

2018

## Introducing Genealogy to the Academic Library in the 21st Century

Tom McFarland

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [lmcfarland1@unl.edu](mailto:lmcfarland1@unl.edu)

Joan Barnes

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [jbarnes3@unl.edu](mailto:jbarnes3@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience>

Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Other American Studies Commons](#)

---

McFarland, Tom and Barnes, Joan, "Introducing Genealogy to the Academic Library in the 21st Century" (2018). *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. 370.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/370>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Introducing Genealogy to the Academic Library in the 21st Century

THOMAS MCFARLAND *and* JOAN M. BARNES

## *Introduction*

This case study examines the development of a new program to foster genealogical research in an academic library that did not encourage or promote genealogical research. In early 2014, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries set a strategic initiative of increased outreach. As one way to reach the goal, the staff development officer and the community engagement librarian proposed a genealogical program with three objectives:

- to reach out to campus faculty, staff, and students
- to involve library faculty and staff
- to bring community users into the academic library

The staff development officer and the community engagement librarian became the program's coordinators. They developed the program by initiating Genealogy Over Lunch and Genealogy & Family History Day as focal points to bring people to the library for interesting discussions to help the library's staff understand how family historians can use their expertise, and to introduce more researchers to the library's underused large collections. Planning, resources, publicity, and assessment were crucial to the success of the program.

## *Background*

For decades, like many other larger academic libraries, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries did not encourage genealogical research. This had not always been the case. The dean of the library in 1925–1937 was Gilbert H. Doane, the author of the 1937 genealogical classic, *Searching for Your Ancestors: The Why and How of Genealogy*. In the 1950s, however, the library transferred materials that librarians considered primarily genealogical to the Nebraska State Historical Society, which is just two blocks from the

main campus library. Reference staff actively urged genealogical researchers to use the Historical Society's collections.

The re-introduction of genealogy into the library started more than fifty years later, in March 2012. The coordinator of Learn at Love, the library's public workshop series, asked the staff development officer to present a session on how patrons could use the library's collection to do genealogical research. The staff development officer used the library's online, print, map, and special collections to show how it was possible to research an unknown revolutionary soldier. Using Heritage Quest, he showed the soldier in the 1790 and 1800 censuses. The library's book collection and HathiTrust had many sources that helped to build out the story. These included lists of militia members, battle histories, effects of the war in the area, and even town histories that included genealogical information on the family. Fold3 provided payrolls, muster records, and personal dispositions. There were also sources to help find materials that were not in the library's collection, such as ArchiveGrid and WorldCat. These resources made it possible to get copies of articles and pages of books. Historical maps gave context and understanding to the movements of the soldier during the war. Bringing all of these documents together resulted in a substantive history. The Learn at Love coordinator actively advertised on campus and was able to get promotion for the event in the city newspaper. It brought in more attendees than the large room could accommodate. Librarians were surprised to learn how much information could be found. The success of the presentation resulted in adding genealogy in later sessions, and the staff development officer presented these programs for the library once or twice per year as part of that library-initiated series. Over the next two years, the attendance at all of the Learn at Love sessions dwindled, and the library discontinued the series.

With the termination of the Learn at Love series, campus colleagues approached the staff development officer to find a way to do something to assist faculty, staff, and students to learn more about doing genealogical research. In response to a new library strategic initiative to increase outreach, in January 2014, the staff development officer approached the dean of libraries with a proposal to have genealogically focused programs. The dean was enthusiastic, and they brought the community engagement librarian in as a co-coordinator with the staff development officer. The community engagement librarian was an adept genealogist and had the essential expertise to promote the program.

### *Genealogy Over Lunch*

The coordinators met to brainstorm to get the program started and decided to emphasize family history over genealogy. The elimination of the strictly genealogical collection was not viewed as an obstacle by the coordinators because of the earlier success of showing how the use of academic materials led to the creation of a family history. They invited key faculty and staff in the library and a representative from the chancellor's office to give input on how to proceed. The group liked the idea of short presentations followed by an open question and answer period. The coordinators decided to start with outreach to the campus community. After discussing the pros and cons of various venues, the coordinators chose to hold the discussions in a library conference room with media and occasionally in one of the library's instruction rooms. The group determined a monthly hour session over lunch would most likely best meet the schedules for

faculty, staff, and students and chose the third Thursday of the month from 11:30 until 12:30. Thus, they launched Genealogy Over Lunch with the first session, "Favorite and Unusual Sources." The community engagement librarian promoted the session, and it brought in thirty campus faculty and staff. This format began a successful series of sessions.

