The most public of all history: family history and heritage albums in the transmission of records
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CHAPTER FIVE

FAMILY HISTORIANS

There was this little ring that my grandmother had. She kept it in the kitchen window in a bowl. And I said to her, “Why is it there?” And she said, “It is to remind me of my mother. She took off her ring to wash dishes. So I remember her. And I remember her mother before her and all the ones before her.” My grandmother said that to me and so I wanted to find out, did they always have wedding rings? I wanted to know that and family history was easier than taking a real class, you know, I couldn’t go back to school.

Shelley, b. 1949

You ask first, who has that information? Also you have to take into consideration too how smart these people were. Did they keep these records? Or did they have a certain individual who kept these records in a town hall or the church? Did the church survive the war and things like that. These are the things you have to look at and consider and say, if I can find the records.

Armand, b. 1959

This chapter reports on circumstances that surround beginning interests in family history and processes of work of family historians. First given is a brief overview of those people interviewed on the project, including descriptions of the settings in which they work. Second, attention is turned to the purposes they find in their work, their means of finding and keeping records, and their thoughts on gender and migration. Finally, the comments of family historians are considered in terms of transmission and pluralization.
Settings: People in the Houses of Memory

The metaphor of memory as “a place”—diversely imagined as a dovecote, rooms in a house, or a palace—extends from antiquity to the present. The archives as the “authoritative storing and inscription of memory” also has been evoked in recent times, within and outside archivistics.

“Placemaking” is a concept more often considered literally by family historians. Specifically, how did their ancestors make a place for themselves in some physical location in the large world? What kind of place did they make? What traces of memory did they leave there? Also, where will family historians keep all the materials they find in their research? How will they appropriate place and space to represent past time?

In terms of their taxonomic placement, and as shown in the previous chapter, of the twenty-six family historians, eleven are male and fifteen are female. They ranged in age from 16 to 83 years, with educational backgrounds almost evenly distributed between high school, university, and graduate work. With regards to how they viewed their family history work, all but the one professional genealogist should be considered as participants in “serious leisure,” which is a “systematic pursuit … sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant [potentially] to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.” In other words, they approach family history with more “earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness” than would someone involved in gardening.


tennis, or other projects. This was true of all the people interviewed, even the beginners. (Others, less serious, probably did not choose to talk to me.) In addition to this attitudinal disposition, more than half (ten men and six women) of the twenty-six interviewees had practiced family history for more than twenty years. Five other women had practiced for 11–20 years. The minority were those who had practiced less than 5 years (one man and one woman) and those who had practiced 5 to 10 years (three women).

Bruce (b. 1940) is one who has practiced more than twenty years. His small house is literally given over to his collections, his living room remade into two offices filled with shelves, desks, and filing cabinets. Even more dedicated space is given to family history by another interviewee, Madeleine (b. 1936). For her, memory work has been “spilling over” her entire house and all her activities for also more than twenty years. The linen closet is filled with archival boxes; a guest room’s dressers and beds hold various albums and artifacts. An office in a converted garage contains more files as well as a computer and printer all devoted to the outputs of various software programs, scanned records, and files of correspondence. On the walls throughout her house are photographs, family trees, and various artifacts.

Twenty-four other people like Bruce and Madeleine told about or presented similar homes and similar pursuits. Among the family historians interviewed in their homes (ten of the twenty-six), two others could be described as having an extended office that took up half of a modest house (more than 1,500 square feet). Three others had more than one large room devoted to family history. Another three had dedicated spaces, described as offices, studies, or libraries devoted to their family history. All had

photographs and other memorabilia of family history spread throughout the house. They are the self-named “keepers … for you never know when some record you thought was stray, was unrelated, suddenly has meaning.”

First Remembered Records: Obituaries

But even earlier, there was a conscious choice of archivalization— that time when decisions are made to seek and keep records. Asked about how they became interested in family history, Bruce and Madeleine spoke of obituaries. Bruce remembers, “They gave a little biography, and I always liked biographies.” Madeleine remembers that obituaries were, still are, a vision of worlds, you know, but then they seemed to me outside what I would discuss with my parents or even my friends. We were allowed to read the newspaper in the morning, and it was a way I guess I thought of the city, my place in it.

Bruce and Madeleine then knew as children a record form with a public presentation that intrigued them personally. Madeleine remembers liking to read “where people were born and who their families were.” She also read “where and when they died.” Obituaries gave the dates bracketing life. In other words, she read in them of “the liminal space between life and before life, between life and death” as family history itself does.⁴

Obituaries are a staple of family historians’ work. As Chuck (b. 1937) stated, “… [D]eath notices in the newspaper…. All the names, I can read a bunch of names, if I think I can use one of them, sounds familiar, I’ll cut it out, save it.” Family historians also talked of various styles of obituary writing. As one Mobile researcher said, “Now in the 1930s, they started adding more of the kinfolk to the obituaries in the newspapers in the South. Before then they were a description of the bedside, the last moments, that kind of

thing, and also notice of where the funeral would be.” Another piped in, “Even today, you know in the newspapers in England they don’t tell the cause of death usually, and my cousin says that Chicago is the same, not as much information as we are used to.” For their own newsletters, the members of the three genealogical societies studied want obituaries that are “more specific than the more immediate newspaper obituary would be.”

As Madeleine thought as a child, obituaries tell much about not only the deceased, but also the culture in which they lived, about the audience reading the notice. When a member of the Jefferson Genealogical Society (JGS), Barbara Ann Lottinger Allen, died in 2004, her obituary appeared in the society’s newsletter the following year. Her fellow member, the author of the obituary, shaped his text to tell of her identity within that group: “ALLEN, a genealogist, has passed into the records.”

His style displays a blend of the familiar with the details that genealogists want to know. Allen had died “on Thursday morning, July 29, 2004, after several years of difficulties with a cardiac condition, which to the end did not move her from a cheerful disposition and an abiding love of family and humanity.” She is given the status of child, wife, in-law, mother, and, most importantly to family history, names are given for all family members. They are the branches on the family tree that could be studied by others. Her schooling, her employment, and even some of the employments of her children are given, also aspects of her life that could yield records. The last paragraph gives more information that one day may be important if a DNA sample has not been taken: “After donation of organs, plans were for cremation.” Her membership in a church is recorded

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and then comes notice of her legacy. “A member of several genealogical societies, she leaves as her memorial and as inspiration for other genealogists a monumental book on the history and genealogy of the FALGOUT family.”

Most critical, however, is the beginning phrase “ALLEN has passed into the records.” Here, the community of records is extended beyond life. The name and the metaphoric passage to records serve, much as Marianne Hirsh notes for the photograph, as a “frame for narrative and imaginary power.” Names and inscription of these names form the key to all family history research, the requirements for most beginnings, hence the pull of the obituary. The place of family history is marked here again, at least in part between the living and the dead, with a fixed date, and a fixed record that moves towards memorialization. The JGS newsletter emphasizes this duality both in their thorough obituaries of members and in their emphasis on names: All proper names are in large capital letters (ALLEN and FALGOUT, for example), a practice common to family history nationally and locally, which is said to ease scanning for the most central information desired by readers.

