

Careers for Historians: Genealogists

By Beth Crist

Have you ever wondered who your ancestors are? If you've ever traced your family history, or genealogy, you already have experience as a genealogist. Many professional genealogists say they first became interested in genealogy by looking into their own family histories. They enjoyed the work so much that they began helping other people trace their ancestry.

How does a genealogist find out the names of someone's great-great-great-grandparents? He or she begins with information that a client provides, such as the names and birthplaces of one set of grandparents. He also determines what information the client wants. Maybe the client wishes to find his great-aunt's grave site or to have his family tree traced back five generations. The genealogist then creates a plan for his research. He looks for relevant sources and decides which ones will be most useful to examine.

Then the research begins. The genealogist spends long hours in archives, county courthouses, libraries, churches, and other places where public records are kept. He searches for birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, wills, tax information, military records, census data, immigration records, and other documents. He asks the client and the client's relatives for family letters, diaries, photographs, heirlooms, and scrapbooks, which can contain valuable data. He also interviews family members about their relatives. Their memories can be treasure troves of genealogical information.

After the genealogist completes this research, he organizes the information into a report. Genealogical reports often contain charts, photographs, copies of documents, audiotapes of interviews, and resources to find out more information.

Unlike other professions featured in this series, genealogy doesn't require a college degree or a background in history. But genealogists must have many of the same abilities historians possess. They must have excellent communication, research, and organizational skills, and be patient and detail-oriented. A few universities offer family history programs, but most genealogists are largely self-taught. Several national genealogical organizations offer certification for genealogists who can prove their skills.

Many genealogists work independently; others work for libraries, professional genealogical firms, archives, and other organizations. In addition to tracing family histories, they write articles and books, teach genealogy classes, and collect and enter information for genealogical databases. The job outlook for genealogists is good, as more Americans than ever are tracing their family histories. For history lovers, especially those who enjoy a challenging information

hunt, genealogy can be a rewarding career.

To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites to learn more about becoming a genealogist:

How to Become a Professional Genealogist

http://www.genealogy.com/20_hnkly.html?Welcome=1015527670

You're a What? Genealogist

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2000/fall/yawhat.htm>

Ten Ways to Make Money Doing Genealogy

<http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=89>

- Arrange an interview with a genealogist. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be a genealogist? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?

Try it out:

- Ask your THJHA adviser to lead your club through the on-line workshop [Genealogy on the Web](#). The museum offers this workshop free of charge to THJHA clubs. It includes fun activities, tips, handouts, and lots of useful information.
- Submit a project for THJHA's annual Genealogy Award contest. Friends of the Archives, Inc., sponsors this award, which recognizes a literary project that focuses on family heritage in North Carolina. Ask your adviser for more information.
- Read the following books to begin working on your own family history:

Beller, Susan Provost. *Roots for Kids: A Genealogy Guide for Young People*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

Perl, Lila. *The Great Ancestor Hunt: The Fun of Finding Who You Are*. New York: Clarion Books, 1989.

Styx, Sherrie A. *Genealogy Just for Kids!* Eugene, Ore.: Styx Enterprises, 1989.

Styx, Sherrie A. *Genealogy Just for Kids! Workbook*. Eugene, Ore.: Styx Enterprises, 1989.

Wolfman, Ira, and Michael Klein. *Do People Grow on Family Trees?: Genealogy for Kids and Other Beginners*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1991.

Interview with Jeffrey L. Haines

Jeffrey L. Haines, a certified genealogist, established Haines Research Services, a genealogical services company, in 1992. He conducts genealogical and historical research, specializing in the Carolinas and British West Indies. Haines lectures across the country and has written, edited, and compiled a number of publications. He is active in various professional genealogical organizations.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Jeffrey L. Haines: I have a bachelor of science degree in zoology from Duke University. There is very little in the way of formal education (degree programs) in genealogy. I am a graduate of the National Genealogical Society's Home Study Course in Genealogy. I have also attended the advanced methodology and professional courses at the Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research at Samford University. I attend national genealogical conferences every year for lectures and workshops, and I also do a great deal of self-study by reading books and journals in genealogy and related fields. I have also been certified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists since 1996.

BC: When did you become interested in becoming a genealogist?

JLH: I became interested in genealogy and family history at a very young age. People had been working on various parts of my family history since my great-great-grandmother's time, and I really enjoyed all of the family stories and knowing what people's lives were like in the past. I became interested in doing this for a living when I attended my first national conference, and I saw there were very skilled and professional people who were making careers out of genealogy.

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

JLH: No. Before this, I was a scientist in the field of biomedical research. There are similarities between science and genealogy, though, like the logic and methodical testing of ideas and hypotheses.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

JLH: One of the pleasures of this job is that there really isn't a "typical" day. Every day is so different. Some days I do research in libraries, archives, courthouses, cemeteries, or any place else that might have records of people from the past. Other times I spend writing reports for clients detailing what I have discovered about their families. I may also write or edit articles for newsletters

and journals, prepare or deliver lectures to help others learn how to do their own family research, or catch up on some of my reading or correspondence.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

JLH: The fact that I am always learning and having to come up with new ways of thinking about things is something that I truly enjoy. A professional genealogist often gets difficult historical riddles to solve, and genealogy can be a lot like detective work. I love puzzles and the challenge of trying to piece together little individual facts to come up with a big picture.

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming genealogists?

JLH: Never be afraid to learn. A genealogist must know about all of the various records that our ancestors left about themselves. A good genealogist will also know all sorts of things about the historical context in which those ancestors lived: legal history, social history, economic history, agriculture, handwriting—you name it. This not only helps you to find and understand the records, but it also allows you to make the story of people from the past come alive again.

BC: What has been your favorite project?

JLH: I have many favorite projects, but one of the best has been researching the ancestors and descendants of Stede Bonnet, the pirate. I have visited repositories in the Carolinas and Barbados (the Caribbean island Bonnet was from). I have discovered many things about the Bonnet family that no one else has known, and I am working on the articles now for future publication.