

IN PRAISE OF PERIODICALS

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Family historians often think of researching using books, microfilm, original, and electronic sources, but forget a very important class of resource materials—periodicals. Why does it matter if you overlook this record group? What might you miss?

First, let's make it clear just how massive this record group is. There are about 10,000 genealogical and historical periodicals for the US alone. Now let's look at the variety available.

MAGAZINES, JOURNALS, AND NEWSLETTERS

There are several broad classifications of periodicals, with a lot of overlap in content. Companies such as Ancestry publish magazines [no longer published]; most societies publish both a journal and a newsletter. We tend to use the term “quarterlies” generically to apply to journals, even though not all journals are quarterly. All three types have content of genealogical interest. In general, content might be classified as:

- abstracts of source data
- compiled genealogy
- problem resolution
- history and culture
- biography
- how-to (methodology and sources)
- book reviews
- recent acquisitions
- current events
- society annual reports
- queries

Over a long time period, most of the current items (the last five) cease to be useful in research, unless your great-grandmother is mentioned in society news or a query contains clues useful to your research. More and more, these current items are being shifted from the journal of a society to its newsletter or even online. Many editors recognize that a journal publication needs to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, so few biographies are published, because they have limited interest to the readership.

VENERABLE SENIORS

For over a century and a half, genealogical and historical societies have been the focal point for genealogical research. They acquired libraries, provided educational opportunities, and published periodicals. The New England Historic Genealogical Society was founded in 1845, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society in 1869, the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania in 1892, and the National Genealogical Society in 1903. Each of these has published—and continues to publish—journals, specifically the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* [NEHGR], the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* [NYGBR], the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine* [PGM], and the *National Genealogical*

Society Quarterly [NGSQ]. (As a disclaimer, I should point out that I am the current editor of PGM and that the term “venerable senior” applies to the journal, not its editor.)

Historical societies were more prevalent than genealogical societies for many years. Their periodicals often included genealogies and materials useful for genealogical research. The *William and Mary Quarterly* [W&MQ] began publication in 1892. Some publications of historical societies are called *Proceedings* and consist primarily of papers prepared for lectures presented to the membership. These may provide helpful background for your research.

Additionally, a number of journals have been privately published in the past, and a few continue to be. Notable among these are *The American Genealogist* [TAG], which began in 1922 as the *New Haven Genealogist*, and the *Virginia Genealogist*, which will be 50 years old in 2006. *The Genealogist*, formerly privately published, is now sponsored by the American Society of Genealogists.

NAME CHANGES

As noted above with TAG, many publications have changed names over the years. PGM was called *Publications of the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania* before 1948, the *Maine Genealogist* was formerly the *Maine Seine*, and the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* began publication in 1892 as *American Monthly Magazine*. This can make finding (and citing) them confusing.

SCHOLARLY JOURNALS

This is a subcategory of journals in general, but one that is very meaningful to the researcher. Examples are the previously mentioned NEHGR, NYGBR, PGM, NGSQ, W&MQ, TAG, *Virginia Genealogist*, *Maine Genealogist*, and *The Genealogist*. The term implies a journal with a critical editor who requires a high standard for the material published. This is most notable in compiled genealogies and articles tackling knotty problems.

GENEALOGICAL SOCIETIES

Most state and local genealogical societies were formed in the twentieth century. Many are still in existence; others had brief, yet valuable, publishing tenures. Even with a shifting focus to electronic genealogy, societies remain strong and active, as shown by the 500+ member societies in the Federation of Genealogical Societies, located throughout the country, from 2 in Alaska to 36 in Florida, from 38 in Michigan to 33 in Texas.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Publications by societies formed around ethnic, religious, or other specialized interests are useful to today's researchers who share that background. These publications

may have both source material and valuable articles about culture and history.

HEREDITARY SOCIETIES

Although the publications of hereditary societies focus primarily on their members and society activities, they may contain articles of interest, particularly in providing historical background. The *Mayflower Descendant* is an important source for Plymouth Colony.

FAMILY NEWSLETTERS

Surname newsletters are published by family societies and by individuals. Most focus on the descendants of a particular couple or the surname in a particular region. Frequently there is (or was) a family reunion associated with the publication. Often these periodicals are sporadic and eventually die away, but during their life span they may have produced valuable information.

MAGAZINES

Genealogical and historical magazines contain articles that can help you learn about record groups, repositories, and research techniques. The authors in magazines such as *Ancestry Magazine* are often well-known lecturers and writers. Like newsletters, magazines usually have book reviews and notices of events. Today, we have several electronic magazines (newsletters), such as *Ancestry Daily News* [no longer published].

WHY BOTHER?

The variety of content in periodicals obviously indicates a variety of uses, from learning to record abstracts. Perhaps the key question is: What will I find in periodicals that I won't find elsewhere?

If the goal is learning, you will find periodicals a more relaxing read than a how-to book—and better designed for short sessions. Lugging *The Source* to the dentist's office seems unreasonable, but a magazine or journal may provide a better waiting-room distraction than a six-month-old copy of *Newsweek*.

A practical consideration that often isn't realized by family historians who are new to the field is that some items simply aren't massive enough to be a book. If your ancestor's church was in existence for only 20 years and all they kept was a book of minutes, that isn't likely to fit comfortably into any of the typical books of abstracts. But it is a perfect record to publish in a local periodical. Those minutes may mention in passing a family relationship documented nowhere else.

Another practical consideration is that of corrections or additions. You may be lucky enough to find a nice thick family genealogy published in the 1930s. At that time it was much more difficult to access a large number of records than it is today. Thus, the book may have carried the male surname back many generations, but identified the maiden names of few wives. If a researcher today identifies one of those wives, he or she certainly isn't going to republish the whole book, but might be thoughtful enough to prepare an article—complete with documentation—describing the find.

Additionally, that family genealogy may have contained an error here and there, such as misidentifying a European origin or swapping cousins of the same name. Again, it is most likely that you will find the correction published in a periodical, not a book.

I hope the possibilities have you thinking about expanding your research to include periodicals.