Other Remembered Records and Memory Traces

What other traces of the past were present in family life to enliven among these people an interest in family history? Questions in the interviews with family historians that tried to approach this first coming to records, this archivalization, were:

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6 Ibid.
What individuals or experiences had the strongest effect in your beginning and continuing with family history? What did you know about your ancestors before you began researching them? What sorts of written or photographic documents existed about your ancestors? Who had these documents? Where did they keep them? How did you learn about these documents?

For many interviewees, the first inclination seemed to be uniquely conceived. Over half initially stated they had no recollection of knowing anything about their ancestors in childhood; they had no memory of having records in their childhood homes. When probed, “None?”—half of these then responded that “well, yes,” there were birth certificates, school records, and immunization records, usually kept by mothers in shoeboxes, closets, under beds, in a safe, or even in an ottoman. All of the interviewees remembered photographs, but only half remembered photographs going back past the generation of their parents. Seventeen of the twenty-six volunteered during probing that their grandmothers had shown them albums, scrapbooks, and other family mementos.

Yet, four interviewees remembered being invested early with family history. For Annette (b. 1937) and Louis (b. 1946), memory texts were all around them. For Annette, genealogy came in “tales” told at family gatherings. “After the music they’d have coffee and that’s when they’d sit around the big oak table and ... we’d just go lean up against our mother or daddy or aunt and listen to them talk.”

In Louis’s home, grandparents, parents, and sometimes an aunt or uncle discussed portraits, memorabilia, “even a kitchen pot” in terms of “who they had once been or belonged to.” He also recalled an older “cousin.... She lived to be ninety-four years old, and she would regale us with stories of her father who fought in the Civil War and all … her childhood memories.” In the multi-generational home, “My great-grandparents … the head of the family, matriarch and patriarch of the family [and] everyone came to see them
on every holiday. It was just a given. And they would talk about their lives.” Another interviewee, Ingrid (b. 1941), also locates an appreciation of the past in particular family and societal circumstances:

I would say that my parents, from my childhood, would always tell stories of their childhood and about their families. And my mother had scrapbooks and I still have those scrapbooks. And I learned to make scrapbooks as a child and it just became part of me. It was an extension. I guess maybe an element of my own personality? And the family had letters, original documents, immigration papers. We’re predominately a Catholic family, so-- In fact, I can show you the box of what I have: a drawing, a painting that I have in the dining room of the family home in Germany on my dad’s side, just lots of photographs, lots of photographs.

Only one person recalled records being especially given to her. This was Catherine (b. 1959) who spoke of her paternal grandmother’s gift:

The day she died, the day before, I was at her home … I was young. Twelve. And she basically said, ‘Take these things, if you don’t get these, you’ll never get these, if you don’t take them now.’ And, I had to walk with it. Because she was too sick…. She said, ‘Take these.’ … That had an impact…. I knew that there was something there that I needed to treasure.

More similar to the others who recalled no records from childhood was Paul (b. 1940) who began family history because, on his return from the army in the 1960s, his mother “had acquired a family Bible and in the back of the Bible there was a foldout chart for family history.” She urged him to fill in the chart. He thus remembered himself as creating “the first” of his family’s conscious efforts to remember the past. But later he interjected that there were “one uncle and one great-uncle who had family information,” one who had “done some genealogy” and could “give” him “names,” and the other who “had a little prayer book, listing one of my great-great-grandfather’s … it had written in it where they came from in Germany and the birth dates of all of their children, some of whom had died as infants.”
A number of interviewees also soon qualified their interests in family history as being aided by someone they had initially forgotten. In addition, in five interviews, there was some sense of specific cultural climates in which records were kept within the home. Like Ingrid, Rosemary (b. 1925) believed that German immigrants brought and taught their German-American children a strong tradition of records keeping: “Confirmation papers, military records, letters, they saved them all.”

Ethnicity itself was considered a lived and living path to records. Acadians, Canary Islanders, and Sicilians were groups whose memories were mentioned around dinner tables and at family gatherings. Anthony (b. 1934) discussed his interest in family history as beginning in adulthood because his Sicilian family “had no records.” But then he remembered to add, “There was always a portrait.” It was of his grandmother’s parents, who, when their child left for the U.S. in 1903, gave her this parting gift, an image of themselves. “They said to her, ‘Take this because you’ll never see us alive again,’ which was true. And we kept that over the years.”

These accounts indicate how the interest in family history emerged first from within the extended family and indicate too something of recordkeeping cultures within families. The transmission of materials and stories is usually the job of someone in the family, a role so unstated as to be often forgotten.

Why Begin Family History? Why Collect Records?

Questions about their initial interests in family history also led to discussions of meanings and motivations. The search for meanings revolved primarily around place: the chance to understand places no longer the same; people who traveled great distances to make new homes; and the interplay of sources held “somewhere else” that were required
to tell the bare minimum of ancestors’ lives. Again, the individuals interviewed believed that they had an individualistic response to records, but for the most part, they told stories of particular communities that instilled and still do instill a veneration for records, and a certain passion for finding the past of “average” people. The larger society, rather than the family at the breakfast table mentioned by Madeleine, was usually the focus of a fascination with records. Mentioned by fourteen of the interviewees were the histories of the cities where they grew up. Both Mobile and New Orleans (founded in the early 1700s) were thought of as places where “learning” the past “was encouraged.” Ten mentioned the Catholic Church as instilling a curiosity about records.

For two of the interviewees who were Mormons, the imperative to remember concerned the teaching of the LDS church. As María (b. 1949) said: “The purpose, as Mormons, we have for family history, is to put us all together in heaven.” And as Rebecca (b. 1939) confirmed, “We believe in being sealed to our ancestors. You know, generation after generation, families stay together.”

For others, the perspective was not that different than that of the Mormons: family history connected them in some way to the family and to a fuller version of themselves than they might ordinarily have. As Gail (b. 1961) said

You do it to actually prove who you belong to. You know the old saying of, “Where did you get those blue eyes from? Or where did that blonde hair come from?” And everybody else has brown eyes and brown hair? Well it comes from great-grandpa so-and-so. That proving that is the main thing.

Recalling her visit back to the town of her ancestors, Catherine stated: “I hadn’t even seen anybody that looked like me. So, when I went to there, and I knocked on the
door, I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, you look like my father.’ So there’s a baseline. Before it was like being adopted. And you don’t even know this whole side of the family.”

Overall, motivations fell into three categories. First, interviewees see the legacy of family history as part of what they want to leave their children or other relatives. Second, they see family history as a way of explaining the world around them, of finding a sense of themselves and a sense of belonging to a particular group, nation, or type of family. Third, they simply enjoy the never-ending clues they could follow, the expanding world of knowledge.

How did they come to these meanings and motivations? Some recalled coming to family history after experiencing a change in family structure, usually some life-changing event. Others remember coming to family history through a general curiosity about the past. Others spoke of history itself, especially a local history. Yet others place their interest in family history in a devotion to a particular ethnic group.

