



Greenville Chapter
JOURNAL

**SOUTH CAROLINA GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY
P. O. Box 16236 • Greenville, South Carolina 29606**

Volume 18, numbers 1 & 2

Winter & Spring 2007

LEARNING FROM TEACHING

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If you really want to understand a subject – try teaching it to someone else. Most have heard this old saying in one form or another, and some even personally found it to describe reality.

When asked to contribute an article for this type of scholarly publication, whose primary utility comes from being a compilation of reference materials, this writer was for a while stumped for some subject worthy of the reader's interest. The Assistant Editor had suggested that some tips on techniques of genealogy research, based on personal experience, might be appropriate. This accomplished author and publisher of her own family history, first crossed paths with yours truly a few years ago in a genealogy class at the Greenville Senior Action Center in downtown Greenville. At the time I was standing in front of the class, and she was seated back there in the role of student – what seemed to be a classic case of role reversals. She turned out to be very patient and cooperative, and just one of many examples of the student teaching the teacher that have so added to my own better understanding and deeper appreciation of this wonderful subject.

Those who want to read some really valuable genealogy research tips might be better served by referring to the excellent article by John J, Andrews, Jr. titled “Breaking Down Genealogical Brickwalls” that was published on pages 85-88 of Volume 15, Numbers 3 & 4 of this Journal. Here's hoping you do save these issues – they are designed to be enduring reference works, not newsletters. So, in the interest of providing some general encouragement and reassurance to researchers, rather than profound breakthrough information, here are some philosophical revelations gleaned from a period that now spans five years of attempts at teaching genealogy.

First, all need to know that what you are reading here comes from someone with no formal training in the subject. But, as many have learned to be true, sometimes that can be a real advantage. We have not heard that “It's not supposed to be done that way”. This leads to the greatest self learned premise: Training in, or a genetic tendency toward, being organized is an enormous benefit to those who plan to “do genealogy”. Discovering early in life that I was either blessed or cursed, depending on one's point of view, with such a tendency probably led me to study engineering, and through many courses in science and mathematics have the trait of orderly thinking further ingrained in my make up. It was not until I married that I first became keenly aware that not all people are born with, or may care much about, keeping things in order.

This sense of organization made the logical search and systematic filing of the many bits of disjointed genealogy information one encounters – names, dates, places, relationships come rather easy. In fact, organization seemed to be so vital, that this topic came to be a starting point with those who came to those early genealogy sessions. It continues to be heavily emphasized with some attempts to pass on the importance of developing and using a simple categorizing and filing system. Encounters with students over the years have further convinced me that this ability to be organized is essential to the successful practice of serious genealogy. Many students have taught me new techniques that they have found useful, and suggested ways for me to do things easier. These experiences have further convinced me that, even though not “born organized”, most can learn to become less disorganized, no matter how personally painful, once they see the benefits to their genealogy work. Those old shoe boxes and drawers full of unsorted papers can be dealt with, and once armed with some understandable tips, can be made into a set of records from which desired items can be readily found. I’ve heard expressions of complete amazement from many when they first realize that they really can “get their stuff together”. The truth learned here: Being better organized can actually be learned, in direct defiance of generations of genes of haphazardness at work!

Now, another one: Almost everyone’s ancestry is different. Wow! Stop the presses! What I mean by this rather obvious statement is that ancestral backgrounds, and the challenges presented to those searching for them often vary wildly. Hence, the need for different approaches to people’s research, and individualized expectations of what they might be able to find. Many find early ancestors who were leaders in those formative Colonial American years, or who were prosperous landowners back then. For these, good records were made and many were preserved. A few can even determine that their ancestors made the voyage to America to become part of the first settlements at Jamestown or Plymouth. It’s awfully easy for these descendants of well noted First Americans to fall into the rut of pomposity by assuming that everyone else has lines that go back that far in a similar way.

What about those early Americans who were not so famous, or not wealthy enough to need wills or could not afford to buy land and have such transactions recorded by deeds? And, what about those whose immigrant ancestor came through Ellis Island just a few generations ago, or even may be themselves recent immigrants – maybe even from the Far East? These individuals have just as much desire and right to practice the art or science of searching for their roots. Realize that they are faced with different places to look for older records than some miraculously preserved Virginia church baptismal list. It may be that even that most prized genealogy resource, the US Federal Census, can be of little value to them, save just those schedules made in 1930 or 1920. And, what about those who are descended from slaves? Only a very few in this category can ever hope to trace their ancestry back very many generations. How does someone who attempts to teach go about helping these folks cope with such challenges, and deal with their likely disappointments?

