

The American University's First Institute in Genealogical Research¹

By MEREDITH B. COLKET, JR.

National Archives

THE growing interest of Americans from all walks of life in family history has long been recognized. Archivists, curators of historical manuscripts, and librarians often find that a large percentage of patrons are genealogists; in some cases they outnumber other types of investigators. Ten years ago, Alexander J. Wall, then New York Historical Society director, described this interest in an article published in *The Papers of the American Bibliographical Society*. He wrote that genealogy was "the outstanding research work carried on throughout the United States."

In late years a wider appreciation of the uses of genealogy has developed. Special emphasis has been placed on its cultural values, the significance of its research techniques, and the importance of critical evaluation of evidence. By the proper use of research tools, genealogists are developing data on migration patterns; they are preparing valuable biographies of the common man of yesterday, which shed considerable light on the life and customs of the people; and they are seizing the opportunity to discover and appreciate the significance of family relationships in community and national life.

Today many leaders in genealogy are members of college faculties. Professor Arthur Adams of the faculty of Trinity College, Hartford, is president of the American Society of Genealogists and editor of the century-old *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*. Professor John G. Herndon, of the faculty of Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania, is vice-president of the American Society of Genealogists and editor of the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*. Dr. Gilbert H. Doane, director of University Libraries, University of Wisconsin, has written the best standard

¹ Read before the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, October 10, 1950.

introduction to genealogy, recently republished by the University Press of a neighboring State.

Many who are interested in genealogy are greatly handicapped, however, because they lack research facilities and adequate training. Very often, therefore, the products of their time-consuming endeavors are colorless family histories or genealogies replete with claims to illustrious origins that are not based upon critical weighing of evidence and do not constitute a contribution to scholarship. But their great interest could and should be tapped and directed in such a way that the results of their research will not be a bleak series of name charts, fortified merely with dates, but rather a rich cultural experience in which an interest in the lives of persons, local customs, and community life, will serve as stepping stones toward a better understanding of America's past.

To fill the need for genealogical training, the School of Social Sciences and Public Affairs of The American University decided to offer during June 1950 a three-weeks' intensified course to run concurrently with its well-established Institutes on the Preservation and Administration of Archives and the Preservation and Interpretation of Historic Sites and Buildings. The prospectus for the Genealogical Institute stated that the program would "include lectures on scientific genealogical methods and their applications for historical and other purposes. In addition the individual research assignments [would] introduce students to the use of materials in the National Archives and other repositories of genealogical materials in or near Washington." The course would be equivalent to a regular college course, but it was planned "to give no college credit until the academic calibre and interests of the students could be better ascertained." Instead, each student would be awarded a certificate if he passed the final examination and submitted an acceptable term paper based upon a project assignment. It was hoped that the prospectus would appeal to those professionally employed in dealing with the genealogical public, and the lectures were planned particularly to serve those who had this interest in view.

The Institute was made possible through the initiative of Dr. Ernst Posner, director of The American University's School of Social Sciences and Public Affairs and through the support of Dr. Paul F. Douglass, president of the University. It was sponsored by the American Society of Genealogists, an organization formed to secure recognition of genealogy as a serious, scientific subject of research among historical and allied fields of learning. In this program the author was privileged to serve as director.

Lectures were held two hours each morning, five days a week for three weeks. Guest lecturers included Dr. Posner and some members of the American Society of Genealogists. Afternoons were devoted to laboratory work in which the students familiarized themselves with research materials and worked on their project assignments. Through the cooperation of Dr. Wayne Grover, Archivist of the United States, it was possible to use the facilities in the National Archives Building and to work with Federal archives. Through the cooperation of Dr. Morris Radoff, Archivist of the State of Maryland, the students made a field trip to Annapolis to learn about State archives at first hand.

Genealogy, as a scholarly activity, obviously cannot be covered in one course. In addition to describing the materials of research, it is necessary to give instruction in how to use the materials. It was recognized that students would not have the time for much collateral reading if they were to spend their energies on research projects. To meet this problem, prospective students were mailed a reading list of books that would constitute a basic background of information for the course. We were amazed to learn, however, that some of the most essential guides to research were not available in many large libraries in the country. One Texas student had her librarian telephone hundreds of miles to try to obtain some needed books. Students from Georgia and New Jersey wrote asking if the books on the reading list could be purchased and mailed, since they could not be acquired locally.

Although an exhaustive treatment of genealogy was not possible, an effort was made to give the students as comprehensive a survey as possible within the time limitations. Strong emphasis was placed on the relationship between genealogy and history, for a sound background in history is an important asset to anyone undertaking genealogical research. A clear distinction was made between secondary materials and original sources. In examining secondary materials, the students had access to two of the largest genealogical collections in the country, the Local History and Genealogy Section of the Library of Congress, and the Library of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, where stack privileges were available. As the basic tools of research were described, each student was supplied with a specially prepared select bibliography of genealogical publications.

As for original sources, considerable time was devoted to the principal series of records in national, State, and county archives and a comparative study was made of the genealogical values of

similar series of records in various collections of colonial records. Students were also told of the nature of the State and county historical societies and of the special values of indexed abstracts of official records and of collected family papers in their custody.