To Understand Life-Changing Events

Births, illnesses, and deaths often led to the first search for records. The birth of a first child brought the need to know family names, which led to wanting to know more about naming patterns in general, and about the lives of people who held the same names. Or, as one said (and as is said often in the blogosphere), “I became myself an ancestor.” Another spoke of a cousin who had an unhealthy child, “so there was need to know who else in the family had a cleft palate.” Unexpected deaths also brought a search for genetic causes, searching “through what medical records survived.” Death in the family meant seeing cousins at funerals, and this often led to wanting to know more about distant and not-so-distant relatives. In learning of the death of relative from old age, there
came a realization that a connection to older generations and one person’s lifetime of hearing and interpreting family history had ended.

To Satisfy Curiosity

Eighteen of the interviewees described themselves as “just curious,” or “always curious.” What did this mean? Six remembered gravestones. Said one, “I would look at the names ... all over the cemetery.” Ten interviewees recalled the New Orleans custom of the cleaning or painting of tombs. The ownership of the burial plot transmits memory, makes one “curious about those people in the tombs, on the walls.”

For others, the past was intriguing because it was “here and now.” In this, seven spoke again of the histories of Mobile and New Orleans and the people there. Landmarks, including statues, but also the “streets—I was always wanting to know why a street was named what it was”—were recalled as part of this coming-to-family history.

To Find A Local Past

Fifteen others also wanted to “use history” locally and personally. They remembered classroom learning on European history as “boring,” or interesting only in “the parts that tell me about my ancestors and why they left.” Even parts of U.S. history were found objectionable. As stated: “They force us to learn everybody’s family in history: politicians, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, etcetera, etcetera. So I said, ‘Why not study my own history and get some pictures?’”

To Find Obscured or Forgotten Identities

Migration, to most family historians, meant a loss of family memory, and thus the need to find records. As Armand noted,

Inquisitiveness … is probably true of all people everywhere, or many people. They want to know who their people were. But here in the U.S., well it is
compounded … because we ask, “Why did they leave there to come here? What did they do to survive here?”

Besides the photograph of his great-grandparents, Anthony felt family history placed him closer to understanding a memory from childhood of an August celebration of the feast of Gesù Salvatore, Patrono of Cefalù. This was the ancestral village, but so too was “the ancestral village here in New Orleans because they had this group. They planned the celebration and they helped one another. Funerals, a mausoleum, sickness, papers for new immigrants, language classes.” He wanted then “to actually walk the places where my ancestors walked.” This meant knowing more about residences in the city and elsewhere, as well as later trips to Sicily.

Similarly, William (b. 1966) wanted to explore his family within the context of Creoles of Color, and Thomas (b. 1940) wanted to explore his family within the context of African Americans. William thought identity issues came to him, who grew up in another state, even more forcefully than it did to people in New Orleans. About his home of childhood in a western state, he remembered “lots of different types of people: Hispanic and white and black and Asian … but there were no other mixed kids, mixed-race kids.” He recalled the thrill of listening as his older brother asked his mother questions on family history for a school project. “My mother, she said, ‘Well, you know my father was from the islands and a mixture of African and Portuguese’…. I then understood that she was of some mixture. And then they said … the word ‘Creole.’ And so that was identity.” As a second grader, hearing these answers, he began files on family history.

For Thomas, “getting the names is the first step.” This is because
these were people, enslaved and treated at best like children. It is about acknowledging and honoring their existence as full human beings. More than full in some cases, because they had to do so much to stay alive and not be bitter. Look at the black churches, amazing, that they dealt with all this.

Processes

These comments on vaguely remembered records but purposeful beginnings reveal a layering of the unstated, the forgotten, yet persistent vestiges of records in society, and thus, the forces at work for archivalization. Processes that follow these beginnings revolve around following clues to research materials, developing expertise by knowing context, joining with others to learn about records, and organizing work to meet particular needs.

Research: A Dance between Records and Clues

Twenty of the twenty-six family historians spoke of beginning with oral accounts, then going to city directories (that led to the geographic placement of grandparents and great-grandparents). Next, any consistent sequence of a process that could be established fell apart. Records consulted were ship manifest lists (that led to an image of countries and ports within countries); birth, marriage, and death records (that led often to discussions of religion); probate and conveyance records (that led to consideration of material wealth, land, and houses); and military records (that led to discussions of either reasons for leaving Europe or patriotic U.S. considerations). At the beginning, there was usually one private record of some sort. Later, relatives sent other private records: letters, scrapbooks, albums, photographs, invitations, clippings, oral history interviews, bible records, and various artifacts. Then, “I go back and forth. I look for whatever I can find.” Of all record types, census records were most often discussed within the context of creation with some
acknowledgement of the fallibility of the census taker (heads of households confused; slaves without last names made part of the family; the brother made into an uncle, and so forth). Transcribed versions of letters were valued as they showed a trail of concern, affection, and preservation, however “misspelled or potentially copied wrong, derivative,” as one said.

Enjoyment of this sort of research is one reason for continuing. For Lucy (b. 1955), this is the time that is

questioning, yes, but passion is what drives it … it’s sweeping and in a very melodic—I would say it’s melodic—because it’s peaceful. And it has got kind of flow to it. But it also has this urgency push behind it, you know, drive—to seek out the answers to the mystery.

Most of the family historians from the JGS and GRS who were willing to be interviewed had family who had lived in New Orleans for generations. In this “home,” family historians feel unusually lucky. Family historians in the GRS and the JGS divided themselves into groups studying Spanish and French colonial heritage; the influx of refugees from the Revolution in Saint Domingue (now Haiti); the Germans, the Irish, and the Sicilians who came in the mid to late nineteenth century; and New Englanders and others who settled the city after the Civil War. Ten interviewees wanted to be sure it was known that New Orleans was one of the largest cities in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Thirteen pointed out that New Orleans was the second busiest port of immigration. Two mentioned French and German newspapers and schools of the city. All of these factors can be considered as extending the layers of ethnic complexity upon which family historians come to an interest in their work.
Sixteen of the interviewees mentioned the New Orleans Public Library Obituary Index as one of their initial steps in research. “You can find where they were buried and then find the cemetery records; and sometimes you can find a maiden name; and even the names of pall bearers are good clues.” First called the Louisiana Biography and Obituary File, this index was begun as a project of the Great Depression in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Staff hired especially for the project worked in the City Archives Department where the manuscript journals and ledgers of city government dating from 1769 were also held. But it was the newspapers, and especially the mention of specific families in obituaries, that intrigued the WPA workers. Over 214,000 names were indexed, and the project was continued by archivists, staff, and volunteers after the WPA project ended. The product they made remains rather unique for all of the U.S. Usually only much smaller cities with much shorter historical time spans attempt to provide such an index. The Obituary Index is, in the words of one family historian, “one of those blessings of the city, right up there with food and jazz, something that is special.”

Developing Expertise

Madeleine, one of the two who recalls reading obituaries as a child, also found her way to this index. But, next, she said, “You have to be more serious and learn about the rest of the types of records.” She did this by attending workshops (locally and regionally); joining family history groups and learning about records from other members; “visiting” genealogical websites; and reading books and online guides from various individuals,

other groups, libraries, and archives. All but five mentioned learning how to prove their work, rules of citation, and other aspects of “proof.” They were particularly sensitive to wanting others to know that they follow rules, a legacy of the schism between history and genealogy, the hierarchy of knowers mentioned in earlier chapters.

