sentiment holds true, although the archival realities of the times are quite different. In the early 1980s, when Turnbaugh spoke of the potential of strengthening the relationship between archivists and genealogists, the immense popularity of genealogy that had followed the Bicentennial celebration of 1976 and the release the following year of the miniseries “Roots,” was still at a height. Professional family historians and amateur hobbyists had caught the genealogy bug, and through the 1980s archival search rooms were overflowing. Today however, the numbers of genealogists coming to the archive are much diminished from their 1980s heights. The depletion has caused many public record repositories to see reductions of between 25 and 60 percent of visitors over the past ten to twelve years. Because public record repositories depend on visitorship and user statistics to demonstrate their value to the legislatures that fund them, drop-offs in patron visitation are a disturbing trend if not addressed with creative responses.

Yet, surprisingly enough, at the same time that archives are seeing drop-offs in their visitorship, genealogy has once again seen a boom in the last ten years or so, with the field’s popularity even surpassing that of Turnbaugh’s days. Most certified professional genealogists have “more than enough clients” and the number of

---


4 Based on figures gathered through interviews conducted by author. Archivist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 12, 2012; Archivist 4. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 16, 2012; Archivist 5. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 15, 2012; Archivist 8. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 22, 2012.

5 Genealogist 6, Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 1, 2012.
subscriptions to online genealogy databases like Ancestry.com soars every day, with Amnesty’s individual subscription numbers currently climbing past 1.7 million members.⁶

Research into the cause of this seemingly paradoxical increase in genealogy’s popularity paralleled by a decrease in archival visitorship is the primary investigation of this study. Rooted in a supposition that a drop in archival visitation may be a result not of a decrease in the number of original records being accessed but rather the now commonplace practice of accessing vital records online via genealogy databases such as Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org, this study is guided by three central research themes:

- Have online genealogy databases affected the traditional information seeking behaviors of genealogists? Have they affected the hiring rates of professional genealogists? If so, how?
- Have online genealogy databases affected the visitation rate of family history researchers to public records archives? If so, to what extent and why?
- Are public record archivists responding to effects of online genealogy databases? If so, what techniques have been most effective and in what ways have archives benefitted from these approaches?

Pairing with this research into genealogical databases is a secondary, complementary investigation into how relevant Roy Turnbaugh’s declaration of “mutual-need” between archivists and genealogists remains today. This subject of investigation was born out of a curiosity about how the relationships between archivists and genealogists play out in the

current environment of decreased visitation and greater digital access to records. Guiding questions include:

- What is the present-day nature of the relationship between genealogists and archivists? Has the relationship changed over time? If so, in what ways?
- If the relationship has negative aspects, what are the primary causes of the tension?
- What role does the relationship play in the current environment of decreased visitation?

**Literature Review**

**Genealogy’s History and its Present-Day Issues**

**History**

Ironically, for a field so entranced by history, locating information on the history of genealogy within the genealogical literature is not an easy task, but there are a handful of appropriate works. Elizabeth Shown Mills, perhaps today’s most prominent genealogy educator and advocate, in her 2003 article “Genealogy in the Information Age: History’s New Frontier”, 7 gives a concise yet reflective description of the chronological development of American genealogy. Mills begins her account in 1771, the year when a Mr. Luke Stebbins published what was the first American genealogy, a story of his New England family, and traces genealogy’s practice to the present day. She concludes with a discussion of the current struggle of genealogists to try to gain a “tenuous toehold”8 in the field of academic history. Covering just seven pages, Mills account of the developments

---


8
of the last 200 plus years is an excellent, albeit brief overview of the topic.

Although not quite as relevant for this study concerned with American genealogy and American archives, Susan Tucker’s “Doors Opening Wider: Library and Archival Services to Family History”, ⁹ published in Archivaria, the journal of The Association of Canadian Archivists in 2007, includes a detailed history of the practice of genealogy at an international level, touching on trends not only in North America but also in the UK and other European nations. Most of the trends mentioned are the same as those Mills presents. One unique point Tucker makes is the gradual appropriation of the genealogical field by women in the late to early 20th century; a move that she claims hurt genealogy’s ability to promote itself and its practitioners as serious historians in a time when few academics were female.

Michael Sharpe 2011 book, Family Matters: A History of Genealogy, ¹⁰ centers on genealogy’s practice in Great Britain. The first sections of the book outline a history of the genealogical field dating back to Biblical times, with Sharpe arguing that the New Testament’s many references to family lineages and generational lines prove the importance of genealogy through the ages. The book’s narrative continues to the present day, “trac[ing] the rise of genealogy from an esoteric interest of gentlemen and scholars to a mainstream hobby enjoyed by millions.”

---


Info-Seeking Behavior

Although certainly not pervasive, articles concerning the information-seeking behavior of genealogists are the most common type of genealogy-related literature to come out of either the library or archival field. These articles typically are written to provide reference archivists and librarians with information regarding how and why genealogists conduct research. The goal of such articles is generally provide improved service to genealogists through greater awareness of genealogy’s practices.

One of the most well-known articles on the information-seeking conduct of genealogists is Elizabeth Yakel’s 2004 article – “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians”, 11 a study based on twenty-nine interviews with genealogists and family historians. Yakel explains how and why genealogists go about doing their research and discusses the influence of personal connections on genealogists’ work. The difference between genealogy – which Yakel considers to be a process of filling in names and dates and places on a family tree, and family history – an effort of creating richer narratives of people’s lives and communities, is highlighted as well.

