ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

From the Editor:

Especially for beginning genealogists and amateur historians, the most valuable service provided by the Archives and History staff may be helping patrons formulate their questions. Whether overwhelmed by the abundance of material available to them, or frustrated by the lack of resources for the era and location being researched, researchers profit from discussing their overall situation with our staff. Organizing and prioritizing your research needs on your own or with our assistance will both pinpoint the gaps in your data and identify new directions for study. One cardinal rule is to begin with yourself and to gather as much documented information as you can on each generation before you move on to the next. This will really narrow the scope of your questions.

Those of you who communicate with us by mail may want to pay particular attention to the suggestions for writing better research requests. Although our staff is experienced in reading between the lines of a confusing letter and in figuring out what the person actually needs, the average person with whom you communicate through an Internet query board or by e-mail from a surname exchange will not likely be as skilled. If you seldom receive helpful responses to your requests, try using the tips in this issue to write a question that draws the answer you need.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

by Susan Scouras

The skill of asking a well-thought out question is one that comes naturally to few people. Most of us must practice and learn from our mistakes in order to develop the ability to ask a carefully worded question that results in the information we want. Balancing the fine line between supplying too little information and providing overwhelming detail can be challenging. The genealogical research letters received by the Archives and History Library range from one sentence "Send me all you have on Jane Doe from Marion County" requests to multi-page family histories that either contain a dozen questions or never get around to specifying an inquiry at all. Unfortunately, we must return many of these letters for clarification, or make an educated guess of what the writers want. Either way, the family researcher may not get the information sought without delays and extra expense.

One of the first ways to increase your likelihood of success is to find out what records are available from the source you are addressing. If you are contacting a state agency, determine the scope of material available from that office or institution. Make sure you are asking for information in an area they cover, and that you are supplying the

basic data or clues needed for them to find the correct record for you. When seeking information about a specific individual, give the full name of the person, including any nicknames or variations in initials or spelling that you have already encountered. If you do not know the date for the record you want, provide a reasonable estimate. For example, if you are looking for a marriage record, but do not know what year, provide the year of birth of their first child, or the first census in which they appear as a married couple, etc. Even a ten-year range is more feasible to search than "sometime before World War II."

If you are planning to write to the West Virginia Archives and History Library for assistance, but are not sure what to say, call us. We will be happy to discuss with you how to word your written request, although we can not supply the actual answers over the phone. We also recommend two on-line articles to help you polish your skill in formulating questions, particularly for Internet searches. As usual, "RootsWeb's Guide to Tracing Family Trees," written and compiled by Julia M. Case, Myra Vanderpool Gormley and Rhonda McClure, has great suggestions. Take a look at Lesson 7, **"What is the Question?"** [http://www.rootsweb.com/~rwguide/lesson7] for tips on defining what you want to know and framing as specific a question as possible. They state that "clarity is imperative in on-line communication," and urge you to "be sure to include the important things: names, dates and places pertinent to the question being posted." They urge the inquirer to be as specific as possible in defining exactly what event, date or other information is wanted, as well as to be sure to mention records previously searched. When using a surname exchange or posting a query on an online board, "offer to share and exchange information." A vital point made is that *if you can't frame a good question following their guidelines, you need to do more research on the generation that led you to this person.*

The RootsWeb article provides a link to a second good source that is aimed at improving on-line communication, but that is an excellent guide for research letters as well: **"Helpful Hints for Searching: How to Write a Successful Query,"** by Maura Petzolt,[http://community-2.webtv.net/mpetzoltz/successfulquery]. "The 3 basic things a good query should cover are: (1) Tell us what you know. . .. (2) Tell us what you don't know. . .. and (3) Tell us what you WANT to know. . .." Two other valuable tips are: "Sending too much information is as bad as too little. . .. Just pick one aspect and deal with one thing at a time," and "Think of writing a query as a letter to someone you don't know. First impressions, even emails, count."

Remember the "Five W's": Who, What, When, Where and Why. Supplying the basic data for each of these categories will also improve your inquiries. Give the name of the person involved, what record or piece of information you seek, the time period and geographic location, and the reason you want this record. If the specific item you have requested is not available, knowing *why* you want the information may help the researcher answer your question by using a different source.

Now you should be ready to write absolutely marvelous questions that will bring you all sorts of informative responses!