All the interviewees discussed at least one workshop or course. Yet for many, learning was a more complicated process. For Paul, first one must learn the city itself, or “any place your ancestors lived. And by this I don’t mean just knowing who settled there but really who was there keeping the records.” As he talks, he leafs through some transcribed records, typed pages that do not reveal the handwriting, pagination, or any other suggestion of who once made this list of baptisms. He comments on the handwriting of the priest all the same. Then he adds:

From the late part of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church here established what they called national churches, to deal with the immigrants. So up in the Irish Channel [as a section of the city of New Orleans is called] you used to have three churches within a two-block radius. You still have St. Alphonsus—which was the Irish church. Right across the street, St. Mary’s Assumption—which was the German church. On Jackson Avenue a block away, it was destroyed after the 1920 something hurricane, was the French church, Notre Dame. So you had three big Catholic churches within a three-block area serving the immigrant population and those were the quote national churches. Downtown the national German church was Holy Trinity and the French church, which was on the other side of Rampart Street, was Annunciation Church. Holy Trinity doesn’t exist anymore; Annunciation has only recently been closed. But my great-great-grandparents went there when they immigrated. At least they did [go there] after the children were older. They lived in that downtown area near Holy Trinity Church. But apparently they first lived further back from the river, they must have lived somewhere around Claiborne Avenue, which at that period, the 1870s, was at about the extent of civilization going in that direction, a sparsely populated neighborhood. A Catholic church was established there in 1870 and I’m sure that’s where grandpa got baptized but the records don’t start quite that early. For some reason they didn’t keep the records or the records didn’t survive whatever happened.
He tells more about the churches and their neighborhoods, which, for him, held records since they operated as small centers of life for so much of the city. So he stops to ask if this is truly understood. “Are you Catholic? And how long, again, did you say you had lived here?” He describes the import of the places, the atmosphere of the streets, the blocks that were actual “empires, you had their schools, their orphanages, each, at least five buildings, the convent, the priest’s house, and even things we forget today: gardens, stables, other working buildings.” He wants to tell too of differences between particular records keepers in the past:

The Spaniards were wonderful record keepers … I mean the early records, the Cathedral records, they are beautiful and they used good paper. A lot of good paper to write on so even if you were using the ink that bled through, even if you used that, the records are generally in better shape than the records from the late nineteenth century where they went to cheap paper, cheap volumes and where, not in all churches—some are better than others—where the handwriting deteriorated.

He knows these record keepers even in more specificity. Pointing to the slightness of one record book, he notes, “That one had an elbow problem. Do you know what that means? It means he used his elbow to hold a drink to his mouth more than to write down the birth, marriage, death, etc.”

Lisette (b. 1943) similarly discussed a colonial community of records:

We are really fortunate if we have French or Spanish ancestry, because the records go back so far and they’re so incredibly good. I think we are extremely lucky in Louisiana to have the kinds of records we do and I look at what other people have to struggle through, I feel very fortunate. And a lot of that is because of the civil law and the kinds of records we have to have because of our legal system. Notarial records are unbelievably rich and other places just don’t have that. Also, in South Louisiana, the Catholic records are unbelievable. So we have bodies of records that many other people don’t have. The Spanish colonial government in Louisiana kept the same kind of legal system that the French had introduced. And the colonial records created under that system are marvelous, with unbelievable information for genealogists.... So, good old Napoleon—no matter what you think about Napoleon, his great legacy was civil law, which in
certain places dictates how the records are to be kept. And they are fabulous records. For example, it’s Book One of the Civil Code (Of Persons) that tells how the civil registrations are to be kept for birth, marriages, and deaths. And even if you’re doing work in Germany, and you’re dealing with the part of Germany that was under the Napoleonic law, and you’re dealing with those Napoleonic records, they are marvelous. If you’re in France, it’s the same. The same is true in other parts of Europe that fell under Napoleon’s control. You get down to Louisiana; the nature of the records depends on the laws that control them. To a very large extent it comes down to that. And common law had different types of records, a whole different system of law that determined the kinds of records created.

Other less-skilled family historians also considered different environments in which records were created. They understand both the liberating and conservative sides of governmental oversight (“so you see the Germany of that time couldn’t feed its citizens so they didn’t mind these recruiting agents coming for my family, enticing them. They made records of their departure”), the quirks of different denominations (“so the Baptist records followed the minister so I was looking for his papers”); and other aspects unique to different recordkeeping practices of varying locales.

Yet, discussions and interpretations of records rarely appear in the local publications. Newsletter articles from the Mobile Genealogical Society are telling in this absence. From The Deep South Genealogical Quarterly 2006 volume, for example, one can find a listing of the “white baptisms (inclusive of illegitimate children and free colored children)” conducted during 1856 at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in Mobile. Compiler Anne Ruise places the names she has transcribed next to an image of the church and church statuary, evoking Christian Europe where such records were also kept. But Ruise mentions nothing about the records, what they looked like, who

recorded them, where they were housed, where they are now housed. Her job is to transcribe them: to bring the names and dates alone into the present.

This orientation towards transcription with little contextual information is seen throughout many publications of genealogists across the U.S. In the Mobile newsletter, this pattern is evident in their index, which reveals pages and pages of muster rolls, cemetery lists, baptismal records, and so forth. Volunteers from the New Orleans GRS in their quarterly take a similar approach. Transcription is the great work of these societies.

Today, however, they see technology as changing their own work in gathering records. Family historians are no longer one of the main producers (transmitters) of those records. Instead, the Mormon Church and various institutional repositories are. Most of the family historians then are shifting their expertise to knowing about electronic databases, knowing about specific software to keep family records, and especially evaluating these technological offerings. All but seven family historians considered themselves adept and skilled in microfilm, software packages, databases, online searching, and email.

Technology extends both their geographic reach and their capabilities in making memories in a lasting form. As Madeleine (b. 1934) noted about her great-great-grandmother: “She came in August of 1853 to New York, with two other[s] with the same name…. Through this fellow in Bavaria who I email, correspond with … I have found her mother and her grandparents and a little bit of history about her.”

Family historians are astute about online access to materials. As mentioned, this is the area where their expertise now lies, as opposed to an earlier expertise in transcription. As Lisette (b. 1943) noted:

You have to sort of learn to discern between what is reliable and not reliable information. I always tell newcomers, “Reliable information is stuff where people have gone to foreign countries, or even this country for that matter, but mostly foreign countries and filmed actual records. And then the unreliable stuff is things that have been submitted by people, by individuals.”

She’s referring here to the split between records individuals can upload to various websites, including the Mormon databases, and those records created by governments and other organizations in their work. She is noting then the various registries of the past, another manifestation of the levels of Chapter Two, and the need to look at the context of records critically.

Great attention is also paid to various software programs. The advantages of entering data and sources for that data were mentioned by fifteen interviewees. In addition, online death indexes, passenger lists, and other databases from libraries and archives were very important to family historians, and knowledge of these, if not actual use, was important to album makers. The Internet especially “helps you find or push you in another direction to make you think about what to look for.”