In “Where Is the List with All the Names: Information Seeking Behavior of Genealogists”, 12 Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson explore genealogists’ information-seeking behavior. Written a year before Yakel’s piece, Duff and Johnson’s research is also based on information garnered from in-depth interviews with genealogists. Duff and

Johnson concentrate on the methodological practice of genealogical research and less on the role of personal and emotional motives for doing such research. The article discusses how genealogists identify the records they want to utilize and how they go about interpreting such materials.

An important aspect of Duff and Johnson’s article is its emphasis on the degree to which genealogists often utilize informal resources and communication networks within the genealogical field. Duff and Johnson show that many genealogists are either self-taught or learn the practice by observing other genealogists at work. The result is that they develop their own methods of locating information because they are more comfortable with their own techniques and because they do not trust archival resources to help them find what they need.

“Does Greater Specialization Imply Greater Satisfaction? Amateur Genealogists and Resource Use at the State Historical Society of Iowa Libraries”,\textsuperscript{13} is one of the most recent publications written about what amateur genealogists want from their research. Written by Julia Skinner when she was a Library and Information Science graduate student at the University of Iowa, the 2010 article shares with Duff and Johnson’s work an emphasis on the genealogist’s need for detailed information and services. Like Duff and Johnson, Skinner discusses why genealogists frequently do not use archival guides and finding aids, and instead prefer their own methods of locating information. She claims that in the case of amateur genealogists it is often because they are not aware of or

are not comfortable with the archival tools available to them.

**Genealogy Databases and their Effects on Public Record Repositories and Genealogical Research**

Most articles written about genealogy databases serve a consumer awareness function, often describing the various facets of the different databases, weighing the pros and cons of the different interfaces, the accuracy of the indexes, etc. These articles are often replete with rankings in different categories such as “number of digitized documents”, “membership cost”, etc. An example of this type of article is Barb Kudanis’s 2009 “E-Reference Ratings: Genealogy”, a very brief piece written as part of a series of articles ranking various online reference services for reference librarians. The article summarizes the main features of several of the most popular genealogy databases, highlighting their values. The article does discuss any impact that genealogical databases have had on genealogists and archivists.

Elizabeth Shown Mills concludes her paper with a brief discussion of the positive and negative effects of digitized original documents, including genealogy databases, on historical research within the genealogical field. For example, she gives attention to the ways that online research eases the process of finding records but also complicates the process by overloading researchers with information. Written in 2003, this article is somewhat dated however Mills’s central argument remains relevant:

---

15 Mills, 277.
“Digitization and the internet offer truly infinite opportunities for the dissemination of information. However, information is not synonymous with knowledge. Our challenge is to ensure that those who harvest that information (whether in the name of genealogy or history) process it in a way that preserves its integrity, that they interpret it knowledgeably, and then reassemble the evidence analytically and innovatively.”

Alina Dizik’s recent Wall Street Journal article, “Not Your Grandmother’s Genealogy Hobby: With Wikis and Other Forms of Group Research, Family Historians Are Making Surprising Connections,” is an example of a short and informal piece written to raise awareness among the general public of the potential of engaging in genealogical research via the Internet and its genealogy databases. Dizik warns against what many information professionals refer to as the “Google syndrome” – the tendency of inexperienced and impatient genealogical researchers to plug in quick search terms with the expectation of rapidly finding results and accepting the results as accurate. In grappling for information, researchers “…eager to dig deeper, are often quick to cast aside doubts about authenticity and embrace the instant results.”

Missy Corley’s highlights the possibilities of online genealogy research and tools in the American Society for Information Science and Technology’s fall 2010 Bulletin. Corley discusses how genealogists may enhance their client services. Although Corley does not discuss genealogy databases specifically, she does highlight examples of how professional genealogists have adopted unique “value-added” approaches to help them...

16 Mills, 266.
meet the needs of their clients in creative ways. She discusses using digital tools, claiming that while

“The idea of genealogy and historical research may conjure images of dusty tomes and sepia photographs, but genealogy these days also includes digitization of records and blogging. Deteriorating family bibles and fading photos are joined by flashy presentations disseminated using social media.”

The only truly extensive and scholarly piece written about genealogy databases and their effects is Christine Garrett’s 2010 thesis for an MA in history, “Genealogical Research, Ancestry.com and Archives.” Garrett provides extensive background about the evolution of the world’s most popular genealogy database, Ancestry.com, from a small genealogy publishing company to the Goliath of genealogy research that it is today. Utilizing survey results, the article examines a variety of Ancestry.com features through feedback from genealogical patrons researching at Alabama’s Department of Archives and History. Very detailed, the thesis provides an excellent accounting of what Ancestry.com offers and how genealogists interact with the database.

The intricate functions of genealogy databases in respect to public record repository activities are not ever discussed in the literature. Thus, as much as I can tell, there is no publication in existence that has taken the approach of this study in interviewing both genealogists and archivists to better understand the point of juncture between genealogical databases, public record repository visitorship rates, and the role of genealogical and archival interaction.

---


Genealogists and Archivists: Mutual Need or Mutual Frustration?

The ability of genealogists and archivists to not only work together, but to appreciate and respect one another has never been a given. Within the literature, the theme of a long-standing disfavor between genealogists and archivists is somewhat common, especially in the older literature. Typically the criticisms are either of the picky, demanding genealogist, careless with his handling of the records in a hurry to find one nugget of information for his “amateur” research, or the short-tempered reference archivist who grows impatient of being expected to know where to find every last name and fights back passively by sidelining the requests of a genealogist in order to help a “true” historian. This excerpt from a 1949 issue of the American Archivist is an example of an early reference to the division between archivists and genealogists.

