

Genealogy and History: Are the Two the Same?

by

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Introduction

Before exploring the numerous and varied historical sources found in the Genesee County History Department it is appropriate to touch upon the distinctions – and similarities – discernible in *genealogical research* and what is commonly called, in general, *social history*. As is commonly known within the genealogical community, but sometimes not recognized in the wider historical one, genealogy is a focus upon lineal descent. I see people on a regular basis who enjoy tracing their ancestry and connecting their lives with those who came before them. It is very inspiring to witness first-hand the numbers of people who pursue the past – genealogical or otherwise – simply because it is an interesting and worthwhile endeavor. As such noteworthy historians as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have put it in works like *Telling The Truth About History* (1994), “history springs from the human fascination with self-discovery, from the persistent concern about the nature of existence and people’s engagement with it.”

Indeed, I have long felt that scholars researching and writing what is generally termed “family history” have a lot to learn from the work of genealogists. Historians of the family, while striving to depict the family or families being studied within a wider context, can learn much from the genealogists’ habit of detailed, factual accuracy. Sweeping generalizations can become more persuasive when resting upon a solid foundation of accurate names, dates, geographical locales, etc. Here I am suggesting the clearest demarcation between genealogies and family histories - at least as written by scholars categorized as family historians. Genealogists pursue the empirically tangible – artifacts and documents of all sorts are the kinds of materials constituting the focus of the genealogist. While family historians also look at such sources, they likewise spend

considerable amounts of time offering elaborate depictions of family structures via models derived from research in areas such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Part of their sophistication includes a basic assumption that the family – defined differently in various societies at any one historical moment – is a fundamental unit universal to human experience. But as numerous historians have reminded us, the evidence suggests, as Mark Poster once put it in his landmark *Critical Theory of the Family* (1978), “the history of the family is discontinuous, involving several distinct family structures, each with its own emotional pattern. . .”

All of this, then, gives rise to an understanding of why one’s life looks like it does – the family plays a central role in shaping one’s personality. Accordingly, family historians have often argued that social forces imposing themselves upon the family work to reinforce societal demands. Conversely, that same family organization can also resist those social pressures. Such concerns have manifested themselves in a plethora of studies, ranging from scholarship on the medieval family through a focus on the idea of the nuclear, middle class family initially emerging with the arrival of industrial capitalism in eighteenth century Great Britain.

As I am suggesting, the attention paid to general historical patterns by the family historian – whole groups of families and their interaction with society at large – is one not undertaken by genealogists. Genealogy is as demanding a discipline as family history – the obvious difference is the distinct focus of its research effort.

This brings me to a personal observation. Unlike the almost exclusively academic culture of family historians, genealogists bring a personal intensity that is both endearing and inspiring. The Genesee County History Department opens its doors to the public everyday precisely at 10 a.m. It is not uncommon to greet one or more people who have waited for our facility to open so that they could research the history of their ancestors. Many of these same people will leave for lunch and then promptly return and continue their work – often for several days

at a time – until closing. A good number of these researchers will subsequently write, or email, or call as new questions arise.

The work of these genealogists is straightforward – they are hunting for what can be discovered about their ancestors and even those closer in time in their families. To do this effectively means a great amount of patient digging in the resources offered by the Genesee County History Department. Those resources include materials regularly made use of. The Department maintains records regarding specific families, which in some instances contains detailed genealogy files. Cemetery records, military records, and church records are also regularly consulted here. Naturalization and marriage certificates are also popular areas for genealogical researchers. Therefore, in the short time available tonight, I will restrict myself to an examination of what remains to be the most popular areas of research interest. It is consequently appropriate for us to now turn to the studies of specific families found in our Department holdings.

Studies of Specific Families

The Genesee County History Department contains one hundred thirty-nine pages of indexed family names beginning with Aaron and ending with Zwetsch. These holdings were either donated by others undertaking research or by staff members. Researchers locate a particular file by surname and then receive all of the information found in that portfolio. Files vary in terms of what they contain, and some are so extensive that they are actually boxes of materials complete with detailed inventories. For example, the Blossom and Ford families – manuscript box number fourteen – hold materials for the years 1817 through 1859. In this instance, there is a family history, along with wills, deeds, photographs, and Accounts for the Free Will Baptist Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the State of New York dated 1853. The Bradley family, a pioneer farm family from Pavilion, whose manuscript box number eleven contains materials ranging in dates from 1774 through 1981, offers the researcher access to various kinds of correspondence. Military and property records, certificates, and numerous other primary sources provide a rich historical vein for the genealogist to mine.