The other real advantage of technology is found in more advanced science, in going beyond what written records exist to the record of genes. As Arden (b. 1940) noted, “I think it’s a major breakthrough. Because of lost records, it is, it will change so much.”

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14 Among family historians, the software from Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.com, and other packages (Personal Ancestry Files, Family Historian, Roots Magic, Family Tree Maker) provided the technologically-produced files and reports that most excited them.
The steps in DNA testing make more connections across times and space, testing for example, Québécois males who know their ancestors began in a particular French village in the 1500s to others with the same name in Louisiana whose paper record only begins in Saint Domingue in 1760.

Extending this acknowledgement of technology’s role in accessibility, all the family historians save two mentioned a debt to the LDS church and its microfilming project, to Ellis Island databases, to military databases, and to efforts of the National Archives in the United Kingdom. In these discussions something akin to the knowledge about and pride in the Catholic and notarial recordkeeping systems was apparent. Various assertions about the quality and plenitude of records reflect back on the fact that the tools of family history have influenced the type of family history completed. Words such as “explosion,” “proliferation,” and “multiplication” were used to describe the impact of materials online. The Internet itself was credited with popularizing the use of records for family history. Four interviewees felt that the increasing number of family historians also motivated others to understand records. According to María, family historians are now more apt to consider that “access [to records] is a right of a democratic country.” In this, they shift what was once a private transmission further into the public realm.

Learning in Groups

Ingrid recognized how often “we stand on others’ shoulders.” Five other interviewees also mentioned their reliance on those who came before, as one said, “the centuries of accumulations of records.” This attitude is another part of their expertise, a belief in stages (and thus positivist) and relativity (and thus modern and postmodern). The National Genealogical Society (NGS) defines professional genealogists as “records
experts, research scholars, teachers, and entrepreneurs.” According to the NGS website, such people begin their pursuits as hobbyists, “progress from ‘looking up names’ to learning records, the laws under which those records were created, and the social and linguistic quirks that affect the interpretation of historic documents.” 15 The experienced non-professional genealogists interviewed here developed similar expertise, and their newsletters and interviews reveal coordinated efforts to educate themselves and others about records.

Interviewees felt they could do this best in workshops and in informal gatherings of family historians. At meetings, monthly or bimonthly lectures are given by librarians, archivists, museum curators, and academics. The panel discussions of members center on problems they have: “Broken Branches,” “Brick Walls,” or simply “Finding Ancestors.” These discussions always involved stories that proceed through various layers of mysteries, new techniques, and newly-discovered documents.

Similarly, the newsletters of the Mobile and Jefferson Parish societies especially contain columns in which members report on visits to repositories. Other articles tell of virtual journeys and online records giving access to information about particular ancestors.

Of the twenty-six interviewees, five males and two females had published regularly in newsletters, with four winning national awards for their work. A series of articles dating from 2002–2005 by JGS member Michele LaPointe-Lehmann is instructive of this whole fabric of a body of work collected by networks of people and technology, then given to the group. LaPointe-Lehmann researches the Audet-LaPointe

Family, which, as she notes, follows the French and Canadian custom of an alias, a “dit name” given to a family name, and thus the hyphenated name remaining—a living memory in Louisiana. In 2005, she begins her article tying this name first to oral accounts: “I have long suspected, from stories that I heard from my grandmother, that the LaPointe family was somehow connected to Nicolas Audet dit Lapointe who had emigrated from France to Canada in the 1660s.” She visits the Chicago Historical Society and finds a document connecting the Louisianian and Canadian families—a letter telling of a cousin’s family, and his grandfather, born 23 March 1801 in Boucherville, Canada. She then turns attention to a website for the Association des Descendants de Nicolas Audet dit Lapointe, Inc. The website took LaPointe-Lehmann to the “extensive research” done today “by Gabriel Lapointe.” The website also is inclusive of all the distant cousins: “Nous avons la chance d’avoir un patronyme enraciné en terre de Nouvelle-France et en Amérique depuis environ 1663.” From them, she was able to trace her own family “from the youngest son … born in 1691.” Indeed, this website brings her to her own name, documented by someone in Canada.

One family historian referred to LaPointe-Lehmann’s work as finding “parts of herself,” and added, What “luck that we get to do this.” Why luck? When she began in the early 1970s, “Ordinary people, like myself, did not do genealogy.” A number were conscious of “a sea change,” around the time of the Bicentennial (1976) and around the time of the publication and television series Roots (1976 and 1977). “This group wouldn’t really be here without this sea change,” one said. Bruce similarly commented:

In fact some of the early people would probably turn over in their graves, as the local phrase goes, if they would realize we have black people coming to meetings. We have Jewish people coming to meetings. They would literally croak if they weren’t already dead. They used to have this very elaborate membership application process which basically was trying to see if these people were black or Jewish. Once the younger folks got hold of the organization more or less we got rid of these—they weren’t written down anywhere they were just sort of an unwritten policy that was in place.

Certainly all the members of groups to whom I spoke delighted in the diversity of people doing family history. As Bruce mentioned, the experience with sharing across the color line has meant “a different America than I had when I grew up. Closer to what it was supposed to be.” How did he participate in this transformation?

I even have a parallel family to my family that is black Creoles. And I haven’t found the exact connection but I have been working with a black lady in Atlanta…. I was working with her documenting the black side of the family you might say. One of her ancestors was the slave of the sister of one of my ancestors way back in the early 1800s.

Other New Orleanians recounted a litany of African-American genealogy workshops, and six others, besides Bruce, spoke of uniting descendants of slave-holding families and the descendants of slaves. As one black man and one white man told me, they were both pleased to learn they were distantly related. As the youngest of three African-American interviewees, Nicholas (b. 1991) reflected, his work encouraged others from all races:

If we can find our history, well, it encourages others. I was received in the group in that way. They liked that I was young but they really liked that I could get to the past, and to a past so long denied…. And I am sure that I get more encouragement because it is slavery and that is such a big impediment to finding names and records. But what I find, then that encourages them.
On the other hand, at all the meetings and other gatherings, there were never more than two African Americans. Similarly, not everyone sees change in the groups, their membership, or their emphasis on helping one another. According to Ingrid:

There has been little change here, in New Orleans. No way. No, no, you can look at the Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans and then go to the Genealogical Society of Mobile and look at their periodicals, their journals, I mean. You want to know which one started first; they’re just absolutely identical. And even the personalities of the people involved are identical. But I noticed lately that Mobile--Because I subscribe to their genealogy site, is having more hands-on activities. Ours [New Orleans] it’s strictly speakers. And no one really, let’s see, how would I say this? Uh, crosses the boundary, in that, no one ever approaches anyone else with a problem or with an ancestor. You’re either supposed to already know that their lineage is back to the German Coast [a section settled early in Louisiana] or you don’t ask. Or you really don’t ask that group anything about research techniques, especially the Internet. Now, the Jefferson Genealogy Society is camaraderie personified, newsletter as opposed to a journal, meetings with really interesting speakers that, for the most part, are all giving genealogy subject matter. The Genealogical Research Society of New Orleans does not have that. Next month we’re having someone that’s going to talk on the two Marie Laveaus [a locally famous nineteenth-century leader of the voodoo movement and her daughter]. I mean, it’s not like having someone talk on the census records. But that group wouldn’t have anyone to do that.