“We are all aware of the fact that an unfortunate antipathy exists between members of the archival and historical professions and the genealogists. The former generally view the ancestry searchers with contempt, regarding them as people who contribute little or nothing to our knowledge of this country's past and are chiefly occupied in forging weak links between themselves and such celebrities as Charlemagne and William the Conqueror. The genealogists, on the other hand, often think that archivists and historical society personnel deliberately close their eyes to the real value of genealogical investigation and consequently are uncooperative when requested to make available records in their custody.”

Fortunately, the literature of the past few decades shows that the relationship between archivists and genealogists has developed into a healthier association. In her 1993 article “Archivists Outlook on Services to Genealogists,” Rhianna Edwards acknowledges the “long-standing antipathy towards genealogists on the part of archivists…” but also states that there is evidence that in recent decades many archivists are reassessing their position regarding the fact that some genealogists as true historians. Also, the mutual-need theme is present as well, as Edwards states that “Regardless of the attitude held, each interviewee [archivist] believed that an improvement in methods of accommodating genealogists would not only aid the genealogist, but would also provide some relief from the pressures of serving this large and varied user constituency.”

Like Roy Turnbaugh, Charles F. Bryan Jr. is another archivist who in the mid-1980s noted that the quality of work being produced by genealogists was improving and the field was becoming more professional. In “What Should We Do about the “Genies”?” published in 1986, Bryan acknowledges the common research limitations amongst novice and amateur genealogists, claiming that “…many genealogists still narrowly focus their interest in the past,” while also acknowledging the ongoing improvements being made in the field. He calls for greater cooperation with genealogists not only because they deserve it as patrons but also because archivists can benefit from such a relationship, saying that

“…more and more [genealogists] are truly concerned with the broader historical picture and realize that a more complete understanding of history helps them become better genealogists. Because of the increasing professionalism in the genealogy field, the time has arrived for historical

agencies . . . to overcome the fear of “selling out to the ‘genies’.” By continuing to ignore them, historical agencies will lose a remarkable opportunity to broaden and increase the size of the public they serve.”

The theme of archivists not only coming to respect the work done by skilled archivists, but also calling for an increase in the amount of interaction with archivists is a more recent development and is a main component of Christopher Barth’s “Archivists, Genealogists, Access and Automation: Past and Present Trends in Archival Access Technologies and Their Implications for the Future of Genealogical Research in Archives”. Written in late 1990s on the cusp of genealogy database surge, Barth’s bold statement calling for archivists to pay more attention to genealogists and value their worth seems especially applicable today in this time of decreased use of vital records. Says Barth,

“A general lack of communication between archival circles and genealogical organizations continues to stymie solid advances within the realm of archival/genealogical relations”… “run[ning] the risk of losing potentially lucrative methods of generating income-and losing the support and patronage of a very important archival patron group.”

Unfortunately, in the fifteen years since Barth’s article was published his argument for mutual-need and collaboration is still a bit of an anomaly within archival scholarship. Although recent library literature commonly calls for user-driven services,

---


this refrain is infrequent in archival literature, especially when it comes to genealogical patrons.

**Methodology**

This study explores the potential effect of genealogy databases on the work of genealogists and public record archivists over the past ten to twelve years by means of a qualitative semi-structured interview methodology.

The study also examines the present-day relationship between archivists and genealogists and gauges the level of interaction and collaboration between the two parties. Interview questions explore these relationships the potential impact of genealogy databases on archival visitorship at physical repositories.

**Participant Selection**

I carried out selection of genealogist participants with the aid of a classmate who is a member of a variety of genealogical listservs and online communities and who offered to send out my call for participants through two online community message boards. She then forwarded to me the contact information of those who responded favorably to the request to participate. Eight genealogists replied and I interviewed everyone who responded. All except one participant were professional genealogists for hire; the non-professional was a long-time amateur genealogist and historian who had published multiple pieces on doing research in government land records. Later in my project, at the suggestion of one of my interviewees, I was able to secure an interview with a former professional genealogist and administrator at Ancestry.com, bringing my total number of genealogical interviews to nine.
I also interviewed state archivists and other employees of state archives. I chose to interview state archivists and their employees because the majority of patrons at most state archives are genealogists and because state archives hold large collections of public records, the records most used by family historians. In order to recruit employees of state archives I contacted Victoria Walch, Executive Director of CoSA, (The Council of State Archivists), and asked her to send out a call of participation for my study.

Eleven state archivists responded favorably to my call and either agreed to speak with me or have a staff member who was more familiar with visitation and the search room be the respondent. I randomly selected eight participants from the eleven. One of those eight however was not able to follow up with the interview, so I replaced that person with another random selection. Of the eight archivists I ultimately interviewed, three were state archivists, three were departmental heads of public services or reference services, one was a head digital archivist and one was a research room supervisor.