NOVEMBER NEW TITLES

Virginia in Maps: Richard W. Stephenson and Marianne M. McKee, editors, 2000.
Location of Salt Furnaces in the Kanawha Valley {1797~1868}: Food Machinery and Chemical Corporation, Chlor-Alkali Division, [no date]. *Map*.
History of Weston Hospital: Vol. 8, Paintball: compiled by Lawrence M. Chapman, 2000.
Charleston Memories: a classic building tour circa 1912: Richard Andre, 1988. *Map*.
Obituaries of West Virginia Newspapers, 1894-1895, Vol. 5: extracted by Gerald S. Ratliff.
My White Family Ancestors in America: Mildred Lucille Kemper Davisson, 2000.

Biography and Sermons of Marshall Keeble, Evangelist: Marshall Keeble, 1931.

Johan Philip Harless of Virginia: John F. Clendenen, 2000.

Brooke County (WV) Index: Complete Transcript of County Court Order book. [*Now available: Vol.1 through 12 and Master Index to Vol. 1 through 12]:* Gwendolyn Mackey Hubbard and Bobbie Britt Elliott, 1998-2000.

Lewis Williams 1793-1843 Rockbridge County, Virginia: The Never Ending Story: Myrna Crapo, [no date].

Judge Henry Hatcher (1875-1950): His Life and Writings: Carolyn Hatcher McColloch, 1999.

McColloch Family of Ohio County, W. Va.: Samuel W. McColloch, 1999.

Descendants of Peter Myer: James L. and Janet Lockhart, [no date].

Descendants of Thomas Hughes: James L. and Janet Lockhart, [no date].

Descendants of John & Christina Lockhart: James L. and Janet Lockhart, [no date].

The George Fisher Family: Rev. John Gray, 1999.

A Daughter Remembers Wilson William Plattner (November 5, 1912-December 30, 1987): Drollene Plattner Brown, [no date].

Kanawhan Prelude to Nineteenth-Century Monopoly in the United States: The Virginia Salt Combinations: John Edmund Stealey, III, 2000.

McDowell County Coal Hertiage [sic]**: Reflections on a Century:** 2000 calendar.

Our World According to Jarosz: McDowell County Through the Eyes and Art of George Jarosz: 2001 calendar.

A History of the Lieving Family: Arline Roush Thorn, 2000.

Zornes Family History: Being the Descendants of Brothers Andrew and Martin: Shirley Campbell Ramos, 1999.

The Hero of Greenland Gap: Abijah Dolly, His Community & His Times: The Biography of a West Virginia Founding Father: Rev. Edition: Mark Hale, 1999, c1984. [Originally published as The Romance of Greenland Gap].

Terrapin Park: A History: Jeffrey and Christy Little, 2000.

Wild Sweet Notes: Fifty Years of West Virginia Poetry 1950-1999: [edited by] Barbara Smith, 2000.

The Handy Book for Genealogists, 9th edition: The Everton Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Tug River Breeze: Williamson High School Yearbook: 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933.

Mirabilia: Marshall College Yearbook: 1924.

The Monticola: West Virginia University Yearbook: 1928.

Windmill: Big Sandy District High School Yearbook: 1920, 1922, 1924, 1925, 1929, 1930.

Allen M. Anderson, Abraham B. Grimes, and John Hamrick Families and Descendants: A. S. Anderson, 1983.

History of Leachtown, West Va.: Fannie Roush Bibbee, 2000.

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANT JOHN BROWN PROJECT COMPLETED

On Saturday, Dec. 2, the West Virginia State Archives of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History will complete a $101,000 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant to digitize and catalog materials in the Boyd B. Stutler Collection pertaining to abolitionist John Brown. The date marks the 141st anniversary of Brown's hanging in Charles Town for an October 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry. Over the past two years, Archives staff members have scanned more than 20,000 images from the manuscript collection, the largest known assemblage of records relating to Brown. The images have been linked to searchable text descriptions in an online electronic database which can be accessed through the State Archives link on the Division's website at www.wvculture.org/history. **[Editor's note: Congratulations to Mary Johnson, Allen Fowler, Constance Baston, Nikki Witt and Lenora Kenwolf! The sigh of relief you hear is**

from all those staffers who assisted with the proofreading process.]