The coordinators led the programs and discussions. The attendance for Genealogy Over Lunch discussions fluctuated and ranged between five to twenty-five people depending on the session topic and work schedules. Over the next two years, they learned more about what attendees wanted and made incremental improvements to the program. At each session, they asked participants what they would like for presentations. The coordinators suggested themes to the attendees for about half of the sessions and the rest were suggested by the attendees.

Library faculty and staff were recruited to share their expertise in brief presentations covering various areas, including preservation of family documents, searching newspapers, and knowledge of collections specific to the university library.

Genealogy Over Lunch covered the following topics.

- DNA
- Cyndi's List
- MyHeritage
- Holiday traditions
- Google Scholar
- FamilySearch.org
- Question and Answer
- Crowdsourcing a problem
- Ancestry.com
- Success stories
- Draper Collection
- Court records
- FamilySearch and WorldCat for local records
- Open Mic discussion
- Finding death records/information
- Land records
- "Inspiration" software
- Building a family member timeline
- Beyond Ancestry.com
- Organizing your research
- GedMatch
- Online publishing
- Brick wall breakthroughs
- Proof and Evidence
- Crossing the Pond
- Archival preservation
- "Legacy" software
- Fold3
- U.S. Serial Set
- Favorite and Unusual Sources

Presentations that covered genealogically themed databases, such as FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com and MyHeritage had the best attendance. Traditional library instruction topics, such as Google Scholar and how to organize research, had good attendance. Sessions that concerned a specific problem, such as crowdsourcing a problem or those that lacked a theme, like the general question and answer sessions, were not as well attended. It surprised the coordinators that the attendance at the DNA sessions was low. Nevertheless, there was a high level of interest by those that did attend. Recently more of the attendees have said that they took a DNA test, so it may become more popular. Faculty from the University's School of Biological Sciences have expressed an interest in working with the group on DNA for future presentations. This contact showed how the program connected to multiple disciplines and made genealogy in the library better known on campus.

The engagement and participation of attendees has been another indicator of success. During each session, discussion and questions flowed comfortably between coordinators and attendees. The coordinators encouraged attendees to present and several did so. This model gave the group more buy-in, was more inclusive, and took advantage of a larger knowledge base. Presentations by attendees were especially valuable for demonstrations of software, such as Legacy, RootsMagic, and Inspiration.

### *Publicity Plan for Genealogy Over Lunch*

The publicity plan targeted a specific audience and marketed the programs in the channels where the audience members would discover them. The first step of the plan required listing each segment of the market audience and deciding on the best way to reach each segment with the program information. The breakdown of the audience for Genealogy Over Lunch included current faculty and staff, emeriti faculty, library personnel, and students.

After each type of marketable audience was determined, a plan was implemented to reach each group with the program publicity. For faculty and staff on campus, the community engagement librarian submitted the announcement of the upcoming Genealogy Over Lunch program to a campus-wide digital newsletter, entitled "Nebraska Today," distributed by the Office of University Communications several mornings each week during the academic year. This campus-wide digital newsletter was the primary means to reach faculty and staff across campus. The names and email addresses of every person that attended a Genealogy Over Lunch session was captured for future notifications of upcoming discussions or future events.

In addition to the digital newsletter, the program coordinators targeted emeriti faculty by sending an announcement to the designated chair with a request to share the announcement widely with their members. Past attendees, plus library faculty and staff, were sent an email notice by one of the program coordinators.

Students were targeted through a digital newsletter of announcements that the Student Affairs office manages, entitled "Next@Nebraska," which is emailed to students once a week. In addition, the Genealogy Over Lunch program was featured in the student-run campus newspaper twice. The second time a student reporter covered the program, she conducted an in-depth interview of both program coordinators. The result was a well-written article about the Genealogy Over Lunch program making it more visible to students (Rembert 2017).

## *Genealogy & Family History Day*

After the success of doing the Genealogy Over Lunch series, the coordinators decided a day of free programs would be a good way to attract community members. They considered it important that the community users would feel welcome and view the library and its staff positively. Since the local community college and genealogical society offered classes for beginning genealogists, the coordinators decided their audience would be users with a basic understanding of doing genealogical research. It was important to highlight the family history aspect, as this was a library strength. They launched Genealogy & Family History Day in 2015.