From their newsletters, it is apparent that the JGS and the MGS host more parties, share more recipes in newsletters, and generally discuss events such as field trips much more frequently than does the GRS. However, many members in New Orleans belong to both metropolitan based groups.

Among those interviewed from all three groups, only three could be described as loners in any sense of the word. Even these three, who worked essentially alone and did not attend meetings, still belonged to one genealogical society, family name society, or hereditary society. Twenty belonged to more than one group. Fourteen participated in groups devoted to family history once a week or more. Eleven participated once a month or more, and two participated once a year.
Organizing Work

There is some conformity to their organization of work. Most kept their information in binders, and spoke of being advised to do so in early classes, or early readings on family history. As Gail stated, “I have binders broken down by last name, like I was taught. And that’s pretty much how I’ve done it.… There’s a good strong fifty [binders].” Seven recalled being told to find secondary sources to help them as they proceeded. As Ingrid mentioned,

I have a little library I can show you. But what I have found is that some of the older people in both sides of my parent’s families, and even with [husband’s] mom’s families, when they find someone that’s truly interested in keeping the family together and keeping these records, they turn them over to you. And so now I have odd pieces, scrapbooks—well that’s not odd, but gold watches that belonged to this one, or a pair of eyeglasses that belonged to that one, or a rosary or a Bible, or that sort of thing. So papers are in acid sleeves, plastic, fireproof and then I have archival boxes that I store for each individual and a list regarding what I have for them.

Most of the interviewees had devoted time to organization itself. Armand told me of the type of notebook he uses and why (black and white cardboard binding since it will not fall apart). Arden (b.1940) spoke of different colored inks. Robert (b. 1938) noted: “Well, I have books that show everything. Any time I find some information on an uncle or an aunt or a cousin, I put it in there…. Right now I have them by family. Each family has its own section in my box and in my computer.”

Lucy noted another method, not mentioned by others:

I don’t recommend erasing. I recommend you draw one line through it and continue on because that way you can see where your mistakes were. What direction you started going in … you can always go back and see where, what direction you started to go in that you know didn’t work.
Influences: Gender and Migration

In these processes, there is an assumption that “someone will one day find my work,” and that the work is especially interesting because it tells “where we came from.” The “someone” is often thought of as a woman. Of the seven interviewees who mentioned leaving their work to another person, all of these were women leaving records to women (daughters, daughters-in-law, nieces, fellow family historians who were women). Four men and two women mentioned leaving records to institutions. How does one interpret this? Are women more apt to be modest about their records? More private about their records? Are men more apt to consider their records worthy of an institution? These are unanswered questions, but what is clear is that there are gender differences in consideration of records.

Migration is a more overtly considered concept than is gender for family historians. As the metanarrative of all family history in the U.S., it reshapes itself into a pride with places such as New Orleans and Mobile that family historians see as having long histories of different waves of settlers.

Gender as Perceived by Family Historians

Judging from their histories and newsletters, women in the family history groups of Mobile, Jefferson Parish, and New Orleans always played a strong role, but leadership remains governed by gender stratification. The MGS, from 1960 to 1989, elected seven men as presidents and two women, and similarly, in the period 1981–2008, they elected three women and eight men as presidents. Since their foundings, all three genealogical societies have had more women members than men, more women than men as committee
chairs and secretaries, and more men as presidents. As noted in Chapter Four, women predominate in membership, but they also predominate in meetings.

To ask about gender, interviewees were queried in this way:

In general some of the publications on family history that I’ve seen begin with the statement that every family has its own historian, someone who keeps family records. Can you tell me what you think about this statement and also how this plays out in your own family?

After they answered this, they were then directed back to a general overview, with “Do you think this person is more likely to be a woman or a man?” Nine of the interviewees felt this person was more apt to be a woman, one felt it was more apt to be a man, and sixteen felt it depended, varied, or that this person was apt to be whoever might have the most interest in family history. As Lucy noted, “I think they come in all sizes, all colors too. All shapes and all sexes. However many there are.”

Among those who believed a woman more likely to be a family historian than a man, three were men themselves. Yet, one of these, Chuck, discussed how he got his information from other men (his father and a male cousin). When queried about this, “Except your father kept all those records. Right?” he replied, “He had very few. And my cousin—he had loads of stuff. But he had too much. And so, he told me, ‘When I get time, I’ll get my wife to copy them, I’ll call you to come here pick it up. So there again, is the woman.’” Most books and online publications advise family historians to think strategically about who would keep family records, usually advising beginners to turn first to the oldest member of a family. Since women live longer than men, these older relatives are often women, according to one interviewee—“gatekeepers” to two interviewees.
For other interviewees, family history gatekeepers were those who inherited or were given the family Bible, but there was no consensus about the gender of this Bible keeper. For example, Catherine thought that women entered births, marriages and deaths in Bibles, and that the family Bible was passed to the oldest daughter on her marriage. But Anthony, Robert, Emily, and Maria all thought the Bible was passed to the oldest son when he married. There also was no agreement if this practice was related to any particular ethnic group.

For the one person who thought family history more apt to be a hobby of men, her reason revolved around the issue of time. “Men have more time,” said Rebecca. She then referred to the reading room of the library of the Latter Day Saints. “We have three men here reading, or four men here reading and one lady.” She was a Mormon herself, and in her generation particularly (born before 1950), it was male children who were encouraged to write family histories. Despite this she added, “My husband doesn’t like genealogy. He’s not a patient person … but his aunt lives across the street from us…. And she knows his family history for him.”

From six-days’ time total spent in the reading rooms of the Latter Day Saints in Mobile and in Metairie (the latter serving all of the New Orleans metropolitan area), most readers were equally split between men and women, with seventy-five percent of the users being from outside the LDS church.

Despite the fact that the question about gender seemed to surprise them, family historians were interested in responding. As Thomas stated,

It is one of those things, like African-American history, until someone asks, people who are not touched by it won’t consider it. It may well have been a way for women to have some power and it may have been that they, more than the men, were just interested in families, in the way people were shaped in families.
Arden similarly was pleased to ponder whether women and men were equal in numbers among gatekeepers to the past within families.

Never crossed my mind. But then it was important to what diseases the family got. Say your aunt had a child who was blind, well, the woman remembered that when she was pregnant. She might want to write that down more than a man would. And then women didn’t get the name you know. The family history was the compensation prize.

As Thomas noted, “women as history keepers” are sometimes “outside the family.” He said,

Think about who is staffing those courthouses and who is the librarian. All women. And in my case, it was the church historian. One of the mothers of the church did a lot of documentation. And she died at 101 or 102 years of age, and she had a lot of personal information that she gave to me.

On the other hand, as Ingrid and William related, the keeper of records is often determined by who remains in a particular house or a particular locale. According to Ingrid,

In reading how to improve my genealogy process, I was reminded that my dad’s first cousins and my mom’s first cousins all had the same grandmother. And so, in my dad’s case, since his family’s home had been burned, I thought, well, I would check his cousins. And I just found a wealth of information there. And I find that most of the record groups from the immigrants that are maintained usually stay with the last family that that person is living with before they pass away.