A file such as the Baker file allows the genealogist to investigate material which, in terms of lineal descent, is already complete. In this case, upwards of ten generations of ancestors are outlined via intricate tables and equally detailed narratives. There are charts containing names, e.g. "Ladies Names" for "The First Ten Generations." A content analysis reveals that "Mary" appeared thirty times, Elizabeth twenty-one times, Maud once, etc. In *Descendants of Jonathan Hiller* there is a volume containing a reference to sources used, complete with reproductions of materials from the Sandwich Archives and Historical Center, in Sandwich, Massachusetts. This volume also offers maps illustrating the family's settlement in seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony; a section appropriately entitled "Our First Roots in America."

In such works as that of the Baker and Hiller family noted above one sees the embodiment of what is typically contained in a genealogical record. Indeed, research into other family files reveals documents addressing dates of birth and marriage. Place of birth, date and place of death, and the site and manner of burial are all alluded to. All of this takes us specifically to the extensive genealogy holdings found in the Genesee County History Department.

Genealogical Records

With the expert assistance of research assistant Judy Stiles our Department features holdings listed on the History Department's website. This area of our online access features sixteen extensive listings – so voluminous that they require archival boxes. Researchers are able to identify the outlines of what each box contains prior to a trip to the County Archives. The range of materials is truly unique, and has proven to be of interest to those who do not arrive to undertake specific genealogical research. For example, there is Manuscript Box Number Thirteen. Here we find the story of Reverend Algernon Sidney Crapsey.

In April of 1906 a trial was held in Batavia; a trial whose records are discoverable in Manuscript Box Number Thirteen. This was an unusual trial, for it did not involve criminal or civil issues. Instead, it was a heresy trial before the Ecclesiastical Court of the Episcopal Church for the Diocese of Western New York. The defendant was Reverend Crapsey, the Rector of Rochester's St. Andrew's

Church. This collection points to the often unique turns a genealogical collection can take – indeed, as all historical research can take. For in this instance we find materials pertinent to the Reverend’s sermons and statements that formed the basis of a heresy trial. In fact, the focus of the trial was his book, *Religion and Politics*. While tempting, it is not the point here to examine the issues inherent in a heresy proceeding. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to see this as an example of how unexpected developments can take place in what would otherwise be a seemingly straightforward genealogical project.

In this case, an initial foray into the genealogical records contained in manuscript Box Number Thirteen can lead to an unanticipated examination of materials from a heresy action. What starts out as an effort to track down someone’s forbearers, or maybe to even identify and locate a person’s living relatives, has instead – or in addition to - yielded primary source evidence of a dramatic heresy trial not taking place in a Puritan village of the seventeenth century but rather in Genesee County in the twentieth century.

Hence the effort to return to one’s roots often yields historical complexities not bargained for. As conversations with a number of patrons utilizing the resources of the Genesee County History Department reveals, unforeseen twists and turns can begin with the oral history of one’s family that the genealogist is compiling even before entrance into the archives. One of the more common developments that have surprised some of our patrons undertaking a search for family roots has been the marital instability of earlier generations. Contrary to initial expectations based upon oral interviews, divorce rates reaching back to the antebellum period have both complicated the construction of lineal charts *and* undermined presumptions about a sometimes idealized family history.