My selection of participants was limited by two primary factors. Firstly, the relatively small size of my sample prevented me from gathering more conclusive data from my interviewees. Predictions could be made based on the noticed trends, but even a strong majority is not decisive when only considering eight genealogical and eight archival points of view. Secondly, because I interviewed only professional genealogists, amateur and hobbyist genealogy practitioners were not consulted. It is possible that non-professionals may have very different takes on the pros and cons of genealogy databases than do professionals. Furthermore, it is possible that amateur genealogists may have different types of working relationships with archivists than do professional genealogists.
Interview Procedures

Of my 17 interviews, all except two were conducted as Skype to landline calls and recorded using Total Recorder © software. For scheduling reasons, two participants provided their feedback via email rather than over the phone. After each recording was complete, the main points and highlights of the interviews were transcribed using Express Dictate © software.

The interviewees were all promised anonymity and at the conclusion of this study all identifying information was be removed from my computer, although the recordings will be kept in the possible interest of a future longitudinal study. All recordings are securely stored on a password protected device. For the purposes of citation in this paper, all interviewees have been assigned a number in place of their names to maintain their anonymity. All study procedures were approved by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s Institutional Review Board.

26 For a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix A on page 35.
Findings

In interviewing the archivists and professional genealogists who participated in this study, all aspects of my research questions were explored. The effects of online genealogy databases on the work of both parties and the actions that archivists have taken in response to such effects were the most prominent topics, within which the effect of genealogy databases on archival visitorship was the major component. The relationship between genealogists and archivists and how archivists can better meet the research needs of genealogists were other points of focus. The findings are arranged thematically within the broad themes presented in the research questions lists on pages five and six.

Theme One:
Have online genealogy databases affected the traditional information seeking behaviors of genealogists? Have they affected the hiring rates of professional genealogists? If so, how?

When asked about the effects of genealogy databases on the genealogical field, one genealogist minced no words – “It’s been revolutionary,” she said.\(^27\) Databases have made it easier for researchers to locate vital record information. The toil of determining where a record is held and how to obtain it is significantly lessened when records can be easily found through genealogy databases.\(^28\) Databases have furthermore made the research process significantly faster as genealogists can now, in a matter of minutes from the comfort of their homes, find original records located thousands of miles away.\(^29\) One archivist who pursues genealogy as a hobby mentioned that twenty years ago he frequently did genealogical research on Saturday afternoons and it took him years to

---

\(^29\) Archivist 6. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 6, 2012.
track down all the records that he was able to find in one day on Ancestry.com.\textsuperscript{30}

Another genealogist mentioned that “having these databases has certainly made research faster, opened up new avenues for exploration, [and] made me aware of new resources.”\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, genealogists note that conducting research online is a money-saver, even when the database service is subscription based, because they save money by not having to drive to archives as often, not having to submit research requests and making fewer photocopies.\textsuperscript{32} For these reasons of convenience, my interviews showed that genealogists regularly use a variety of databases and often consult such sources as the first stop on their research journey.\textsuperscript{33}

The genealogists mentioned one major challenge about several of the most popular databases that make research problematic. Because some of the services, most notably the omnipresent Ancestry.com, strongly promote community features like message boards and linkages to public family trees, it is easy to stumble across potentially inaccurate information. Erroneous transcriptions of original records, notes made from memory, and the reference of “working trees” as final products all can lead to mistakes. The result is that following “lazy” research methodologies not rooted in original records can lead to the acceptance of “someone else’s “facts” as the truth.”\textsuperscript{34} In the past, when most derivative sources cited were published, this tendency to accept a

\textsuperscript{30} Archivist 4. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 16, 2012.

\textsuperscript{31} Genealogist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Email interview.

\textsuperscript{32} Genealogist 9. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 20, 2012.

\textsuperscript{33} Genealogist 6. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 1, 2012.

\textsuperscript{34} Genealogist 7. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, January 31, 2012.
presumption as fact was not as common. As a result, genealogists must be more diligent than ever before to make sure to verify all information with original records.\(^{35}\)

One other unfortunate side-effect of genealogy databases and online archival research in general is that although the vast majority of “genealogical records” are not yet available online, there is a recognizable pattern amongst novice genealogists to only utilize what is online and to be unaware that many resources are only accessible by visiting an archive.\(^{36}\) In the past even beginning genealogists knew to start at a library or archive because that was the only option and because most people became involved with genealogy through interactions with more seasoned practitioners who advised them of reliable methodologies. Today however, many people start their genealogy research not at a library or archive but online, and with little guidance from more advanced researchers or archivists they use genealogy databases until they can find no more records, at which time they often abandon their research.\(^{37}\) This is a consequence of the prevalent “assumption that if it’s not online, it doesn’t exist.”\(^{38}\)

In terms of hiring rates, the professional genealogists were split as to whether hiring rates have stayed about the same or increased over the past dozen years since the birth of genealogy databases. Of the eight genealogists asked this question, three stated


\(^{36}\) The three figures cited by interviewees as to what percentage of United States genealogical records are currently believed to be available online were “between one and ten percent”, “between two and five percent”, and “between five and ten percent”, Archivist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray, Phone Interview, February 12, 2012; Archivist 4. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 16, 2012; Archivist 7, Interview by Kimberly McCray, Phone interview, February 3, 2012.


