

The State Archivist and the Amateur Researcher

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WHAT services should an archival agency provide for the amateur researcher—that is, the amateur historian and the genealogist? Perhaps the first service is to publicize the institution so that interested persons may become aware of the agency and its holdings. Every archival institution has materials of interest to the amateur local historian and to the genealogist, and such materials should be brought to the attention of these enthusiasts.

Publicity can be obtained through many sources. Press releases about significant documents or acquisitions, talks to local groups and hereditary patriotic groups such as the D. A. R., and the publication and distribution of finding aids should be undertaken with the primary objective of promoting knowledge about the agency and its holdings.

After a searcher has found his way to the archives, the next step is to aid him in finding materials of use to him. The best guide for him will be indexes and other finding aids, even unpublished ones. Here, however, is the difficulty: just how far should an archivist go in preparing such material? The answer to this question probably lies in the policy of the reference department. An archives should analyze the records on hand, the searchers' inquiries, the frequency of use of certain groups, and their intrinsic value; and then should prepare enough finding aids so that the searchers will not overburden the personnel in reference. This solution, one might say, is selfish, but it works to the satisfaction of all concerned. When the amateur historian or the genealogist is a problem to the reference staff, this may be because the archives is not doing enough for him or, perhaps, because it is doing the wrong thing.

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What, then, is the right thing to do? Making name indexes to every document in an agency's holdings—and perhaps having the index entries punched on IBM cards—is not, in my opinion the right thing. First, this procedure is much too expensive for most agencies. Second, research should be fun. To the amateur historian and the genealogist, research is a hobby. There is certainly no fun—no sensation of having found a treasure-trove—in pushing a button and being spoon-fed “retrieved data.” Last, but equally important, no machine will disclose related information, sometimes obtained by pure chance, that might be found by a searcher in going through the original documents.

An index can be a helpful tool when used with restraint, but its preparation is, as we all know, expensive and time consuming. I would recommend indexing small groups of records that are in frequent use. Many considerations—such as availability of staff, time involved, and records “activity”—should be weighed before a particular series of records is indexed.

A guide is, I believe, the right approach to the solution of the problem. A guide to the materials frequently used or requested should be prepared in order to direct the searcher as quickly as possible to the information he needs. This will appreciably decrease the time spent by a reference staff and will still satisfy the needs of most inquirers. In preparing a guide it is necessary to analyze the questions asked, the requirements of searchers, and the various kinds of searchers. Genealogists usually are of three distinct types: (1) the professional who knows your holdings and is usually not too much trouble to your reference staff, but who occasionally forgets; (2) the out-of-state genealogist who does not know your holdings; and (3) the naive citizen who has heard that you have genealogical records and who wants to know how to trace his family tree.

A reference staff can spend considerable time in helping the out-of-state genealogist and the plain citizen. In New Jersey this has been particularly true because our older records are still divided among different State departments: early deeds are in the Office of the Secretary of State; wills are kept by the probate division of the superior court; Revolutionary War records are in the Department of Defense; and so on. Until recently the situation was so confusing that our own reference people had no positive knowledge of what was in existence and where it might be. Rebecca Schlam, our cataloger at that time, went to each department and inventoried the pertinent records, making notes on their availabil-

ity, any existing indexes, the cost of photoreproductions, and other useful information.

We entered this information on an individual sheet for each record group and put the sheets in a looseleaf notebook. We also added other sheets containing answers to questions frequently asked by genealogists, such as what censuses were available, even though this information appeared in our card catalog. Our objective was to have in one notebook all the information usually requested by genealogists. Of course the book became invaluable to our reference staff. Eventually our searchers learned that we had the notebook and would borrow it for hours at a time. There was so much demand for it that we finally edited and published it. In the published version we added several items—such as a list of dealers in out-of-print books on history and genealogy, information on the origin of New Jersey counties, a list of other New Jersey repositories of historical and genealogical materials, and a “how to do it” section for the amateur. We gave the compilation a cover page and a title and in 1957 we mimeographed a thousand copies of our *Genealogical Research; a Guide to Source Materials in the New Jersey State Library and Other State Agencies* (23 p.). Through the State House we issued a press release describing the guide and offering copies of it free of charge. Six months later we had to print another thousand copies. The guide was slightly revised in 1961, but only 500 copies were made because we planned a complete revision when the State’s archives would be consolidated in 1964, in our new Library-Archives Building. The revised edition, however, was mentioned in a genealogical magazine, and we are again reprinting it!

How is our guide used and what benefits have accrued from it? For one thing, the professional researchers now have copies with them when they come to the library. For another, we no longer have to spend hours with out-of-state genealogists or beginners, explaining the State’s records and their location. We merely hand each inquirer a copy of the guide and let him proceed on his own. As an added bonus we prepared additional copies of certain sheets of the guide that we keep in a file and use in answering letter inquiries.

Does such a guide achieve the purpose of enabling an archival agency to provide the proper services for the amateur historian and the genealogist? I can answer this question from our own experience. First of all, the widespread distribution of the guide has brought attention to our holdings and our facilities. Second,

the guide has proved to be an excellent finding aid for the researcher. All of the information needed concerning a particular record series is readily seen and information on all of the records of interest are presented in one booklet. Finally, the guide has proved to be an effective public relations tool. The genealogist feels that he is not being neglected and that something is being done specifically for him. He feels, in other words, welcomed, and this is how it should be.

As far as New Jersey is concerned, our guide evolved through necessity and experience. It is not perfect, but it has accomplished much more than we anticipated. In addition, we no longer have a "genealogist problem." May I suggest that other archival agencies need not have that "problem"!

SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE

The following publications may be ordered from H. G. Jones, Treasurer, Society of American Archivists, P. O. Box 548, Raleigh, North Carolina:

General Index to the American Archivist, Volumes I-XX, January 1938 to October 1957. \$6 to members; \$8 to others.

Annual Directory, June 30, 1962, compiled by Dolores C. Renze. \$1.

Society Directory, 1961, compiled by Dolores C. Renze. \$1.

Society Directory, 1957 (with biographical sketches). \$1.

Guide to State and Provincial Archival Agencies, 1961, edited by H. G. Jones. \$1.

Directory of State and Provincial Archivists and Records Administrators, 1962, compiled by William T. Alderson. Free to members; \$1 to others.

Directory of Religious Archivists and Historians in America, 1962, compiled by Aug. R. Suelflow. Free to members; \$1 to others.

Back issues of the *American Archivist*, 1940-62. All issues for 1938-39 are out of stock, but subsequent issues are available except those of July and October, 1940; January and April, 1941; October 1945; April 1947; October 1948; July 1950; January 1952; and April 1954. \$2.50 per issue.