This leads to an important point – genealogical research takes one far beyond the simple who gave birth to whom. It is also a story of family reality, and how family members interacted – or eventually did not. Some of those same patrons have shared with me the sometimes emotionally disturbing oral interviews done *after* the visit to the archives. As is soon discovered, there is much that does not show up in official records or local newspapers. Undertaking genealogical

research means combining what written records there are with the oral history of relatives – assuming one has the relatives to talk with – in order to get as complete a picture as possible. One historian who has brilliantly commented on the inevitable intersection between a strictly genealogical focus and the unavoidable connections to wider historical patterns is Peter N. Carroll. In *Keeping Time: Memory, Nostalgia, and the Art of History*, he recalls the role played by his mother, who was a walking repository of family history:

With a good ear for gossip and a passion for detail, she made herself the voice of authority about the family's past – why, for example, Grandpa and Grandma came to America, how they made their lives; what kinds of politics they believed. This knowledge she leavened with intricate stories of explanation that she repeated and repeated and repeated. To ask my mother how she met my father – an event I know happened in 1933 – invites a sojourn into all she knows about the family, from Czarist Russia to the East End of London, and on to the streets of Harlem . . . ; a question about chicken pox evokes her sagas of childhood illness, miscarriages, and once (in a hurried whisper), abortion.

In his mother's stories – supplementing, enlarging, and refining what the written records reveal – we are ushered into the essential humaneness of history as genealogy. As I look through the Manuscript Boxes and family files so tenderly retained by Genesee County I see lifetimes captured in photographs – baby pictures, military uniforms, creeping age with all of its baldness and withering strength – and one sees maybe the essence of history itself, which, unlike a discipline such as biology, is not either natural or neutral. This sense of ultimate finality with all of its twists and turns is played out in vivid terms when one confronts the Department's collection of cemetery records.

Cemetery Records

Our Department maintains the records of numerous cemeteries in thirteen Genesee County communities. Along with a listing of cemeteries there are maps illustrating the locations of the listed cemeteries. These indexes and maps can all be found on the Department website. Genesee County contains about one hundred ten burial sites and cemeteries. There is a strong local tradition stressing the importance of cemeteries as a repository of information about both families and the growth of communities. Numerous organizations, military and otherwise, have long affixed identifications to graves. Elaborate headstones are seen marking the burial site of noteworthy residents, and it is not uncommon to see the gravestones of children decorated with lambs or angels.

None of this should surprise us. Legions of historians have noted the importance of cemeteries among agricultural communities in particular, with its strong emphasis upon intergenerational continuity; a value embodied in the rituals of death in general and cemeteries in particular. Class structures and status expressed in the differences between gravestones have been written about in great detail, while sentimental adornments of a child's grave in particular is something seen in numerous societies at different historical moments. For example, look at the variety of essays on different gravestones among a wide array of groups in different parts of the United States in works such as the edited version of *Ethnicity and the American Cemetery* by Richard E. Meyer (1993).

As is well-known, genealogists make extensive use of cemeteries as a means of identifying lineal patterns. Headstones themselves sometimes offer the only evidence of a person's life, which could include birth and death dates, spouses, and even occupations. As many a genealogist is aware, stones are like documents – they also eventually decay and more times than not are lost.

To facilitate genealogical research the Department offers a guide to the County's cemeteries. These guides include the name and location of each cemetery, the initial burial there, if known, and an indication as to whether the cemetery is abandoned. However, one should remember that gravestones used as historical documents need to be approached with the same evidentiary

skepticism as other kinds of historical sources. Dates and spellings are not necessarily accurate. Through the antebellum period gravestone carvers were typically an illiterate, migratory labor force who arrived at the household of the deceased well after the death of the family's loved one. Scholars have long recognized that spellings can differ wildly, as carvers either misspelled words or simply ran out of space. Ideally, the genealogist should attempt to ascertain the accuracy of a gravestone etching through a correlation with other documents if at all possible.

In sum, even with extensive indexes, gravestones are vanishing as historical sources. Freezing and thawing conditions work to split sandstone and slate. Acid rain works to erode etchings on more porous stone, working to obscure the gravestone's imagery. Negligent mowing of a burial plot serves to chip away at a gravestone's base. Vandals have tipped many a fragile gravestone, rendering it essentially useless, while even researchers have harmed gravestones through a careless application of substances in order to capture a photograph or a rubbing. In any event, the use of cemetery records – and the attendant use of gravestones – is a particularly rich historical source for the ambitious genealogist. In addition, an equally rich source of data for the genealogist is found outside of the cemetery, in the military records maintained in the Genesee County History Department archives.

