

OLAQ

OLA Quarterly

Volume 24
Number 1 *The Specialness of Special Libraries*

7-25-2018

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Recommended Citation

Carlile, D. M. (2018). Genealogical Society Libraries: A Treasure Trove of Family Histories. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(1), 32-34. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1932>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Genealogical Society Libraries: A Treasure Trove of Family Histories

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DAWN CARLILE is the volunteer Library Coordinator for the Oregon Genealogical Society's (OGS) Research Library in Eugene. She has held this position since 2016 and has been an OGS member since 2001. She has a BA in Management from Northwest Christian University. Dawn also volunteers as a genealogy class instructor, organizes the Society's spring and fall seminars, and serves on the OGS Board of Directors. She's employed full-time and does genealogy research for others as well as her own family. In her free time, Dawn likes to go camping, spend time at the coast, and go wine tasting.

Oregon's genealogical societies come in all shapes and sizes, and their collections and services are just as varied. Some societies operate and maintain a standalone library; others' holdings are part of a private or public library system, or housed in alternative public or private buildings. One thing all have in common, though, is that their unique materials are made available to the general public in addition to the society's members, enabling anyone tracing their family tree—whether writer, researcher, or casual investigator—to access their collections.

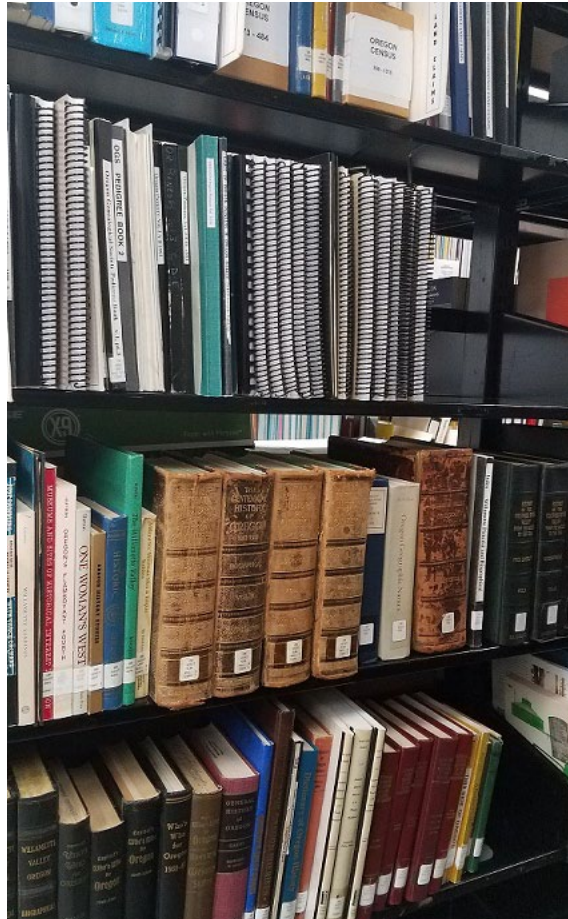
Most genealogical society libraries are staffed by volunteer members whose breadth of experience, including collection knowledge, research ability, and awareness of available resources, ranges from beginner to advanced. They all contain local information on their particular county, towns, and unincorporated regions, as well as genealogy research of area families. Hours and days of operation are generally limited and unexpected closures can occur due to weather or lack of available volunteers, so it is wise to call first to confirm the library is open.

Genealogical library collections may include books, periodicals, microfilm/microfiche, maps, photographs, research aids, reference books, local city directories, scrapbooks, obituaries, and even original county court record books. Manuscript collections (frequently referred to as vertical files) gather the work of earlier researchers and include items often unavailable elsewhere such as pedigree charts, family group sheets, and other original records and documents donated to the society. These files might hold a naturalization certificate, Bible record, or letter from one of YOUR ancestors!

Societies often hold meetings, classes, workshops, and seminars with local and national speakers, all of which provide numerous educational opportunities for family historians. Some societies publish books related to genealogy records in their area, offer certificates for descendants of people who settled in the state or county, and create indexes to books, records, and county histories within their collection. Indexes are either available in print or electronic formats and are often accessible via the society's website. Some society libraries offer access to online subscription databases such as Ancestry.com Library Edition, or their library may be affiliated with an LDS Family History Center, which gives them free access to many specialty subscription databases.

With more than 30 genealogical societies currently in Oregon (per the Genealogical Society of Washington County Oregon's directory on their website: <http://www.gswco.org/ogs.html>), researchers do not have to travel far to find one that specializes in their individual needs. Regionally, the Oregon Genealogical Society's Research Library in Eugene, where I've been the library





Oregon censuses and pedigree books at OGS.

coordinator for two years, has more than 14,000 items in its collection representing all 50 states as well as 22 countries. Holdings include 940 family histories, well over 3,000 periodicals, and a large Oregon collection that covers all 36 counties, the Oregon Trail, Western Frontier, and Northwest Territory. Of special interest are the 13 volumes of *Record of Proceedings, Grand Chapter, Order of Eastern Star, Oregon* (related to the Masonic Fraternity), and *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies and Navies*.

