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# Genealogy and the Virtual Library

by Thomas Jay Kemp


Genealogy has always been at the cutting edge of technology. In the early 1940s, Fremont Rider was the Librarian at Wesleyan University and an early proponent of virtual libraries. Based on the micro-formats of his day he envisioned research libraries filled with microtext copies of books shelved directly in card catalogs. These microtext cards would then be removed from the card catalog as requested and read by researchers. He was using cutting edge technology to save space and accommodate the growing number of books acquired annually by libraries. He left Wesleyan in 1951 and founded one of the key genealogical libraries in the country, the Godfrey Memorial Library in Middletown, Connecticut.

Librarians today are focused on providing more and more service online to the public. Hundreds of libraries, genealogical and historical societies, and other groups are mounting various levels of research content on their Web sites. The Library of Congress' enormous *American Memory Project*, begun in the late 1980s and launched in 1995, is steadily growing to its goal of providing full-text and digital images of thousands of the key records and books in its collection. The University of Michigan began its *Making of America* project in the fall of 1995, and it has mounted over 1,600 books and serials and has plans to add 7,500 more titles within the next two years. Michael Hart began the oldest of these projects, *Project Gutenberg*, in 1971. "The Project Gutenberg Philosophy is to make information, books and other materials available to the general public in forms a vast majority of the computers, programs and people can easily read, use, quote, and search."<sup>1</sup>

Using this same philosophy, commercial data providers like ProQuest Information & Learning (<http://wwwlib.umi.com/genealogy/main.htm>) offer libraries remote access for their patrons to the images of every page in more than 25,000 genealogies from the Library of Congress, all fully searchable.

They are in the process of adding the complete backfile of *The New York Times*, all of the Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application files, and images/indexes of the entire US Census, 1790 to 1930, etc. Gale (<http://www.gale.com/>) provides libraries with in-library access to a wide array of biographical and genealogical materials indexes, as well as the images/indexes to census records between the years 1790 and 1920, the Social Security Death Index, and Periodical Source Index (PERSI), and plans to add Filby's Passenger and Immigration Lists Index.

American libraries have been collecting genealogy and local history materials for the past 370 years. The public's interest in genealogy has steadily grown, taken a phenomenal turn in the past 25 years and in the last 5 years has shifted to "warp" speed. We have gone from a time when genealogists had to go to a library or archives to do their research to a time when images and indexes of primary documents are full-text searchable online.

Every library in Oregon of every size can now, today, provide their patrons with in-house and remote access to the core genealogical reference materials that previously meant a trip to multiple libraries and archives. All the more powerful when we remember that genealogy is the most requested reference topic by adults in our libraries. It is a good feeling when we can give our patrons all that they need and more to meet their research needs. 

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<sup>1</sup>Project Gutenberg Web site, <http://www.promo.net/pg/history.html>

Thomas Jay Kemp is an OLA member and the Chair of ALA's Genealogy Committee. He has written numerous articles on genealogy and the Internet for *Library Journal*, and is the author of the *Genealogist's Virtual Library: Full-text books on the World Wide Web* (2000) and the *International Vital Records Handbook*, 4th ed. (2001). He works at Heritage Quest, which was recently purchased by ProQuest.