

GENEALOGY ON FOUR HOURS A WEEK

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I recently discovered that my professional colleagues had the misconception that my research files are well organized, with every fact documented. I can't imagine where they got such an idea. Knowing *what* and *how* one should do things and having *done* them are two different things.

Above all, my colleagues know that I have almost no time to work on my own family genealogy. Between lecturing, clients, and writing, there just isn't any time.

I used to research my family. In February of 1982 when I began researching, I planned to trace all of my lines back to the immigrant ancestors by June when I had a trip planned to Nebraska to see my family. In all fairness, I had no idea that many of my family lines had been in America far longer than I thought.

I still have not achieved that optimistic goal, but I have collected four file drawers, numerous boxes, and many computer files of family research. Much of it was acquired when my understanding of the need for documentation was a smidge weak. Most of it was acquired before I understood the need for creating a single compilation of all information on a family in order to analyze it critically.

What this means is that there is a lot of material that retroactively needs organizing. Which brings us back to the problem stated above: I have almost no time to work on my own family genealogy. What I do know is that an hour here or there won't do it.

My solution? Beginning this week, I resolve to devote four hours per week to my genealogical family. That, however, is easier said than done. When I examine my calendar and take into consideration all my responsibilities, I see there is no time today, or tomorrow, or the next day, or . . .

Clearly this won't work. It's time to take my own advice, from an old lecture on the subject, "Genealogy on Four Hours a Week" and see what I can learn from myself.

GET FOCUSED

One of my problems is that when I do work on my family, I work on too many parts of it at once. I need to start, persist, and complete my efforts on one family. At the moment, I have made commitments to others that I will complete work on three different families. They are all overdue. I need to focus on one. I have decided to begin on the smallest family. In this case, it is one surname in a relatively limited locale. When I move on to the next two families, in order to be focused, I will have to divide them into subsections. They are migrating families, so tackling one locality at a time makes sense, although when I get to them, I may find that it is more logical to do one family unit at a time.

GET COMMITTED

One key element of this plan is that I won't just commit to devote four hours per week to my own family

research, it means that I will commit to devote a *specified* four hours per week to my own family research. I reviewed my calendar and chose Thursdays from 5:00 to 9:30 (half an hour for dinner) because I have no regular commitments on Thursday evenings and the library is open until 9:00. (Those of you with spouses may find the spouse's bowling night to be the best option.) During those hours, I may switch the phone over to the answering machine to avoid interruptions. In the event of a conflict (or unavoidable interruption), I intend to reschedule the four hours immediately.

Artificial aids are good. I am putting it on my calendar and setting my computer to remind me at 4:45 on Thursdays to close up whatever I am doing and get ready to work on my own family. I am more likely to keep my commitments if I tell others about them, so I am telling several friends (the kind who don't mind gently nagging) about my schedule and focus family.

To stay focused and committed, I am putting all other family research away, out of sight. This is taking me a little bit of time because, although I thought the piles in my office were well organized, papers seem to have managed to migrate almost as often as my ancestors. This step has the added advantage, though, of providing me with more working space in my office.

GET ORGANIZED

To begin with, this means finding what I have already collected on the family. The first project I selected is, fortunately, also my newest family find, so the material is more or less in one place. After I complete this project and progress to the next, I will have to go through the massive amount of material I have collected and select only what pertains to the subsections on which I am focusing.

Once I have identified the research material that I have collected, I will create a simple chronology listing all events. For family units during the federal period, I also create a census grid indicating which censuses I have found for each family member.

GET IT IN PRINT

The most important part of the Four Hours a Week plan (sounds like a diet, doesn't it?) is to compile a fully documented, detailed discussion of everything found thus far and a fully documented genealogical summary (family group) in Register or modified Record format.

I expect this compilation to take several work sessions. One lesson I have learned (but do not remember as often as I should) is that it takes much longer to enter the research into the computer properly than it does to find it. On this family, I have already devoted more hours to typing than were spent on researching, and I am far from done. This is because I am taking the time to analyze each document carefully, often transcribing all or part word-by-word. As discussed in "Typing Every Word," this almost

always results in a better understanding of our ancestors and new ideas about research.

GET READY TO RESEARCH

It is while creating the compilation that I begin my “to do” list. I also review the chronology to determine events for which I do not have a record, and I mark the census grid with a highlighter in cells for which I do not have a census record.

Explore what is available on the locality. With a variety of catalogs and websites on the Internet, this is much easier to do than when I first gave my lecture. I won’t just look for what is available. I will create a resource list on the computer, including full name of author and full title.

Then I will check to see what is available at the local library from their online catalog and add the call number to the resource list. Our cataloging system shelves books on a single locality in numerous places, so I sort the list in call-number order for rapid retrieval. I have already

identified and ordered two microfilms from the Family History Library and will probably order more.

GET TO THE LIBRARY

Researching is what I love to do. I just have to remember that the keyword is *focus*. I am not taking any other research with me, and I will wear blinders and refuse to be distracted by books and microfilm that catch my eye but are related to other projects.

As I research, I will continue to update the chronology and compilation (plus the census grid when appropriate).

GET PUBLISHED

There is closure to this process. By “publish” I don’t mean there has to be a book. I mean “make it public.” In my first project, I will be sharing my detailed, fully documented discussion and compilation with other researchers on the family.

I am starting my four hours a week tonight, February 13. It will be interesting to see if I can stick with it.