A daylong event meant dealing with more logistics: themes, presenters, venue, extended marketing, registration system, welcome, and refreshments. As one of the goals was to bring community members into the library, the coordinators chose a large classroom auditorium in the building. It had the advantages of ample seating capacity and a full classroom presentation setup. It was a high priority to have a good speaker system and oversize display monitor.

The publicity focus for Genealogy & Family History Day was to take the core publicity efforts the community engagement librarian did for the on-campus audiences and to expand them to an off-campus audience in and around Lincoln, Nebraska. The additional marketing tools included a webpage, media release, and a visual/poster that could be printed, emailed or posted on social media.

The media release contained the elements of a standard event announcement, which included the date, time, place, link to register, and a brief description of the content of the day's program. The purpose of the media release was to drive people to the website for more information. The Office of University Communications distributed the media release to newspapers, radio, and TV media throughout the state.

To directly reach groups of people interested in a day of genealogy workshops, the community engagement librarian created a database of genealogical societies, historical societies, and public libraries. A student employee assisted in searching online and gathered email addresses and links to Facebook pages. The media release and a digital poster were distributed to all email addresses on the list. Part of the social media strategy was to post the visual or message to each organization's Facebook page with the poster.

The library's graphic designer created visuals for both Genealogy Over Lunch and posters for Genealogy & Family History Day. Figure 1 is the tree that accompanied the Genealogy Over Lunch announcements.

The poster for Genealogy & Family

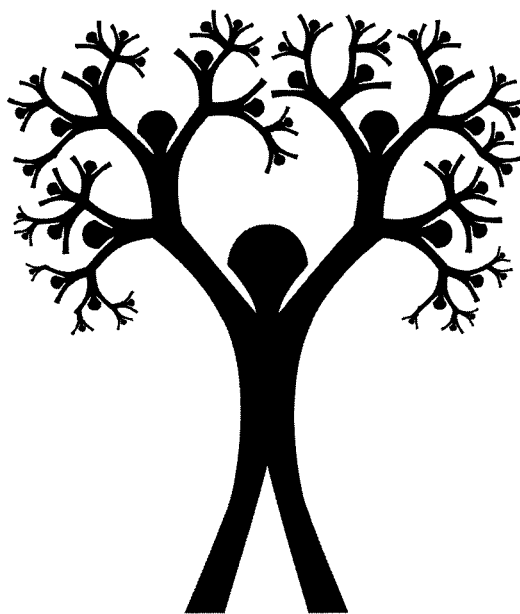


Figure 1. Design for Genealogy Over Lunch:  
<https://unl.box.com/s/6o7j22tt8e6wlmnx91n9oglu4ciqjxy>

History Day (Figure 2) incorporated that tree and visually illustrated the theme of the second annual Genealogy & Family History Day. Visuals conveyed the theme of the program and grabbed the attention of the potential audience.

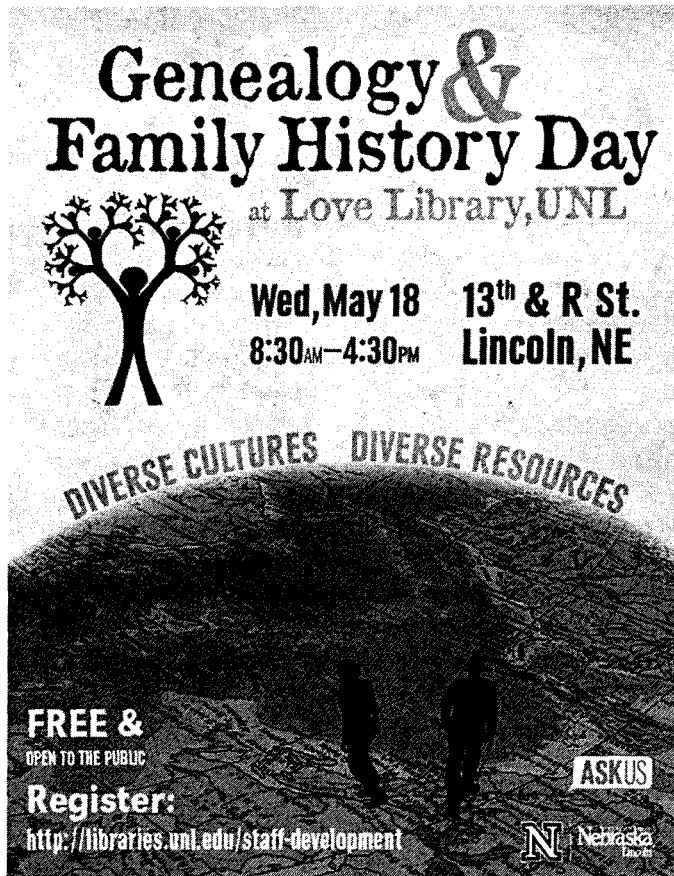


Figure 2. Poster for Genealogy & Family Day: <https://unl.box.com/s/1u48vjotuhjlzq8jjst8vd1c9bhyblwq>

