

Genealogists Look to Archives, Internet to Track Down F...

Categoría: Actualidad / Identidad/Identity

Autor: jbg

Publicado: 10 Ago, 2002 - 01:06 PM

Voice of America

August 9, 2002

Maura Farelly
Annapolis, MD

The Internet has proven to be very helpful to amateur genealogists, looking to trace their roots as far back into the past as they can. The U.S. GenWeb project, which was launched six years ago, has posted census data, marriage records, even tombstone transcriptions from all over the United States on the web. But there's a lot of misinformation on the Internet, too. And as VOA's Maura Farrelly reports, assembling a family tree that's truly accurate still involves a lot of digging through primary-source documents at an archive.

On a Thursday morning at the state Hall of Records in Annapolis, Maryland, about 60 kilometers east of Washington, D.C., a dozen or so people were in the microfilm room, looking at photocopies of land deeds, tax rolls, and church records dating back to the 1630s, when Maryland was first founded as a British colony. Another 10-15 people were in the main hall, carefully transcribing documents often worm-eaten and brittle with age, the words within them sometimes grossly misspelled.

Bob Barnes, an archivist at the Hall of Records who specializes in genealogy, said most of the people who come here aren't satisfied with what they've been able find on the Internet. "On the Internet, unfortunately, many times people put up things that they believe are true, that they hope are true, that they wish were true, but they haven't necessarily proven it," he explained. "So if there is something on the Internet, and it doesn't give any references to primary-source material, then the family historian, the researcher, has to try to find the proof, which is why they're here."

Mr. Barnes said it's very common to find claims of royal lineage on the Internet that are entirely unsubstantiated. He also said people will sometimes claim that certain ancestors fought in the Revolutionary or Civil Wars, and that when these claims are posted on the web, it can give them an air of authenticity they don't really deserve. But Mr. Barnes said the people who come to the Hall of Records aren't interested in family mythology. They're interested in a challenge.

John Lyon is a retired aerospace scientist who said he became fascinated with genealogical research many years ago, when he was helping his son with a school project and discovered that putting together a family tree is like putting together a puzzle. "I've always had a fondness for mathematical puzzles and other kinds of logical puzzles, and this turned out to be very closely akin intellectually to that kind of problem," he said. "The information is often all there, but it's incomplete. There are many pieces that have to be assembled from disparate sources, inferences that have to be made. This is good logic, good mathematics, and good genealogy."

Mr. Lyon said the further back in time you go, the more challenging it can be to put fathers together with sons, nieces with uncles, and cousins with cousins. Some of this is because the older records are often incomplete. You may, for instance, find a will in which a man mentions his three sons by name, but then find that only one of those sons left a will of his own. If you want to find out about the children of the other two sons, you have to start looking in church records or at tax rolls.

But archivist Bob Barnes said the incomplete nature of the surviving records isn't the only trap waiting for genealogists. "Another pitfall is, 'Well, my ancestor's name, my immigrant ancestor's name was Humphrey Davenport, and there was a Humphrey Davenport who was in England, who was of a gentle family, gentle birth, you know, coat-of-arms and all that. And he disappears as far as we know. He must be the one that came over.' They assume that the similarity of names means that it's the same individual," he said. In fact, Mr. Barnes said, it often is not the same individual.

Nowadays, Americans all have unique social security numbers, in addition to names, but there are still mix-ups. People are billed for merchandise purchased by someone else with the same name. Airline passengers are taken into custody by security officials, because they share a name with a known criminal. Bob Barnes said it can happen with today's records, it can certainly happen with records that are hundreds of years old, and family historians need to consider multiple sources when verifying the identity of a possible ancestor.

But Mr. Barnes said this can be difficult, particularly for African-Americans. "It's the lack of available records prior to the Civil War that makes it so difficult," he explained. "Slave owners may not have kept records of who had who, you know. The records may not give as complete an identification as possible. The Catholic Church did record marriages of slaves and who the owners were, that they were married with the permission of their owners. And of course they baptized the babies. So there is help."

Nevertheless, Mr. Barnes said, when it comes to family trees that date back prior to the Civil War of the 1860s, most African-Americans have to rely upon what are known as "oral histories," family stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. Bob Barnes said these oral histories may actually be more accurate than some of the claims posted on the Internet by amateur genealogists who are white. He said that's because there's a long tradition of meticulously preserving oral histories in the African-American community. He said this tradition is rooted in the historical reality that for many years, black people in America didn't enjoy the same documentary evidence of their lives that white people did.

Este artículo viene de culturas de archivo
<http://culturasdearchivo.org/>

La URL de esta historia es:
<http://culturasdearchivo.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=156>