

Fall 2016

[Sabbatical Report]

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Recommended Citation

Pennavaria, Katherine, "[Sabbatical Report]" (2016). *Sabbatical Reports*. Paper 20.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/sabb_rpt/20

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REPORT ON SABBATICAL LEAVE: FALL 2016

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January 30, 2017

Summary of Original Plan

My original plan for the sabbatical semester was threefold:

- (1) Write/revise the chapters of the book I was currently under contract to produce by the end of December 2017 (see below for details)
- (2) Make significant progress on some genealogy research projects already underway
- (3) Increase my expertise in specific genealogy-related record sets located at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, the Philadelphia City Archives, and two local-history libraries in Chicago

Departure from Original Plan

In September, I realized my travel plans were too ambitious for my budget, and I decided to forego the trip to Salt Lake City. However, I did make the trips to Philadelphia (September) and Chicago (December).

Where Sabbatical Was Spent

Primarily in Bowling Green, with one week each in Chicago and Philadelphia.

Summary of Sabbatical Activities

My sabbatical application was prompted by my signing the contract for my second book in Rowman & Littlefield's "Practical Guides for Librarians" series.

In March 2015, around the time my first book in that series (*Genealogy*) appeared, the publisher's representative, Charles Harmon, asked me to consider writing a second book for R&L. His preferred topic was another book on genealogy, this one for a general audience. After some discussion of that possibility, I declined to pursue another work on that topic at that time. Then he offered me another book in the "Practical Guides" series, which I accepted. I worked out with the series editor, M. Sandra Wood, that the best topic for me was "providing reference services." I engaged my colleague John Gottfried as co-author and we signed a contract in June 2015, with a deadline of December 2017.

In October 2015, I submitted my application for a sabbatical in Fall 2016, with the intention that I would devote a good portion of that time to completing my half of the book. I spent the time between the contract signing and the start of my sabbatical reading numerous books and articles about reference services, and also wrote an initial draft of one of my chapters. During the sabbatical leave itself, I revised that chapter and wrote/revise two others. The process of completing the reference services book entailed a great deal of back and forth with the series editor, but John and I got our final version in by the deadline. So that part of my sabbatical plan went exactly as planned.

The other parts went mostly according to plan. I wanted to use the leave time to travel to three genealogy-related libraries and one city archive collection. Salt Lake City's Family History Library is a mecca for genealogists, and I wanted to spend two weeks there studying some FHL-specific record sets, with the aim of developing a presentation/publication on using those records for an audience of researchers. But as I said above, I ultimately decided against going to Salt Lake City for financial reasons.

But my plan to visit Chicago's Newberry Library and Harold Washington Library did work out, as did my plan to spend a day at the Philadelphia City Archives. All three places hold record sets unavailable online, and I wanted to use and study

them in depth for the same reason I wanted to see the Salt Lake site-specific resources—to develop an expertise in using them which will lead to presentations and publications on the process of researching family history.

As the two major libraries containing local-history information in Chicago, the Newberry and Harold Washington are magnets for people like me with Chicago ancestry and who are also family history researchers. I have been engaged for the past seven years on a major, professional-level history project involving my own immigrant ancestors, and have already written two records-based narrative histories about those immigrants. Also, I am a member of the Chicago Genealogical Society and have submitted articles for publication in their journal, *Chicago Genealogist*, and hope to continue doing so (nothing accepted so far). Spending time at the Newberry and Harold Washington Libraries in early December gave me a clearer understanding of the scope of their record offerings, and a familiarity with the process of researching and requesting records. As a bonus, though it was not part of my original plan for my Chicago trip, I spent a day downtown at the Cook County Courthouse archives office and law library (they are in the same building), where I used microfiche indexes and learned how to request archival records through the system. The understanding I gained has helped me immeasurably with my Chicago-area research and with clarifying the record sets that are and are not available/useful to genealogists.