Surrounding the Genealogy & Family History Day included providing a welcome start to the day. This was especially important, as the library had not encouraged genealogical research for many years. Both coordinators and a student employee comprised the logistics team for the day. A successful event depends heavily on attention to detail. The student created the nametags and provided them for any walk-in registrations by transferring the names from the LibCal spreadsheet to a label-making program. The student was assigned to greet attendees at the welcome table, confirmed everyone was on the attendance list, and distributed the handouts. The community engagement librarian provided a script and went over possible questions that might arise at the registration table while the student greeted attendees. Specific talking points on the script were to show where the restrooms and vending areas were located. The library provided coffee, water, and an afternoon snack of popcorn for the attendees. The cost for each Genealogy & Family History Day was modest, as it covered coffee, popcorn, nametags, and one professional presenter.

It was necessary to know the number of people attending in order to provide appropriate refreshments, distribute handouts electronically, and communicate final details. The coordinators used LibCal, a product of SpringShare, for registrations. This had several advantages. The coordinators could email directly from LibCal with reminders, directions, and updates. Setting up an event in LibCal created a URL that could be published in the promotional materials and that would take attendees directly to the registration page which interfaced with the library's staff development web page. The library web designers further developed the page to include details of the day's programs, speaker information, registration information, event location and directions, parking options, and recommendations for nearby restaurants that serve a quick lunch.

For the first year, the coordinators chose to have presentations that highlighted databases and library collections. This was also a way to enthuse and educate librarians and staff as to how their expertise could help these researchers. The coordinators invited the reference coordinator, history librarian, architecture librarian, and university archivist to do presentations, along with the staff development officer. This covered a broad range of subjects by library experts. They included:

- Using the library website
- Newspapers
- Google Scholar
- Google Books
- HathiTrust
- Fold3
- Civil War Index
- Sanborn Maps
- University Archives
- ArchivGrid
- WorldCat
- Heritage Quest
- Draper Manuscript Collection

For the second year, the coordinators thought it would improve the event to have a theme. They chose “Diverse Cultures, Diverse Resources,” which fit into the library’s diversity focus. The theme worked well in promotional materials and in developing lectures. The presentations focused on Native American, African American, German, and Colonial American genealogy and showed a variety of resources held in the library and online.

## *Resources*

When the new genealogy outreach program began, the library’s only strictly genealogical online database was Heritage Quest. The library later exchanged that database for MyHeritage. These databases were important to the program, as they provided the United States censuses and other basic resources for assisting genealogists. MyHeritage also had the advantage of being more international in scope.

The program coordinators emphasized how the wider library collection could augment family history research outside of the strictly genealogical databases. They encouraged librarians to present sessions to show researchers how they could use the United States Serial Set, history, political science, map, and patent collections, as well as archives and special collections, in family history. It was also an opportunity to highlight under-used large collections, such as the Draper Manuscript Collection, which included manuscripts and papers relating to the American West from the 1740s to the 1830s, and primary papers from the American Fur Company.

The genealogy program promoted the library digital initiatives of the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (CDRH), a joint venture of the University Libraries and the College of Arts & Sciences. The CDRH digitized Nebraska newspapers as part of the National Digital Newspaper Program and its public website, *Chronicling America*.



They also digitized the Nebraska Homestead records. That collection became part of Fold3, a database that specializes in military records but includes non-military records. These opportunities highlighted to the campus and community users how the library contributes to the creation and dissemination of valuable record sets and how they could use these in their family history research.

### *Assessment of Impact*

Attendance, engagement, and feedback were tracked to measure the success of both Genealogy Over Lunch and the Genealogy & Family History Day. Most importantly, both programs brought diverse members of the University community into the library. In the third year of Genealogy Over Lunch, new staff and faculty, from diverse offices and units across campus, are still discovering the discussion group. New attendees heard about this program through the campus e-newsletter announcement or by word-of-mouth.