The database contains photographs, original manuscripts, research papers and printed material, including more than 100 original Brown letters, manuscripts and family letters, and three letter books from Brown's partnership with Simon Perkins in the wool business. In addition, there are hundreds of letters of associates and biographers such as George Luther Stearns and Frank Sanborn, two of Brown's most ardent supporters, and William Connelley, an early biographer. The project was made possible by a grant from IMLS, an independent federal agency that encourages leadership, innovation and lifetime learning by supporting museums and libraries. In 1998, the State Archives was one of 41 recipients of the first National Leadership Grants awarded by that agency. The grants were created to help libraries and museums address individual education, research, and preservation needs, as well as support collaborative projects that expand service to the public. The IMLS grant allowed the State Archives to make an important body of material accessible on the Internet to people who are unable to visit its library in person. It also will help preserve the original images from the wear and tear of normal use.

The State Archives plans to place additional materials from the Stutler Collection online in the coming months. For more information about the IMLS grant project or State Archives programs, call Fredrick Armstrong, Director of Archives and History for the Division, at (304) 558-0230. [News release, November 29, 2000, by Ginny Painter, Division of Culture and History.]

WEST VIRGINIA'S OWN ELECTION CONTROVERSY

The West Virginia State Archives of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History has made available on the Division's website a 1946 article from the <u>West Virginia History</u> journal detailing the state's 1888 gubernatorial election. One of the more controversial events in West Virginia history, the 1888 election resulted in three men claiming the governorship and a fourth refusing to vacate the office until the election was decided.

The extensive two-part article, "The West Virginia Gubernatorial Election Contest: 1888-1890," was written by James Henry Jacobs and published in volume seven of <u>West Virginia History</u>. Supplemented with photographs from the collection of the West Virginia State Archives, the article can be found on the Internet at www.wvculture.org/history/1888election.html. **[Editor's note: Material selected and entered on-line by Joe Geiger and Mary Johnson.]**

The 1888 election pitted Democrat A.B. Fleming against Republican Nathan Goff. Initially, it looked as though Fleming had lost the election by only 106 votes and he protested the election, claiming 2,000 fraudulent votes had been cast, mostly by African-Americans in southern West Virginia. While the West Virginia Legislature was considering the issue, Governor E.W. Wilson's term ended. Because the legislature had not chosen a winner, both Fleming and Goff claimed to be lawful governor. To complicate matters, state senator Robert Carr entered the fray, declaring his constitutional right as senate president to assume the governor's duties.

In separate ceremonies on inauguration day, March 4, 1889, Fleming, Goff and Carr were sworn in as West Virginia's eighth governor. Meanwhile, Wilson announced his intention to remain in office until the legislature determined an official winner. Nine days later the West Virginia Supreme Court sided with Wilson, ruling he should continue as governor until the election could be settled legally. Wilson served until early February 1890, when the legislature narrowly chose Fleming as his successor. Fleming governed over an administration shortened almost a year by the controversy. Bitter over the ordeal, Republican legislators thwarted most of Fleming's measures. Ironically, one of the few accomplishments of his

administration was the adoption of a uniform ballot to discourage election fraud.

"This is a fascinating story and one that is particularly interesting today because of the legal issues surrounding the recent presidential election," said Fredrick Armstrong, Director of Archives and History for the Division. "We can certainly hope the presidential question is decided more quickly than was our state's 1888 gubernatorial race." For more information about the 1888 election or the West Virginia History article, call Armstrong at (304) 558-0230. [News release, November 30, 2000, by Ginny Painter, Division of Culture and History.]

STATE ARCHIVES CREATES FILM HISTORY PROJECT ONLINE DATABASE

The West Virginia State Archives of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History recently created a series of databases featuring the materials collected, created and presented by the West Virginia History Film Project (WVHFP). The database can be accessed through the State Archives link on the Division's website at www.wvculture.org. **[Editor's note: Mary Johnson and Constance Baston are to be congratulated.]**

The WVHFP was initiated in 1991 to produce a film and video focusing on the history of the state. Four years later, the six and one-half hour documentary, West Virginia: A Film History, premiered on public television. In 1996, The West Virginians, a short-feature video production focusing on nine current or former West Virginia residents had its first airing on public television as well. During the process of producing the films, the WVHFP did extensive research and collected information through interviews, photographs and moving pictures. The West Virginia State Archives has spent a year compiling this collection and creating three fully searchable databases.