\(^{38}\) Ibid.
that their hiring rates had increased\textsuperscript{39}, two claimed that hiring rates had stayed more or less the same\textsuperscript{40}, and three said they could not speak as to whether changes in their own hiring rates over the past ten to twelve years were due to an outside force like genealogy databases or rather by changes in their own marketing efforts, certification level, etc.\textsuperscript{41}

One of these three further stated that while she did not know if genealogists were actually contracted with and hired more, in her own individual case there did seem to be a slight increase in potential clients due to genealogy’s surging popularity. However, she said, many of these potential clients who show initial interest eventually decide against paying the often sizeable sums to hire a professional genealogist.\textsuperscript{42} No respondents said that they had noticed or heard of a decrease in hiring. Of the three participants who stated that they believed hiring rates had improved, one claimed that “I am busy as I want to be. I sometimes have to turn people away.”\textsuperscript{43}

**Theme Two:**

**Have online genealogy databases affected the visitation rate of family history researchers to public records archives? If so, to what extent and why?**

All the archival employees indicated that their state faced declining in-person visitation figures since the late 1990s and seven of them said the increasing amount of

\textsuperscript{39} Genealogist 8. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, March 4, 2012; Genealogist 7. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, January 31, 2012; Genealogist 9. Interview by Kimberly McCray, Phone Interview, February 20, 2012.

\textsuperscript{40} Genealogist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Email interview; Genealogist 6. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 1, 2012;

\textsuperscript{41} Genealogist 3. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 10, 2012; Genealogist 5. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February. 22, 2012; Genealogist 4. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 27, 2012.

\textsuperscript{42} Genealogist 6. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview. February 1, 2012.

\textsuperscript{43} Genealogist 3. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 10, 2012.
research done online was the cause of this decline. One archivist specifically noted the presence of genealogy databases as central forces in the practice of online research, saying that “due to the widespread penetration of broadband Internet in the US population, genealogists working from home discovered the increasing amounts of primary and secondary source genealogical materials available through repositories and especially Ancestry.com and Family Search.org.” Two others, while not mentioning genealogy databases specifically, did claim that when it came to their repository, a decrease in the number of genealogists coming to the archive was a major contributing factor to the overall drop in visitorship. One archivist said that “so many genealogists now can find vital records online, they no longer are coming to the archive to locate such available information.”

In terms of the extent of the drop in in-person visitorship, most archivists interviewed did not provide me with specific numbers. Most made general claims, as did one archivist who reported that “over the last 10-12 years there has been a marked decline - a lot fewer people coming in to use vital records particularly.” Two archivists did give specific figures. One mentioned that “when things first started to go online there


was a bit of a drop, and this has continued steadily decreasing. We used to get about 15,000 visitors a year, now it's less than 10,000 a year.”49 The statistics provided by the other archivist can be found in Figure 1 on page 26.

Theme Three:
Are public record archivists responding to effects of online genealogy databases? If so, what techniques have been most effective and in what ways have archives benefitted from these approaches?

Because “the extent to which archives are used and by whom is a critical consideration for state government archives in establishing the value of their functions and justifying their resource needs,”50 a decline in patrons can result in a decline in funding if the situation is not dealt with pro-actively. Fortunately, all of the state archives involved in this study have responded to the potentially detrimental effects of declining in-person visitation rates. The primary technique utilized by all institutions in countering declining in-person visitation has been the development of their web presence in an effort to reach out to the patrons lost to genealogy databases and other online services.

Although all eight of the state archives that participated in the study have created online services and digital collections, they have done so at different rates and with varying degrees of success. Four of the archivists interviewed work at institutions with long histories of developing rich websites replete with a variety of online services and

50 Council of State Archivists, 20.
dozens of fully-searchable digital collections. All four of these archives received placement in the annual list of “Best State Websites” published by Family Tree Magazine in 2010. Two other institutions support digital programs that have existed for several years and consist of a moderate number of services and digitized items. These archives also warranted placement in the Family Tree Magazine ranking. The two remaining archives are now in the early stages of developing their web services and are only beginning to create online repositories for researching digitized collections. These two repositories have not yet achieved a position in the ranking.

In responding to the effects of genealogy databases, the most effective programs have advanced their online presence through the creation of sizeable collections of digitized original records. Instead of fighting against the effects of Ancestry.com and other genealogy databases, these archives have instead adopted their model of making original records available online. One genealogist explained this approach as “If the Internet is killing your business, get on the Internet!”

By making archival holdings accessible online, all but two of the archives involved in this study claimed to have not only replaced lost in-person usage with online

usage, but to have actually added to their visitorship numbers from the pre-internet era.\textsuperscript{56} Although most archivists did not quote statistical data, the majority echoed the words of one archivist who said that her institution had "more than made up for the drop off in in-person visitorship through our website."\textsuperscript{57} As one archivist explained, "'People are still using us, they call us, they email, they ask for copies of what they find online, they're just not visiting us as much.'\textsuperscript{58} State archives are replacing search room visits with virtual visits.

One archivist did site figures to corroborate the claim that archives are augmenting in-person usage with online usage. (Figure 1, below) An institution with one of the largest digital collections in the country, this archive's statistics show a tremendous growth in online usage coupled with a steady decrease in in-person patrons. Even when unintentional bounces and other superficial hits are considered, these numbers speak for themselves. My study cannot claim that such results are typical of other state archives, but the presence of such data does serve as evidence of the possibilities of achieving high online visitorship through the development of archival websites that support digital collections.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{57} Archivist 8. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 22, 2012.

\textsuperscript{58} Archivist 5. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 15, 2012.