Military Records

The military records held by the Department are an area that is easily one of the largest of the collections. Both primary and secondary sources address the connections between Genesee County and the Revolutionary War; the War of 1812; the Civil War; the Spanish-American War; World Wars One and Two; the Korean and Vietnam Wars; the Gulf War; and the ongoing War on Terrorism. The Department website lists in some detail the amount and variety of materials open to researchers. Service records, payroll documents, newspapers, and extensive biographical sketches of World War One service people from Genesee County are just some of the highlights of particular importance for genealogical research.

An example of the richness of the Department's military holdings is found in the eight volume set constituting five years of research and writing and donated recently by Terry Krautwurst. Entitled *To End All Wars*, it is a detailed series of biographical sketches of the Genesee County service people who lost their lives in the First World War. Based upon an impressive array of sources which include official military personnel files from the National Personnel Records Center of the National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri, these volumes constitute a treasure trove for the genealogist researching particular members of a family during this war. This research in local history brings into focus the meaning of broad treatments of World War One featuring titles such as *The Lost Generation of 1914*. Along with biographical sketches Krautwurst included photocopies of such materials as obituaries, draft registration cards, medical records, and letters from the War Department to parents offering to pay for "mothers and widows of the deceased soldiers, sailors and marines of the American forces now interred in the cemeteries of Europe to make a pilgrimage to these cemeteries."

Such materials are invaluable for a genealogist whose work draws him or her to Genesee County. It is hard to say in general how these records will be utilized in a particular instance, as military files can contain everything from ranks held to pages from family Bibles to affidavits and depositions of witnesses in pension applications through bounty land warrant applications for ancestors seeing service in the Revolutionary War or the War of 1812. These claims based on service can contain materials similar to those discernible in pension files – all loaded with genealogical information. Like church records, military records allow the genealogical researcher to observe an ancestor in a specific historical moment with clear cultural and social implications serving to breathe life into the person or persons focused upon.

Church Records

In an even more extensive collection than that of military records, the Department maintains an impressive collection of church records for Genesee County. The collection is indexed and accessible to the public via an online listing designed to offer researchers a clear sense of what can be examined prior to ever

setting foot in the archives. Many patrons have commented on how this has reduced the time and expense involved in what may have otherwise been a futile trip to the Department holdings. Included in the website listing is a thorough presentation of what a particular offering holds. For example, the Oakfield Baptist Church, situated in South Alabama, contains covenant meeting minutes. These include

Church proceedings, rules and regulations
from 1829 to 1858
Handwritten records of members of (the)
congregation
Documentation of dismissal by letter
Lists (of) covenant meeting prayer services
Extending the hand of fellowship to new members
Written Christian experiences of local
towns people

The importance of church records for the genealogist is clear. These records contain such important data as births, baptisms, marriages, funerals, etc. Additionally, they shed light on other aspects of one's relatives. For example, these materials could reveal the types of social activities family members undertook. The intensity of their involvement, and the consequences of such participation, could be discovered in church manuscripts. Attitudes about other religions and ethnic groups may be found here, along with gaining insight into the day to day routines of particular family relations. I have spoken with researchers who talk excitedly about discovering unknown family celebrations revealed in these sources. An interesting aspect here is a situation spoken of by one patron – raised to believe that her family participated in the Temperance Movement; she discovered that there were relatives who used alcohol on special occasions – and even on routine ones in between. Such surprises are part of the joy of discovery that genealogists typically experience, and one similar to the excitement of an encounter with naturalization records.

Naturalization Records

The Department maintains a distinguished collection of naturalization records for the period between 1849 and 1929. The genealogist is able to use indexes addressing documents entitled the “Alien’s Declaration of Intent,” along with “Record of Aliens, Naturalization of Aliens,” and the contents of “Naturalization File Boxes A-E 1895-1964.” These sources are invaluable for the genealogist. For instance, the “Declaration of Intention” necessary for citizenship identifies the applicant’s occupation, physical features, place of birth, port of departure, the vessel traveled on, the name of a spouse if applicable, the spouse’s place of birth, and the port of arrival. Such information is potentially crucial for one tracing lineal descent.