The largest database contains more than 5,000 records that identify and describe every image in the two features and their out take footage. Where copyrights allow it, an image captured from video is linked to the descriptive record. Approximately 70 percent of these records include digital images. The transcript database contains fully searchable text of West Virginia: A Film History and the nearly three dozen interviews conducted for the film. The inventory database holds a box-by-box description of the contents of the WVHFP Collection, which was accessioned by the West Virginia State Archives earlier this year.

In addition to approximately 2,000 historic works of art and still and moving picture images acquired from individuals and repositories throughout the United States, the films and out takes include hours of scenic film and interview footage. The compilation reveals the state's history from the time of colonial settlement through sectional conflict and industrial development to 20th-century images of economic growth and mountain heritage. Topics include the colonial-period conflict with Native Americans, The Greenbrier Resort, John Brown and the Civil War, the Hatfield and McCoy feud, labor conflicts at Paint Creek, Mingo County and Matewan, construction of the Hawks Nest Tunnel, the It's Wheeling Steel radio program and the Buffalo Creek disaster among others.

Film buffs seeking information on specific images used in West Virginia: A Film History or The West Virginians can find the image database an invaluable tool, as will those who want to locate pictures that depict the state's past. Students of West Virginia history can enjoy the personal recollections and scholarly interpretations found in the interviews. The three databases created by the State Archives were partially funded by the WVHFP Board of Directors. For more information about the online databases or the West Virginia History Film Project, call (304) 558-0230. [News release, November 6, 2000, by Ginny Painter, Division of Culture and History.]

ARCHIVES AND HISTORY STAFF

Fredrick Armstrong: Director
Debra Basham: Archivist (photographs, special collections)
Greg Carroll: Historian (Civil War, Native American history)
Dick Fauss: Archivist (microfilm and moving images)
Elaine Gates: Part-time Library Assistant (microfilming and microfilm repairs)
Joe Geiger: Historian (Web page)
Ed Hicks: Photographer (archival photography, darkroom)
Mary Johnson: Historian (John Brown)
Jaime Lynch: Library Assistant (Records of the 1700's and early 1800's, Pennsylvania)
Cathy Miller: Library Assistant (WV State documents, periodicals)
Sharon Newhouse: Secretary to the Director.
Harold Newman: Library Assistant (microfilming, Revolutionary War)
Pat Pleska: Part-time Library Assistant (Clipping File)
Susan Scouras: Librarian (cataloging, Kentucky, library collection, newsletter editor)
Bobby Taylor: Library Manager
Nancy Waggoner: Office Assistant
Contract employees working on special projects: **Constance Baston, Nikki Witt** and **Allen Fowler.**

This newsletter is a publication of :

The Division of Culture and History
Archives and History
The Cultural Center
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East
Charleston, WV 25305-0300
(304) 558-0230
Commissioner: Louis A. Capaldini

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

C H E C K   O U R   W E B   S I T E (http://www.wvculture.org/history) FOR GENEALOGICAL and HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETING ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND FOR MORE COMPLETE INFORMATION ON ACTIVITIES LISTED BELOW:

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT: 1870-1970 [HISTORIC COSTUME EXHIBIT], NOW THROUGH FEB. 2001. State Museum, Charleston.
DECEMBER 23. Archives Library will be *open* 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.*
CHRISTMAS DAY, DEC. 25. Archives Library will be *closed*.
DECEMBER 30. Archives Library will be *open* 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.*
NEW YEAR'S DAY, JAN. 1. Archives Library will be *closed.*
MARCH 22, 2001. *HISTORY DAY!* Mark your calendars and start preparing your exhibits for History Day at the West Virginia Legislature in the Capitol. Be on the lookout for History Heroes to nominate for 2001 recognition.
MARCH 30–APRIL 1, 2001. The **Appalachian Studies Association** will hold its **24th Annual Conference**, "Standing on the Mountain: Looking to the Future." Snowshoe Mountain Conference Center.

*Only the Archives and History Library will be staffed--all other Archives offices will be closed. The State Museum will be open any time the Archives Library is open. The West Virginia Library Commission Library in the Cultural Center is closed weekends and all holidays.

ARCHIVES AND HISTORY LIBRARY HOURS ARE 9:00 A.M. TO 5:00 P.M. MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, AND 1:00 P.M. TO 5:00 P.M. ON SATURDAYS. HOLIDAY HOURS ARE AS POSTED.

Best wishes for the holidays!