\textsuperscript{59} Archivist 4. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 16, 2012.
FIGURE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>In-person Visitors</th>
<th>Hits on Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6,087</td>
<td>2.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>number not available</td>
<td>3.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 - 2005</td>
<td>number not available</td>
<td>number not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4,987</td>
<td>number not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>number not available</td>
<td>8.2 million*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>number not available</td>
<td>56 million**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3,511</td>
<td>80 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>number not available</td>
<td>number not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,055</td>
<td>number not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* after death record and other major collections go live
** after separate Digital Heritage site goes live

In addition to providing access to digitized original records, the development of other online services also helps encourage use of archival websites. Administrative and reference tasks that formerly had to be carried out in-person or over the phone can now be carried out virtually. One archivist discussed the benefits of researchers being able to
submit record request forms online instead of mailing, faxing or delivering such paperwork. Three others mentioned the great benefit of placing finding aids, indexes, and other helpful guides online.

The question of how archives have benefitted from their responses to the effects of genealogy databases goes beyond simply improving usage statistics in the hope of receiving increased funding. One other major gain that several archivists stressed is the possibility for improving reference services, both in-person and online.

First of all, requests that come in online are fewer in number. This means that search rooms are not as crowded as in the past and reference archivists can devote more time to their in-person patrons. One pleased state archivist said, "now we have more time to help people."62

Secondly, patrons who are able to find many of the records they need online via browsing and searching archival websites are more self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency leads to fewer interactions with reference archivists and thereby more time to devote to those patrons that do have inquiries. The days described by one archivist as “back when there were so many visitors and nothing online to help, there was almost a "bunker mentality" because there were so many [genealogists] and so few of us and they wanted


so much”\textsuperscript{64} are fading. Also, with a less busy search room, in-person visitors have quieter, less crowded and less hectic work spaces and do not have to share materials as often.\textsuperscript{65}

Requests received virtually also tend to be more advanced and precise than their in-person counterparts.\textsuperscript{66} When an archives makes original records, finding aids and indexed content available online, users can discover more accurately what information they need and where it is located before ever contacting a reference archivist. For example, one archivist pointed out that rather than asking a broad question like “I’m looking for my great-great uncle Job’s marriage license, where might I find it?”, a request produced after the patron utilizes searchable and browsable finding aids and indexes might sound more like “I need a copy of page 77 on reel number 13 of the Jefferson County marriage license collection. The marriage license is for Job Hanson.”\textsuperscript{67} Another archivist who works at an institution with a large digital repository said, “There seems to be an increase in the number of prepared researchers; they are able to locate relevant descriptions online to possible resources without visiting or contacting the archives first. Hence, they are well prepared with what collections they prefer to review.”\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} Archivist 8. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 22, 2012.

\textsuperscript{66} Archivist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 12, 2012; Archivist 7. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 3, 2012.

\textsuperscript{67} Archivist 7. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 3, 2012.

\textsuperscript{68} Archivist 6. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 6, 2012.
Theme Four:
What is the present-day nature of the relationship between genealogists and archivists? Has the relationship changed over time? If so, in what ways? What role does the relationship play in the current environment of decreased visitation?

The present-day relationship between archivists and genealogists is generally favorable. Although most respondents acknowledged the poor relationship of the past, almost all claimed that the situation has improved. One genealogist said that in the past genealogists were seen as a nuisance, but "right now, we get along pretty well with archivists." A state archivist mentioned that “back when I started in the 80s, the relationship could be somewhat strained because we were often getting 40 or 50 [genealogists] a day and there was a lot of people and not a lot of staff. Archivists and genealogists both felt the pressure…today though 95% of everyone who comes here is very personable and we get along great. Only two interviewees said that they feel that the relationship is still often negative. One, an archivist, said that the unfavorable relationship between the two is still present because “over time…it has continued either because genealogists were viewed as “bad researchers,” or more often, because the type of research they do is perceived as not “true” history - they are doing personal research and academic historians do professional research. So because of the nature of the work people still look down their noses at genealogists.” The other, a genealogist, felt that the relationship remains problematic because “genealogists are usually at the bottom of

---

70 Archivist 1. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview. February 12, 2012.
the list of archivist's priorities. Most archives are there for other reasons - meeting
government mandates, helping academic historians, preservation, etc.”

However, although both the genealogists and archivists I interviewed generally
cited favorable impressions of one another, such impressions have not led archivists to
regularly communicate or collaborate with genealogists. Only two of the eight archivists
I interviewed work at institutions that host regular committees or programs or surveys
that seek feedback from genealogists. Genealogists may be respected more now than in
the past, but this respect has not yet transferred into a desire on the part of public record
archivists to regularly cooperate with genealogists beyond typical daily reference
interactions. The wish of one genealogist that “we [genealogists and archivists] need to
find a way to join in common cause” is rarely fulfilled in state archives.

**Conclusions**

The observations and reflections of the participants interviewed in this study paint
a picture of both the growing pains and success stories that have come out of the
evolution from analog to digital genealogy research and archival practices. The feedback
gained in the interviews provided valuable insights in response to my research
questions and led to several strong conclusions. It is recommended however that research
on this issue continue and that a future study be carried out on a more encompassing
level. Because state archives vary so much from one another, a study incorporating

---

74 Archivist 7. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 3, 2012; Archivist 1. Interview
by Kimberly McCray. Phone interview, February 12, 2012.
75 Genealogist 2. Interview by Kimberly McCray. Phone Interview, February 5, 2012.
more comprehensive and credible. Furthermore, because the web components of state archives are developing so quickly, research carried out a few years from now could be analyzed as a longitudinal study in relation to how things have changed not only since this study, but since the 2007 Council of State Archivists comprehensive report.