Teaching genealogy to the variety of people out there is far more challenging than one first realizes. However, it confirms through the looks on real people's faces, how important a sense of one's personal history can be, and makes someone with a documented long line of ancestors appreciate what they know so much more. Try to think more openly about the family history of different people. Be careful not to boast too often or too long about your line back to King Solomon, or to what XYZ Society you belong. Just because you have learned about such a storied personal past, don't give the aloof impression of being more worthy still today – especially in the presence of those with only yet nameless ancestors who fled the Potato Famine just a few decades ago. Encourage them to also be equally proud of their own lineage, even though likely never to be as long as yours, nor their record collection ever filled with copies of impressive heraldic crests or American war pension papers.

More about discovering that not everyone is alike: Every family has a skeleton, or maybe several, in their closet. Lots of us like to joke about this, and it can make for interesting genealogy conversation to many. I have found that different people think of these “bad” people or events in their past in different ways. As more “students” are encountered, one comes to the realization that a lot of folks' skeletons still “smell”. Learning about abandonment, illegitimacy, murder, incest, or even divorce in their family history can be highly unpleasant, or even traumatic for some, even though the unpleasantness may have occurred many generations ago. Developing an enhanced sensitivity about discussing what may seem to you to be just a slightly unusual situation is just plain good manners. Be considerate and respectful of what may be unexpected strong feelings of others. Encourage others not to hide documented facts, and to not pass judgment about them or the ancestors who were involved. Teach all to practice what I call “responsible genealogy”, and try to help people learn to live with the universal truth that even our prettiest ancestor may have had some warts. Getting over such past things without letting them depress those of today is a must. Genealogy is supposed to be fun, not depressing!

A really important discovery: Genealogy can be extremely boring. Maybe some of you have already been told this many times. I've seen the eyes glass over, and heard the famous disinterested response of “Oh, yeah?” when someone I have just met asks what I do in my retired years to stay busy. Sound familiar? But here's another discovery I've made by learning from my students: I think I now know why so many feel this way, and in reaction have some advice as to how to begin to change their perception. Here's what I consider the main cause: Nobody likes to hear long detailed stories about someone else's ancestors. They really don't care, but will usually be polite for up to about one minute. After that, forget it – they now hate genealogy, even if they were neutral to the subject just that one minute before. Even those more experienced of us genealogy nuts, including someone who obligingly listens to a student relate one of these lengthy soliloquies, will soon begin to think that this “stand up genealogist” is going to be a “problem student”.

Genealogy will probably always remain primarily a “me-centered” adventure, but some of this can be made more palatable to others.

Some advice on how to try to “change the mindset”: Before staring on one of these long stories about your distinguished list of famous ancestors, ask the person you are facing about their background. Try to get them to begin doing just what you might have a tendency to do. But, control the situation. Even rudely interrupt them, if necessary, before they can run on too much. Ask about another relative, or what their earliest known ancestor is, or where they grew up. Keep on the subject of their genealogy, but not on the same part of their family. Pretty soon you have learned more than you ever cared to know about their background. Now, seize upon some trait, or place of residence, or occupation that you have just discovered to have in common with that potential new genealogy buff that will further spark their, and maybe your interest. Genealogy should be a two way conversation. Like other conversations that are dominated by just one person, pretty soon a dislike of the subject, and even the person begins to develop. Genealogy teachers, as well as students, must be considerate when conversing with one another. Try to keep conversations limited to parts that both, or a group of, people really want to know or learn about.

Somewhat related to the above learned truth, genealogy can help friendships develop. As one grows older, but just before their interest finally turns to genealogy, their circle of friends usually ceases to expand. It may even shrink. How many funerals have you been to in the last year or so? But, out there in the many venues where modern genealogy is practiced - family reunions, genealogy society meetings, libraries, court houses, and most importantly - the Internet, potential new friends abound! How many, including the aforementioned Assistant Editor of this Journal have been first met at the classes I led? I have never laid eyes on some folks met on-line, but through subsequent electronic encounters over the years, have come to consider them among my very best friends. A few of these friendships have later been enhanced through the both of us attending some event and meeting in person. Ask questions to that person pouring over a reference book at the other table in the library. Don't be afraid to answer that person who asked in an Internet posting about something you know. Attend a genealogy society meeting. Get involved with record sharing. Make some new friends.

Try to keep learning about genealogy and about life from others, be they teachers or students. Consider teaching others more about what you have learned, from just a few specific research tips all the way to speaking on some topic to a group, or even leading a series of classes or workshops. Get involved. Try to give something back. See for yourself how much you can also learn by teaching.