But as in other areas of genealogical research, the raw data is only part of the story. Indeed, the naturalization records alluded to above can serve to fill in areas of omission – in many states, for example, the registration of births and deaths were not mandated until the twentieth century. As a result, a naturalization petition is the only means by which the genealogist can discover when a person was born. Petitions offer the discovery of names and addresses as attested to by the affidavits of witnesses. All of the information provides a more complete picture of the experience of immigration in American life.

The very act of immigration propelled ordinary people to take public positions, swearing allegiance to a new nation while simultaneously renouncing the old and rejecting specific political ideologies, such as anarchism. A fascinating implication here is the weakening of numerous assumptions about immigration, such as the alleged centrality of language. Immigration as embodied in a document such as a Declaration of Intent reminds us that *all* immigrants – regardless of language and culture – shared traits that have constituted general, common patterns. For example, an examination of the Declaration of Intent forms housed in the Department archives, and filed by immigrants from Great Britain, call to mind the observations of such scholars as Charlotte Erickson. In *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in 19th-Century America*, she reminds us that

Even when migrants moved into another

society which used the same language and had many similar institutions, migration required considerable risk-taking, a high level of adaptability to changing circumstances, and often a break with family and community. The migrant had many adjustments to make if he did no more than change his residence within an emerging national culture, as when Britons moved within the British Isles or the native-born within America.

As in the case of deeper meanings discernible in a Declaration of Intent, the same could be said of the Marriage Certificates for the years 1908 through 1935, which are also housed in the Department's archives. Once again, the raw data is both illuminating – and suggestive – of patterns which the genealogist may not have anticipated.

Marriage Certificates

The History Department houses official marriage records filed with Genesee County for the time period noted above (1908 through 1935). These documents fill five volumes. They contain such information as the names of the groom and the bride and the place and date of the license, though it should be remembered that except for such data other pertinent information is maintained by the town, city, or village clerk issuing the license to marry. In addition, the New York State Department of Health can be contacted in order to request an official copy of the marriage license. This information can be found on the Department's website.

The certificates are of tremendous value to the genealogist. They contain not only the names of the couple but in addition, their place of residence, their race, age, occupation, and place of birth. The names of the father and the mother's maiden name are listed if known, along with the name of the person performing the ceremony. The date and place of the marriage is recorded, as are the names of witnesses and, if pertinent, consent forms for minor grooms (under the age of

twenty-one) and minor brides (under the age of eighteen). In the event that this was not the first marriage, the former spouse is listed, whether alive or dead. If there was a divorce, information regarding the place of the divorce is also discoverable.

What one discerns maybe more than anything else in these marriage documents is the sociological meaning of marriage. Simply put, the union of the couple, sanctioned by law, empowers the family to function as an institution capable of perpetuating status. It was only the legitimate wife, and children, who could share the social rank of their husband and father respectively. This was particularly true for the time period that these records are set in, though, as many family and legal historians have argued, it was also a period in which new and radical ideas about marriage began to circulate, eventually changing the conception of gender relations and marriage as an institution evident during the Victorian period in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

I began this presentation by offering a comparison between genealogical research and that research undertaken by family historians. It seems fitting, then, to conclude with the same motif. But here I seek to stress the worth of genealogical work by discussing what it has in common with family history. To begin with, to risk stating the obvious, every family carries its own story. Like family historians, genealogists uncover that story by uncovering a family's roots. On the trek to discovering roots family historians and genealogists inevitably tell of traditions and customs that may not have been known, or known about in different ways. Researching one's lineal patterns yields rich insights into a family's social and economic circumstances and how those conditions change – or not – from one generation to the next.

Exploring such patterns tends to shed light on a family's good times and bad, its religious traditions, living arrangements, and a host of other factors constituting one's family story. Along the way, the genealogist - like the family historian – provides an invaluable service to other family members and possibly society at large. But the genealogist – like the family historian – also gains insights

into oneself that cannot help but to produce a deeper self-awareness. Needless to say, a deeper self-awareness on the part of the individual tends to culminate in a deeper self-understanding for society at large. The dignity of the otherwise obscure individual is the story of America itself, a society which, from the beginning, even acknowledging its less than laudable features, was a collective drama made up of ordinary people seeking to fulfill whatever potential they possessed.