

History lives at the Vermont Genealogical Library

At a small library in Colchester, a group of dedicated volunteers is writing the history of the state of Vermont, one family at a time.

The Vermont Genealogical Library, administered by the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society, is an all-volunteer, non-profit, donation-funded organization whose rich resources are available to anyone—from the amateur family researcher to the professional historian—for a modest fee. The mission of the VGL is to research and make available to the public information about the human interactions that undergird every occurrence in Vermont's long and rich history: births; deaths; marriages; relocations. But the rich lode of such data is only the beginning of the historian's quest, according to VGL President Ed McGuire.

McGuire likens the lists of names, dates and locations to the "skeleton" of any family's history. "Doing family history," he notes, "is putting the flesh on that skeleton."

To learn that one's great-great-grandfather moved from, say, Barre to St. Johnsbury, is interesting enough in its own right. But to understand the historical causes of why the family moved—that is the stuff of history.

"Throughout the tapestry of even my own tiny little family," McGuire says, "I can see them intersect with world events. Wars influence them, and they influence the wars. It makes history come alive." To uncover such historical linkages in one's own family history is, as McGuire puts it, to be inspired by "the art of genealogy."

The VGL houses more than 4,000 books that are of vital use to Vermont family historians, as well as access to four major genealogical databases. Moreover, they frequently work with other regional, national, and international genealogical societies to provide for their patrons the information necessary to trace their family lineage. So dedicated are the VGL's volunteers to the preservation and dissemination of Vermont history that they have, on more than one occasion, participated in "scanning parties": multi-day events in which volunteers gather together to convert reams and reams of historical documents into accessible, searchable PDF files.

Though a large percentage of Vermonters can trace their lineage back to Francophone Canada and/or the British Isles, the state's roster of ethnicities is larger and richer than might be expected. So, even though the name of the "parent" organization reflects Vermont's strong French-Canadian history, the library's purview is broader than that, aimed at serving the genealogical inquiries of any and every Vermonter.

As a pastime and passion, genealogy has exploded since the dawn of the Internet Age, in part due to websites such as ancestry.org, and to organizations such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Also known as the Mormon Church, it is the true pioneer of modern genealogy, having for decades made freely available vast quantities of family history that, according to McGuire, would have been lost forever without the Church's dedicated work.

If the Mormon Church represents the past and present of genealogy, the ability to sequence one's genome represents its future. Websites such as 23andme.com use DNA sampling to trace users' lineages, as well as provide potentially valuable medical information. "Genetic genealogy" will soon prove itself to be an

invaluable tool, even for small libraries such as the VGL, according to McGuire. “We’re at the point where we’ve got our toes in, and we’re moving toward our ankles,” he says. Though he believes that this particular method is still in its infancy, McGuire asserts that genetic genealogy will prove itself more and more useful.

Genealogy has, in recent years, become especially popular with retirees, both in Vermont and around the country. McGuire notes that “the vast majority” of the VGL’s patrons are at or near retirement, and many are already expert genealogists, in part because organizations like the VGL significantly lower the barriers to embarking on what might at first glance seem a forbiddingly complex pursuit. Many patrons get bitten by “the genealogy bug,” finding that tracking down one’s family history is at times difficult, but highly rewarding.

McGuire refers to one patron who, through the assistance and resources of the VGL, tracked down the father whom she never knew, and flew down to Florida to reestablish a long-severed family link. Creating such “success stories” is both the mission and the satisfaction of the volunteers of the Vermont Genealogical Library.

Patron Peg Eddy, a retired banker and Burlington resident, says the library’s Saturday morning classes have been of particular value in tracking down her family history. In conducting her genealogical research, she has uncovered the fact that she has ancestors who were present at the hanging of Major John André, the British soldier who was Benedict Arnold’s co-conspirator in espionage.

Eddy notes that while the classes and instructors themselves never fail to enlighten and inform, equally valuable is the time spent talking to other patrons. “Sometimes, you find someone with one of your lines—you’re tenth cousins or something,” Eddy says. “Getting feedback and advice from others is probably one of my favorite things about the society. It’s a nice group of people who are very willing to help you.”

The VGL is holding an Open House on Saturday, Sept. 7 from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. The event will include demonstrations of several of the computer databases at the library. Books and guides will be for sale to help you with genealogy research for Vermont, Canadian, Irish, Scottish and German ancestors.

The Vermont Genealogical Library frequently hosts classes and meetings designed for both novice and seasoned family historians. For information on classes, and to browse the VGL’s extensive online resources, visit the Vermont Genealogical Library at <http://www.vtgenlib.org/index.php>, and the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society at <http://www.vt-fcgs.org/>.

Saturday morning classes are presented on numerous topics related to family history during each spring and fall. These classes cover research techniques, tools and where to locate critical records. Trips to nearby records repositories in New England, New York and Quebec occur 1-2 times a year.