As William similarly stated, the family’s record keeper in his father’s family was my dad’s sister, [because] of all my dad’s siblings, she didn’t leave the area she grew up in. She stayed there, she married someone local, she pretty much stayed within five miles of where most of them were born. So she was the one. She knew the most family history of her generation of my dad’s side.
In other words, if women do not move around the country as much as men, if they stay close to parents, it is they who inherit family papers.

On the other hand, said Thomas, “It depends on if a family is matriarchal or patriarchal and a lot of that depends on how many daughters, how many sons, how the money is earned if any, if there is a family home passed to the daughters or sons. So many things.”

Thoughts on Migration

Similarly, family historians considered not just the metanarrative of migration, but also various steps and sidesteps, and various complexities. Again, they were cognizant that they had the most information on people who had lived longest in one place, either in a particular place in the U.S. or elsewhere. In speaking of one of his “brick walls,” Paul mentions having practiced family history for almost thirty years, but not being able to find any records about where his great-grandfather had been born. “Somewhere in the Black Forest of Germany” was the most precise answer he was given verbally by his mother and his great-uncle. Even the baptismal papers of the first-born son of this man had been lost by the church. Paul didn’t know why:

So, no church records and no other clues about where he was from. He was German, but even that, well it wasn’t really Germany when he came over. Then one day I was cleaning. My grandparents had an old country house over in Covington. After my grandmother died, I was over there one day and we were looking through things in her bedroom … and here was the pipe.

He brings out a white ceramic pipe with red lettering on its base. He encourages smelling the lingering scent of tobacco.

The date on this is 1865 and this was my great-great-grandfather’s—my mother’s great-grandfather’s. This is the only way that I ever found out where he was from. Apparently, he got this when he went into the Prussian Army. It has his name and
then it says, “From Steinach, the Greater Steinach Grenadiers Infantry regiment to Constance in 1865.” That’s what the German says: the departure of the first of March, 1865. So on the first of March 1865 he left a little town, Steinach, which is where he is from, and went into the German military in Constance on Lake Constance in 1865. And in 1869 he immigrated to New Orleans. He came here. No one in the family knew where he was from. But sure enough when I went back using the records from the Latter Day Saints to Steinach and I found his baptism.

He pauses again to make sure the whole of the story is apparent. “When I went back looking through the church record, there’s his baptism which gave me then the name of his parents…. And it is all because this [the pipe] was saved.”

Still for many other interviewees, accounts of migration concerned a different sort of movement, more akin to the sentiments of President Obama as noted in Chapter Two. Yet even here their responses provided a nuanced understanding of American migratory sacrifice and hardship. For Louis, knowing something about his ancestors redeems other parts of the past. In exchanging papers with distant cousins in France, he states that

They were way over there and yet we had all this in common. It made me consider the world in a more kindly way. I thought of my people, well they had Saint Domingue, slavery, the horrible things, Sicily, poverty. But they had this sociability. We met through this sociability. It couldn’t be all bad.

Similarly, as one person said at a meeting:

Take the Acadians, take the Africans, take the Cherokees on their Trail of Tears, there was a lot of forcible damage done in making this country. Not everyone up and decided, hey, how cool it would be to move to New Orleans. So, yes, we look back and say thank you, God, for these people who lived long enough to have a child who had a child who had a child, you know, survived right on down the line to me.

Family history’s popularity unfolds outward from this idea of placing not only the self within a collective history of migration, but also some connection to perseverance within a specific migration.
Interpreting the Work of Family History

Despite this movement towards collectivity and specificity, more often than not, the interviewees still explained their “passion” with family history as their own, rather than something of interest to many others. Even given the vastness today of family history, over half of them characterized their pursuits as individualistic, even lonely. Perhaps because their interests are in families, they remain planted themselves within their families, more so than within the family-history community. As Gwendolyn (b. 1974) noted, “I’ve sent letters to all of my relatives, saying, ‘Hey, if you have any information, if you have any pictures?’ And very, very few of them have even bothered to respond.” Or as Emily stated, “Very few people are really interested, in family history.” And as Lisette elaborated,

You’d like a lot more family members to be that interested. But for example when I first started, I, for Christmas, did nice little books for all of my siblings, not unlike lots of other people, right? I put it into little binders, with family group sheets and the genealogy chart, which is what most people look at, and a few additional things—photographs, Jean-Paul’s oath of allegiance to King George, which is the first documentary proof we have of our ancestor in the New World. I had gone to England and found that in the Public Records Office in London. And so it was a really neat, big manuscript. And so I had that reproduced and everybody got a copy with the translation and they all now have it framed in their houses. But it went along with a booklet of print outs of everything else…. [But] lots of family members aren’t interested. So you’ve got to do this research while disabusing yourself of the notion that all of the family is going to be just so grateful that you’ve spent all of this time doing this, because a lot of them aren’t going to be touched by it. You ask yourself constantly why on earth you are spending all of that time digging up all that stuff. Who cares?

It is possible then to understand their family history work as being both social and lonely, both private and public, both on the forefront of technology and at the same time, incomplete in the small percentage of records that might be needed for one completed project. For interviewees, the leads found in the stories held clues that took them on
journeys to records, but over half of them mentioned the work as “never ending.” This final section then discusses transmission and pluralization of records as demonstrated in this ceaseless pursuit.

Transmission

In both the finding and recontextualization of records within a particular family history, issues of transmission ran throughout the conversations with family historians. These issues concern current interpretations, sharing of records, and the longevity of records overall. First, family historians want their collections of records to be “of use” to others. Robert explains: “You take what you find, and put it in a form that makes sense enough to you to give to someone else, in this case, to leave for my children. But first something has to be there.” What did he mean?

You have got to make sure it is in a form someone can understand. Or grab a hold to. Like my children and my grandchildren, I try to tell the granddaughter, she’s interested in cheerleading, so I talk of what her great-grandmother did when she was her age. I get a school record; I got pages of school records. Try to interest her in those.

Among those most skilled, the desired form is some sort of report or book. Four interviewees spoke of intentions to make a bound volume of some sort, “a book,” or as one said, “a monograph” that symbolizes the passing of the records back into the public sphere, the presence of more than one copy going to family, to libraries, to the genealogical societies. Louis stated, “I should put it in some kind of book form because one of these days I’ll drop dead, and all these years of work people are going to put into a box out on the curb.” Or as Bruce noted, he is working towards “the stage where you could share it with people through publication or what not…. Maybe put a chapter of a family in some sort of publications so it could be shared with others.”
Some apologized that they hadn’t yet made a book on their family. To twelve family historians, disseminating their findings could not be considered until one had “more proof.” This made the work “never ending.” They want more records before, as one said, “I make my book.” Twenty of the twenty-six interviewees mentioned “proof” as part of finding more “accounts,” more “details,” more documents, and needed before reaching any stopping point for their work.