First, the reality of how genealogists are faring in response to the growth of genealogy databases is generally positive. The fact that none of the professional genealogists interviewed claimed a decreased hiring rate supports the argument that professional genealogists have been able to capitalize on the present-day popularity of genealogy in making their services attractive to potential clients. Although at first it seems logical that with so many more records available online people may not need to hire professionals anymore, in fact that skilled genealogists are very much in demand. It seems likely therefore that as more people become interested in genealogy, more meet the frustrations of beginning some research online only to hit a dead-end, thereby requiring a trained professional for assistance.

As far as effects on archives, this study shows that the increasing availability of original records online has resulted in a steady decrease in in-person visitorship to public record archives since the late 1990s. This evolution from in-person to online archival visitation was confirmed in the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) 2007 report “The State of State Records: A Status Report on State Archives and Records Management Programs in the United States,” which states that although exact figures are not available, there “could easily be 100 Web visitors for every user who requests assistance or
information through a person-to-person contact.”76 The report went on to say that “today, the Internet is the most frequently used method, by far, employed by users of all kinds to contact the state archives and explore their holdings, either via electronic mail or through state archives’ websites”.77 Although many online programs and resources have contributed to this trend, the main trigger for these changes has been searchable genealogy databases.

Although the potential of decreasing visitorship numbers to harm archives by cutting funding and staff positions exists, most large archival institutions, including the state archives researched in this study, are now taking steps to avoid these detrimental effects. The primary method for warding off the disadvantages of declining visitorship is by adapting the successful digitization efforts of the online genealogy databases for archival materials. By making a variety of original records available online through archival websites, state archives have encouraged users to supplement the vital record information they can find through genealogy databases with value-added archival materials like photographs, newspapers, city directories, etc. Archives also have created user-friendly web services such as online chat reference, email reference, online submission of record requests, etc. to encourage patrons to utilize archival materials and services.

While genealogists are the primary user population in 39 states, representing half or more of total users in 28 state archives, their research needs are rarely given the

76 Council of State Archivists, 33.
77 Council of State Archivists, 33.
attention befitting the magnitude of their constituency.\textsuperscript{78} Relationships between genealogists and archivists have improved significantly in the last twenty to thirty years, yet it is still customary for archivists to bypass the needs of genealogists in favor of academic historians, government researchers, lawyers and other more “serious” researchers. Recent funding cuts and increases in collection size have aggravated the problem, forcing archivists to fight backlogs by processing items quickly with minimal description. This approach provides sparse finding aids that make it difficult for genealogists to find the specific information they need.

Genealogists are not the only ones being hurt by archival policies and practices. Archivists are also potentially being hurt by their remaining reluctance to not take steps towards embracing genealogists the way Roy Turnbaugh suggested back in the 1980s. Thirty years later, genealogists have yet to be tapped to their full potential as archival volunteers, donors and advocates by most state archives. This is a missed opportunity as archivists could only benefit from gaining more loyal patron-advocates in these days of declining visitation and reduced budgets.

In conclusion, this is a unique time for archives, an intersection of great challenges and great possibilities. The effect of genealogy databases on archival visitation has been great but has not led to negative consequences for those archives that have responded in kind by offering original records and research services online. When archives adopt practices that emphasize creating a strong web presence, visitorship is recouped and repositories reap the benefits of increasing access to the historical record. All of the archivists interviewed who work in institutions with strong digitization

\textsuperscript{78} Council of State Archivists, 35.
programs and websites were enthusiastic about the results, as were genealogists who had used such services. Should these triumphs be combined with increased efforts to communicate with and serve genealogists, the payback of developing web services will improve as more patrons use the archives and contribute to its success.
Appendix A – Interview Questions

Questions for Archivists

1. How long have you been working as an archivist?

2. How long have you worked at your current institution? In your current position?

3. If you were to give a description of the types of patrons using your search room (academic historians, genealogists, students, lawyers, etc.) what would that be, and approximately what percentage of those patrons are genealogists?

4. In the last ten years, have you noticed any changes in the number of people coming into the archive to use vital record / public records / genealogical materials?

   If yes, what types of changes?
   If yes, what are your thoughts as to why this change has occurred?
   If yes, what has your institution done to respond to this change?

5. Compared to 10-15 years ago, have you noticed any changes in how much research patrons have already done when they come to the archive?

   If yes, how is it different now?

6. Have you noticed any changes in motivation for research or in the research goals of genealogists now in comparison to 10-15 years ago?

7. How familiar are you with online genealogy databases like Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, etc.? 

   If familiar, how often do you use their services in your professional work? In your personal research?

8. What are the most positive aspects about online genealogy database products and the services they provide researchers?

9. What are the most negative aspects about online genealogy databases and the services they provide researchers?

   How could online genealogy sites improve these negative aspects?

10. What are your opinions of how online genealogy databases have affected archives, both positively and negatively?
(If response is negative) What do you think archivists can do to improve this situation?

11. Has your institution taken steps to digitize and make their materials available online? If yes, what has been the response?

12. One final open topic for commentary. Could you speak for a minute about the role of professional genealogists in your archive?
   What is the relationship like in your archive between the staff and the genealogists who research there?
   Is there any regular collaboration / discussion that takes place at your institution between archivists and professional genealogists? Any committees, focus groups, volunteer groups, etc.?
   If yes, how so?

Final comments
Any final thoughts or comments concerning the challenges facing vital record collections today?
Any final thoughts or comments concerning online genealogy databases?
Any final thoughts or comments concerning the relationship between archives and their professional genealogist patrons?