Another prominent resource developed by OGS is a diverse compilation of research forms, which can be customized, printed, and saved, available via our 161+ *Genealogical Forms* CD. In addition to our numerous classes, workshops, and trainings, OGS also conducts outreach—courtesy of its 40+ volunteers—at several events throughout the state.

The Genealogical Forum of Oregon (GFO) in Portland is Oregon's biggest society with more than 1,000

members, and it maintains the largest genealogy library with nearly 49,000 holdings. These include Oregon Masonic publications from 1854–1998; indexes of Multnomah County marriage licenses from 1874–1978 and marriage records from 1855–1924; and Oregon death certificates from 1903–1905.

While open to researchers statewide, the GFO serves as the primary library for many metro-area genealogical societies, including the Genealogical Society of Washington County (GSWCO); however, GSWCO also has a vibrant relationship with the Hillsboro Public Library. Harry Meyer, President of GSWCO's Board of Directors, explained that their society holds meetings at the public library, they work with library staff to help enlarge the library's genealogy collection, and they maintain an information-filled website highlighting where to find resources at the library and elsewhere in Washington County (H. Meyer, personal communication, July 2, 2018).

Certainly, like GSWCO, many county genealogical societies partner with their local libraries to make collections publicly available. For example, the Linn County Genealogical Society houses its collection in the Linn Genealogy Research Room (LGS Library) at the Albany Public Library. In Marion County, the Willamette Valley Genealogical Society (WVGS) makes more than 5,000 reference items available at the Salem Public Library; additional materials stored at the WVGS office in Salem are accessible by appointment.

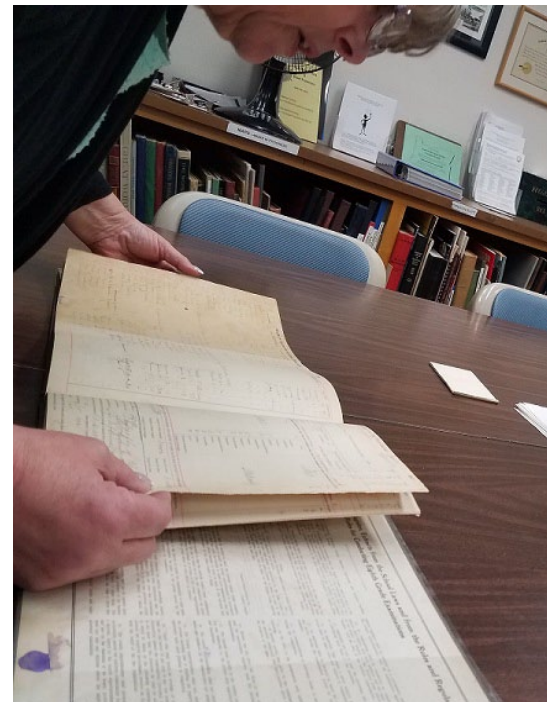


Highlights from other Oregon genealogical libraries:

- Sweet Home Genealogical Society has about 5,000 items in their Linn County library, including the local newspaper, *New Era*, from 1947–2015, along with several file cabinets of alphabetized obituaries.
- Yamhill County Genealogical Society’s research library is located within the Yamhill County Historical Society building, with holdings that include many Yamhill County indexes and Linfield College yearbooks and directories.
- Clackamas County Family History Society’s collection is housed in the Wilmer Gardner Research Library at the Museum of the Oregon Territory in Oregon City, and it includes unindexed records of births, marriages, deaths, and burials in Clackamas County.
- The Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon maintains a library at Congregation Neveh Shalom in Portland, which includes 128 Yizkor books (pertaining to Jewish mourning rituals); more than 50 basic works on finding Jewish ancestors; and microfiche data published by Avotaynu (the leading publisher of Jewish genealogy resources).

Smaller libraries with narrowly-focused collections are maintained by some societies. For example, Benton County Genealogical Society in Philomath holds over 2,900 items, including a collection of transcribed oral histories from the 1930s and 1940s of county pioneers and their descendants; the Bend Genealogical Society houses more than 3,000 items, including “Deschutes County Cemetery Books”; and the Crook County Genealogical Society’s library at the Bowman Museum in Prineville has several thousand items, including two bound compilations of articles written by the museum’s historian on various local-interest topics, like railroad logging camps, gold mines, and Prineville’s first baseball team.

From the smallest library, with only a few shelves of information, to the largest, with rooms of unique materials, Oregon’s genealogical society libraries offer an unparalleled opportunity to discover hidden treasures, each one adding to the stories of Oregon families. These rare collections won’t be found online, but they are preserved with immense care and promoted with pride—and may just hold that piece of the family tree puzzle you’ve been hoping to find! 🌀



Examining an early 1900s Oregon School Register.