These products from research, for Paul, “should equal an account of lives, various points of lives” and should then transmit accounts of the process:

The first things I guess, the documents, would have been in the Civil District Court. They would have been conveyance records because in Louisiana—because of the Napoleonic Code—females had to agree to the sale of any property. So if you didn’t know—you might know your male ancestors’ surnames but you didn’t know who they married because if you couldn’t find a marriage record you sometimes couldn’t find out what the maiden name of the wife was. If you could find a property sale you could find that out because Mrs. Cecile So-and-So, wife of Mr. Different-Name So-and-So had to agree to the sale of that property. So okay you’re already picking up information through these conveyance sales. You write it down, add it to a file, whatever. It makes up the whole picture that you are trying to get. If you can make yourself present it at a meeting, all the better, since then what you have learned has an audience.

Sometimes the layers of the story are not as interesting as the route followed in transmitting the story, but “you take it, you have to, since that is the point,” Lucy said. What point is that? “Some truth. I won’t say it is the only truth, that’s what you learn, you learn it’s a truth.” Other times, this learning is corrective and even healing. Gail told of her family’s memory:

My mother-in-law, there was another story about how her uncle was shot and killed and the whole works. And I was able to prove what actually happened. Because he was on the police force, as was her father, the Irish family. And I was actually able to get the actual police report. And also, he was brought to Charity [hospital], where he did die a few days later. But I actually got the report, so I could put the whole story together. So in the eyes of her being a child, I could
actually give her the true story behind it. There was some truth to it. Yes, he was shot, and he died, but how that happened.

Yet, outside the immediate family, records are very selectively transmitted. Ten mentioned not giving away copies, since they feared they would be “put on the Internet,” “just given away, all that work,” because “a bad experience” with someone else “claiming he’d done all the work,” and other fears of misuse. Only two were more philosophical about sharing, with one stating, “I would be happy if someone was interested enough to want this, and even if they didn’t give me credit, well, the information would be used.”

Because of the recent hurricanes and the potential and real loss from storms, all the interviewees had given more than passing thought to the survival of their lists of names, their booklets, their files, their records. Transmission for them is not a given. It requires various approaches to the safety of records: maintaining storage units above the third floor, duplicate records mailed to relatives in other parts of the country, and special methods of packing materials in water proof containers.

Eleven had worked to find funding for various conservation efforts in libraries, archives, and courthouses. In terms of the longevity of their personal archives, however, none want to give their papers away before death. As Joan (b. 1927) noted, “I have left my records to the Mobile society, but I have also appointed [another woman member] as the one to go through and get them ready for them. They are not in good shape yet.” Or as Sheila (b. 1935) stated, “I put everything in binders by families. And I put all the information, all the know-how stuff in other binders. Color coded, so they can be left to either my children or the Jefferson society. But I wouldn’t say that I am done yet with
anything.” Five others who had considered these legacies also returned to the idea that so much work remained unfinished.

Pluralization

Pluralization, a gift of records to the world, then is complicated for at least some family historians with their fear of incomplete products, with their fear of others taking their work. What then is involved in any sharing of records?

Each family historian allowed that their files and papers are valuable, potentially to others, even in some unfinished quest. But there remains, for most of them, the necessity of parceling out what they know at meetings and workshops, and to a limited extent, among family members and distant relatives. Ideally, they see themselves as stewards of family records. Hearing of a family Bible “that no one had paid attention to and I called this distant relative and finally persuaded her to let me have it,” is an example Bruce gave showing something of the roles of initiator, caretaker, and disseminator that family historians take. When he arrived to get the Bible, there were two, and he considers them now his “most prized possessions.” He “writes to other cousins … since they belong really to everyone. I am just entrusted with it, so I have to be sure I make it known and also pass it on.” As many theorists remind us, to become “archives” requires that private memories become public. Family historians understand a version of this stance in their insistence that “public” is defined by accessibility and preservation.

In an even more open attitude than others, Chuck succinctly stated his goals for a book of photocopies of all the records he had found. He wants it to be “handy. That’s

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19 Reed, “Beyond Perceived Boundaries,” 178.
what I want to write at the beginning of the book: Someday I hope this work will come in handy.” But Chuck’s preliminary efforts at this book, many see as unworthy of the type of effort they want. The manuals discuss pedigree histories (ascending or descending, with the latter being more heritage album-like in a focus on one particular family), genealogical histories (single-surname studies, or full-family studies), hourglass genealogies (again like heritage albums in concentration on a not-too-distant forbear), or a multivolume series.21 “Handy,” for many, was not good enough for their “rules-based” world.

Pluralization then, in some ways, remains circumscribed. Yet, they do add to what they see as the layers of the past, and recall again, “someone will use it.”

Finally, too, pluralization in another sense is achieved. The interviewees consider the community of family historians as teaching about the many different types of people. Family history, according to Robert:

allows you to meet people you would not normally meet. It allows conversations to take place. It allows—you become involved in a very unique community that is worldwide. It educates and, I would hope, breeds tolerance. Because not everybody comes from a socially acceptable family, all the way down the line. So you see where you’re not purist and, hopefully, it allows you to have a better understanding that we’re a global community and not some Nazi, you know, cookie-cutter type thing. I think that’s helpful.

Settings in the Network of Memory

There are two walls of memories in Sheila’s house. One wall in the small entry way features all her children and grandchildren, with one centered photograph called “Bienvenu of the Month.” Another wall, this one in the kitchen, contains photos of John and Robert Kennedy, Pope John XXIII and Pope Benedict XVI, as well as group photos

of the family, including her grandparents home in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, her
great-grandparents home in Mid-City New Orleans, her husband’s family house in rural
Louisiana, and a framed postcard showing the village where her great great grandmother
lived in Ireland. Her walls are representative of what she wants the family to envision,
images that tell of her interest in them, in memory itself, and in those connections she
makes for them to the wider world.

Like Sheila, all the family historians choose their own ways but all work
dynamically with the past, especially coming to records from, or creating, environments
that encourage thinking about the past and undertaking projects that can show them proof
of the past. Yet, it is not only the positivist tradition of truth, but also the affordance of
records that family historians appreciate, an affordance of relativity. They do not expect
quick answers, they expect rather to see connections that will help them understand the
present world.

Finding records, Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres stated, “Frees
[genealogists] to search for meaning…. As a result they are less concerned about every
story being true and can seek identity though more subtle and perhaps metaphorical
meaning in the stories.”22 But the stories are unending ones, and thus one returns to
records. As Arden said, “Resolving problems is waiting and seeing what’s next.” For
family historians the unending nature itself is the meaning. It is a process of knowledge
maturation, or more simply put, “a belief in learning as you go along.”

The learning trajectories the family historians described included struggles with
how records were shaped by different national practices, by different languages, by the
destruions of wars, as well as by their own struggles with spellings from other times

22 Yakel and Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records,’” 108.
and places, and travel to find the records of family in others places. To return to the beginning of this chapter, for these people, memory is not symbolically a palace of some magnificent quality, or even a dovecote. Instead, memory, at its best, shows journeys already made, and those yet to come. Bruce and Madeleine were both traveling to distant places to find records in the summer of 2007, to meet distant cousins known only via email. Their progression to a new network of knowing the past is mirrored in memory studies. Now memory is understood as shaped by neural networks, organizing matter, in a way not so different from the passages family historians take between mediating technology, records, people, across oceans and time and back again. Family historians seek not one place of memory but many potentially connecting and enlivening places.

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23 Draaisma, Metaphors of Memory, 194.