Knowledge of what constitutes adequate evidence and of what techniques should be employed to evaluate evidence is basic for a competent genealogist. He should be able to tell if a genealogy was compiled by a wishful thinker or an outright forger. He should be able to form some judgment as to whether abstracts of source records have been rendered intelligently. Students, therefore, were given illustrations of how incorrect inferences can be made from statements of family relationship in colonial records. For example, "son," "junior," "brother," and "nephew" in colonial days had several meanings, so that it is only by evaluating such terms in the light of other records that their true meaning is clearly ascertained.

Careful attention was given to the process of note taking, the advantages of copying on standard-size paper, and the importance of always giving the source of information. In addition, students were told how to present facts effectively, once acquired. Models of genealogical writing were evaluated and compared.

One of the most important tools of genealogy is the map. Careful emphasis was placed on the nature and use of 19th century and contemporary maps. Some maps of the early Federal period show the shape and location of every building standing in certain municipalities; some maps of counties give place-names that have disappeared today; and some State maps show locations and owners of original purchases of land. Likewise, some real-estate atlases of the late 19th century contain names of owners and location of property.

What kind of students enrolled and what benefit did they get from the Institute? Eighteen took the course. Except for three from the vicinity of Washington, they were drawn from a wide geographical range, from Pennsylvania to California to Florida. The largest group, surprisingly enough, was from the South, while the New England States, the rockbed of genealogical interest in the past, had no participants. The students had varying degrees of experience in genealogy ranging from twenty-seven years to less than one year. Each was asked to state in writing why he took the course. Several, including a State library genealogist, a State historical society genealogist, and a county historical society genealogist were interested in perfecting their knowledge in order to serve the public better. One young man desired to become a professional genealo-

gist. An older man wanted to write a competent, scholarly book dealing with a number of southern families. One lady was interested in increasing her knowledge in connection with her work as genealogist for a national patriotic society. Another lady wanted to be able to write articles for publication in genealogical periodicals. More than half were interested in doing private research. All had one attitude that is pleasing to any instructor; they were enthusiastic about their subject.

The laboratory projects they selected were interesting. The results of some of them will become the bases for published articles in the field. Three students were stimulated to make transcriptions of manuscript records. A word about that work might be appropriate. Transcriptions are important because the genealogist is specifically interested in proper names and if names are inaccurately transcribed the value of a passage may be lost. Many official State publications of the past have been undertaken by untrained personnel with the result that proper names are so badly garbled that the entries are useless to the reader.

One student selected as her project the transcription of some colonial letters, letters chock-full of genealogical interest. She was supplied with a microfilm of them. She had learned in class of the very distinctive varieties of handwriting among the literate English-speaking populace of the period. She had learned of the almost unbelievable variations in the use of capital letters and how to familiarize herself with unfamiliar symbols representing capital letters. She had learned the abbreviations used for parts of given names and some surnames, and had been given specific examples of how "maior" could mean "major" or "mayor"; how a name which looked like "John" in a New England document was "Jehu," the "e" being written as we would write an "o" and the final letter appearing as much like an "n" as a "u." Upon completing her work, she was referred to a published article which contained a competent transcription of the material. The student then made a highly interesting report on the problems of transcription, with notations as to where she had fallen into error. It was difficult, she reported, not to transcribe capital "B" as "C" and small "e" as "o." What had appeared to her in one instance as "Wodbzter" was correctly "Webster." One letter from Ireland referred to a "night of the Cheere for our County," which, of course, was "knight of the shire for our County."

Two students, desiring to make transcriptions of records of the early Federal period, selected records in the National Archives.

One transcribed early passenger lists with the thought of having the results published; the other copied early census schedules of his own county, and was aided in this work by his knowledge of local family names. Another student prepared a very useful checklist of published materials having genealogical value relating to the State of Ohio.

What we had not planned to include in the course, but what the students particularly wanted to know, was information about research facilities in each State, particularly in those States that had been colonies. Was there a State archives, a State library, a State historical society, a State land office, and if so, what could the genealogist expect to find there? To what extent were early county archives or photostat or microfilm copies of them available in State archives? To what extent were the usual types of archives destroyed or non-existent? To what extent were indexes or abstracts made of official records?

Secondly, students were interested in methods of ascertaining the parentage of western or midwestern pioneers. In this case, individual guidance was given as to the most practical ways of trying to solve the problem, but it was pointed out that even the most competent genealogist cannot always solve problems of this type.

The reactions of the students should prove of value in planning for the second Institute in Genealogical Research to be held in June 1951.

Apparently the students found the course valuable to them. Most did not want to leave the lecture room after the two morning hours were up. Upon completion of the course, many spoke with appreciation for the training they had obtained and subsequently several wrote letters. One referred to her "very rewarding interval"; another expressed appreciation for the careful preparation that had made for the course, while the chief of a genealogical division of a State library wrote:

"I want to tell you again how much I enjoyed the Institute of Genealogical Research. I felt that it was very worthwhile to me, particularly because it gave me a better understanding of the use and value of much of the material in our collection. . . . All of us in the class, I am sure, are hoping that it may be continued annually."