Questions for Genealogists

1. How long have you been working as a professional genealogist?
2. What are your areas of focus / your specialties?
3. What types of repositories do you most often utilize in your research?
   Specifically, how often do you work with vital records / the search room at state archives?
4. What types of records do you most often utilize in your research?

5A. In the last 10 years, have you noticed any changes in the number of people hiring you to do genealogical / family history research?
   If yes, what types of changes?
5B. (If not working for at least 10 years) Have you noticed or heard about changes in the number of people hiring professional genealogists in general? Any trends?
If yes, what are your ideas as to why this change has occurred?

6. Compared to 10 -15 years ago, have you noticed any changes in how much research patrons have already done when they come to you for assistance?

   If yes, how is it different now?
   What types of information have patrons already gathered before they come?
   Do you find that the information people have already found is generally accurate?
   Where do you think people are doing their research before they come to professional genealogists like yourself?.

7. How familiar are you with online genealogy databases like Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, etc.?  
   Do you use them in your own professional research? How often?

8. In terms of your opinions concerning these online genealogy databases, what are the most positive aspects about the services they provide to researchers?

9. What are the most negative aspects of genealogy databases regarding the services they provide?
   How could online genealogy sites improve their services?

10. Do you think the popularity of online genealogy databases have affected the ability of professional genealogists to be hired?

    If yes, how so?

11. Do you think online genealogy databases have affected visitorship to archives?

    If yes, how so?

    (If response is negative) What do you think archivists can do to improve this situation?

12. If given one choice, would you prefer to have more complete collections digitized or more finding aids/indexes available?

13. One final open topic for commentary. Could you speak for a moment about your working relationship with archivists and the role they play in your research?

    Is there any regular collaboration / discussion between yourself, your close colleagues and professional genealogists concerning how the archive can improve the services it provides to you?
If yes, how so?
What can archivists do to best aid the cause of genealogists?

Final Comments
Any final thoughts on the biggest challenge facing the field of genealogy today?
Any final thoughts or comments concerning the effects of online genealogy databases?
Appendix B – Environmental Scan

Recommending that an archive improve their web presence is simple. Actually creating a plan for such a program is much more problematic. The practicalities of devising a digital program and the complicated decisions that go into such work are not simple. The work of creating a first-rate digital collection or website may seem so daunting in fact as to discourage small archives from such attempts.

Fortunately, while there is no guide or step-by-step manual of how a public record repository can create successful websites, it is possible to observe and copy the general policies and methods from one institution and implement them into another. I therefore offer here samples of popular and successful projects, programs and collaborations that demonstrate both standard and unique approaches to creating web outreach and collaborating with genealogists.79

Example #1 – Fully Digitized Collection

Missouri Digital Heritage, Missouri State Archives

http://www.sos.mo.gov/mdh/

More than 6.8 million digitized records from a variety of Missouri archival repositories, museums, historical sites, etc. come together in the Digital Heritage site. In-demand genealogy records include birth, marriage, death, church and cemetery records. Notable “boutique collections” also are present, including several timely Civil War collections. Collection guides and finding aids are also available.

Example #2 – Large Collection of Online Finding Aids

*Pennsylvania State Archives*

http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/about_the_archives/3177/findin
g_aids_for_collections/382910

Complete with full descriptions of the different kinds of archival collections in the repository and descriptions of the components of the finding aids, all written in layman’s terms. Includes a Google custom search function

Example #3 – Collaboration Amongst Archival Repositories

*Arkansas History Commission and State Archives*

http://www.ark-cat.com/

A joint catalog between the main branch of the History Commission (Arkansas State Archives), The Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives, The Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives, and Ouchita Baptist University Riley-Hickingbotham Library. Includes the finding aids and indexes

Example #4 - Collaboration with External State Agencies

*Oklahoma Tourism*

http://www.travelok.com/genealogy

A unique form of outreach, The Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department has devoted a page of its website specifically to genealogists and visitors pursuing family history in Oklahoma. This collaboration between the tourism department, the state
historical commission and a variety of cooperating research institutions encourages
visitors to the site to choose which county they are interested in doing research in and
then provides a list of links to archival repositories, libraries and historical sites in that
county. Links to other genealogy sites are also included.

Example #5 – Collaboration with Genealogists

Western Reserve Historical Society

http://www.wrhs.org/

The Western Reserve Historical Society has long had a genealogical advisory committee.
The group supports the society through volunteer services and by undertaking frequent
fundraising efforts to purchase genealogy resources for the Society. Genealogists
frequent the society’s collections and they in turn support the library as donors and
lobbyists.

Example #6 – Collaboration with Genealogy Databases

New York Family History Day

http://www.ancestry.com/newyorkfamilyhistoryday

New York Family History Day is just one of many “Ancestry Days” hosted by
genealogical societies and archives across the country every year. These events are a
great way to introduce people to Ancestry.com’s services and those of the hosting
institution. For example, an Ancestry Day event could both allow visitors to search for
their ancestors in one of Ancestry.com’s databases and go on a tour of the hosting
archive. These events allow archives to showcase their facility and some highlights of the
Example #7 - Helpful Online Reference Tools

*Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Records Ordering System*


Adding additional functionality to an archive’s website can make many patron-archivist interactions quicker, easier, and more user-friendly. When archives allow patrons to submit their reference questions to archivists online for example, or in this case, to submit record request forms online, the enhancement is almost always a win-win. It enhances the level of services and makes the process more efficient both for users and for the archive.
Bibliography