The Philadelphia trip at the end of September was made primarily for personal reasons to visit family, but I dedicated one day to working at the Philadelphia City Archives. I learned long ago that the best way to understand the value and limitations of a particular archive, library, online resource, or record set is to search for something specific. In other words, just randomly browsing doesn't pay dividends like researching an actual person does. So I chose to research three individuals, two of whom had been murdered in Philadelphia in the early part of the 20th century. Though I found the Philly archive staff to be less than well-informed, I was able, through the use of specialized indexes, to identify both murdered men as probably appearing in set of coroner's autopsy records that were not digitized and were available only on site. Two large and dusty volumes were eventually brought out and placed before me—I'm sure I was the first person in many years to turn their pages. Eventually I found the autopsy reports I was seeking, and came away wishing that some benevolent entity would underwrite the digitization and indexing of those remarkable records.

My Philadelphia research failed to turn up anything on the third person I was researching—late 19th- and early 20th-century vaudeville star Katie Emmett, a Philadelphia native who became best known for playing lead in a series of "sentimental Irish" plays. She and her spouse owned a theater in Chicago and were based primarily there, though Katie traveled all over the U.S. with her shows. I was hoping to dig up some early biographical records in Philly, but struck out on that. Nevertheless, researching and writing about Katie Emmett is on my back burner—she is a forgotten piece of vaudeville history that deserves to be resurrected.

Finally, when I wasn't traveling, I was researching and writing up parts of my own family history—as I said earlier, this project has been underway for seven years, and has involved using not only the easily accessed online records at sites such as Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, Fold3.com, etc., but working with microfilms available only through special order from the Family History Library. I spent many hours of my sabbatical semester hunched over a microfilm reader at the Mormon Church on Cave Mill Road, which functions as a branch of the Salt Lake City Family History Library. The FHL has millions of microfilmed records from all over the world—a subject I wrote about in my 2015 genealogy book and in one of my "Genealogy Gems" columns for *Kentucky Libraries*. I worked my way through several microfilms (each with thousands of records)—something that would have taken me much longer to do if I hadn't been on leave.

In addition to the above-outlined activities, I also gave an invited presentation (with Rosemary) at the Grayson County Public Library in October called "Managing Genealogical Records."

Perceived Benefits of Sabbatical

I finished my part of the reference services book by the deadline assigned—that was the primary benefit of my sabbatical leave. Writing is not something I can do easily in fits and starts, or between other tasks. Working on writing projects in my VPAL office has proved difficult for me over the years I've been at WKU. The process is not like chopping vegetables—I don't know how it is for everyone else, but I require complete silence and the absence of other activity around me in order to write effectively. So for me to write and revise three chapters (30-40 pages each) of densely

written text (i.e., only a few graphics) required an extended leave from my office. I am grateful to my department head and dean for supporting my sabbatical application, and satisfied with the book chapters I produced during it.

The benefits of my leave regarding the Rowman & Littlefield book are obvious and easy to state—the thing was finished on time, and it's pretty good. But I think the benefits regarding my genealogy research require a little explanation.

The microfilmed records I used in the fall to research my father's immigrant grandparents were all in Italian and Latin—I've worked with microfilmed records in those languages for several years now, and can read and understand them without difficulty. Having the time to spend working extensively with them during my leave was immensely gratifying, and led to my being asked to deliver an advanced-level presentation at a conference planned for August 2017 (sponsored by the Louisville Free Public Library). The title of that forthcoming presentation is "Researching Italian Church and Civil Records."

At that conference I will also, with my colleague Rosemary Meszaros, deliver two other presentations which derive from my family history research: "Genealogy Record Types and How to Access Them" (basic level) and "A Guide to FamilySearch.org and the LDS Family History Center (advanced level). While I do not intend to disseminate the direct results of my family history research at the professional level, I have for several years been offering the other fruits of my research: familiarity and experience with a wide array of record sets. To date I have, both with Rosemary and without, offered numerous presentations and webinars that draw directly on this experience.

In essence, my sabbatical leave allowed me to immerse myself both in the writing of *Providing Reference Services: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (publication expected in May 2017) and in researching the Italian records made available through the Family History Library. Such immersion is crucial to my research and writing processes, and I am deeply appreciative of the university's sponsorship of such leaves. I look forward to further sharing what I have learned through that time away from the office.