Students were one group the program was unsuccessful in attracting to Genealogy Over Lunch. One student attended the very first session but never returned. The program has been featured in the student newspaper twice with no positive effect.

An objective of the program was to involve library faculty and staff in instruction and to make them aware of the needs of genealogists. This objective was essential to the success of the program. The genealogy sessions presented by the staff development officer as part of the Learn at Love series gave reference providers an in-house resource. The presentations also helped library staff understand that genealogists most often were not just interested in dates of birth, marriage, and death, but that they wanted to flesh out the family history. Starting with programs for campus researchers helped to overcome the negative stereotype some librarians had for genealogists. It also reinforced that their expertise could meet the needs of these researchers and was an exciting way to reach a new user base. Library staff also attended sessions to learn more about other resources.

One of the objectives of initiating Genealogy & Family History Day was to bring new community members into the main campus library. To gauge the success of that initiative, the coordinators used two main indicators: email addresses of registrants and the results of an evaluation questionnaire.

The online registration form for Genealogy & Family History Day captured registrants' names and email addresses. In 2015, twenty-eight of the emails addresses were from the domain used by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (unl.edu); thirty-two email addresses were from non-university domains (.com, .net, .org, and .gov). In 2016, even more community members attended with twenty-three email addresses from the University's domain and forty-six email addresses from non-university domains. The numbers of community members increased in attendance from the first to the second annual day. The program coordinators knew, anecdotally, that a few attendees had returned to work on their family history or to use a resource in the library. Unfortunately, data such as reference or circulation statistics did not exist to support that supposition.

The coordinators used an evaluation questionnaire that yielded valuable qualitative feedback from registrants of the Genealogy & Family History Day. In 2015, the questionnaire contained seven questions and was returned by thirty-three of the sixty registrants. In 2016, an eighth question was added to the original evaluation questionnaire and thirty-

four of sixty-nine questionnaires were returned to the coordinators. Below is a list of the questions:

1. Where did you learn about the conference? (added in 2016)
2. Please describe how the sessions met, or did not meet, your expectations.
3. What will benefit you most?
4. How will you apply what you have learned?
5. It would have been better to spend more time on...
6. It would have been better to spend less time on...
7. What would you like included in the next workshop?
8. General Comments

The results to question number one helped the coordinators determine whether the publicity for Genealogy & Family History Day was effective. Word-of-mouth and local genealogical societies were the top two answers to the first question on the evaluation. Sending the publicity announcement to genealogical societies across the state supported the attendance numbers and proved to be worth the time and effort.

In terms of rating the content of the Genealogy & Family History Day, attendees were overwhelming positive in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, there were only a few negative comments about one session. This highlighted for the coordinators the need to fully communicate to potential presenters about the type of audience that attends the workshops and that speakers need to be well-versed in their topic. All other questions on the evaluation form gave the coordinators feedback on content and guided future workshop topics.

## *Conclusion*

The library developed a new genealogical program with the goals of reaching out to campus faculty, staff, and students, involving library faculty and staff, and bringing community users into the library. The assessment showed that the program met these goals, except for the ability to attract the student population. Reaching the student body is still a challenge. Factors that contributed to the program's success were the coordinators' good understanding of public service, genealogical expertise, and enthusiasm. It also was essential that there was a publicity system in place and that the coordinators had expertise in organizing events and marketing. It was important that the program proved itself able to support the library's strategic initiative. This meant that good record keeping and assessment were vital. Opportunities for library staff and attendees to have input resulted in their enthusiasm and good advice. The format of a shorter presentation followed by a question and answer session at Genealogy Over Lunch is recommended.

For the future, the program coordinators will test better ways to draw students into the program. They will also develop an online guide for reference providers and researchers on using the library for family history. They will continue to look at new topics and expanding the program.

## WORKS CITED

- Doane, Gilbert Harry. 1937. *Searching for Your Ancestors: The Why and How of Genealogy*. New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
- Rembert, Elizabeth. "UNL's Genealogy Over Lunch Allows Family History to Be Discovered." *Daily Nebraskan*. February 7, 2017. [http://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/unl-s-genealogy-over-lunch-allows-family-history-to-be/article\\_9735cbd4-ece0-11e6-b08a-97adedb77646.html](http://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/unl-s-genealogy-over-lunch-allows-family-history-to-be/article_9735cbd4-ece0-11e6-b08a-97adedb77646.html).