

Where Is the List with All the Names? Information-Seeking Behavior of Genealogists

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Abstract

Until the 1990s, archivists gave very little attention to studying their user population. None of the user studies that have been conducted in the last decade have focused solely on genealogists, one of the most frequent users of archives. This paper gives the results of a study involving in-depth interviews with ten genealogists. The findings provide information on the stages of genealogical research, how genealogists search for information, the access tools they use, the knowledge required, and the barriers they face. The findings of this study can be used to improve the design of archival information systems that will facilitate access for this important group of users.

Archivists' expertise is grounded upon knowledge of records and record-creating activities.¹ At the heart of archival theory is the record, while the various types of researchers who visit archives seeking information receive scant attention. Traditionally most archivists have expressed little interest in systematically studying how or why their patrons use archival material. However, since the 1990s, archivists have begun to focus more attention on reference service and users, and a number of researchers have begun to study the information-seeking behavior of archival users.

Archival user studies have included institutional-based studies,² research examining the information-seeking behavior of specific groups of users,

¹ Barbara Craig, "The Acts of the Appraisers: The Context, the Plan and the Record," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 175–80.

² Paul Conway, *Partners in Research: Improving Access to the Nation's Archive* (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1994); Ann D. Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage: The Report of the Historical Documents Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Historical Publications and Records Commission, 1992).

such as historians, academic researchers, and elementary school students,³ and studies that included representative sample populations of a number of user groups.⁴ For example, Paul Conway conducted an extensive study of researchers at the National Archives of the United States in 1990–1991⁵ and found archivists were consulted more frequently than finding aids. Gordon surveyed a variety of different types of archival users including genealogists and found that the respondents preferred to rely on their past experience, archivists, and leads from secondary sources. The least popular method of accessing information was to use the published guides, although the value of finding aids varied depending on the type of users replying. These general studies indicate that different types of users rely on different methods for locating information in an archives. For example, Gordon's study found that while 42 percent of the members of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) considered published guides an important means to find information in archives, only 26 percent of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) members did (p. 59). Researchers have also examined reference correspondence, e-mail reference, and on-site reference questions to understand the terms patrons used in forming their requests and to observe the effect of providing remote access to the archival system and reference service via e-mail.⁶ These studies indicate that people include names, dates, places, subjects, and sometimes events in the information requests. However, studies of reference questions rarely identified how the terms used by the various types of users differ.

Although some previous research studies have included genealogists, no research has focussed solely on how genealogists identify relevant material in an archives, how genealogical researchers use archival services, or how well these services meet the needs of genealogists. A number of genealogists have

³ Diane L. Beattie, "An Archival User Study: Researchers in the Field of Women's History," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989/90): 33–50; Helen R. Tibbo, "Primarily History: Historians and the Search for Primary Source Materials," *Proceedings of the ACM/IEEE Joint Conference on Digital Libraries 2002*, Portland, Oregon, 14–18 July 2002 (New York: ACM, 2002); Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives," *Library Quarterly* 72 (October 2002): 472–96; Wendy Duff, Barbara Craig, and Joan Cherry, "Historians' Use of Archival Sources: Promises and Pitfalls of the Digital Age," *Public Historian*: Submitted; Elizabeth Yakel, "Listening to Users," *Archival Issues* 26, no. 2 (2002): 111–27; Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," paper presented at the Society of American Archivists Conference, Birmingham, Ala., 19–25 August 2002.

⁴ Conway, *Partners in Research* and Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage*.

⁵ Conway, *Partners in Research*.

⁶ Kristin E. Martin, "Analysis of Remote Reference Correspondence at a Large Academic Manuscripts Collection," *American Archivist* 64 (Spring/Summer 2001): 17–42; Karen Collins, "Providing Subject Access to Images: A Study of User Queries," *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998): 36–55; Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "A Virtual Expression of Need: An Analysis of Archival Reference Questions," *American Archivist* 64 (Spring/Summer 2001): 43–60; David A. Bearman, "User Presentation Language in Archives," *Archives & Museum Informatics* 3, no. 4 (1989/90): 3–7; L. Gagnon-Arguin, "Les questions de recherche comme matériau d'études des usagers en vue du traitement des archives," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 86–102; Burt Altman and John R. Nemmers, "The Usability of Online Archival Resources: The Polaris Project Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 64 (November 2001): 126.

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

written papers describing the methods they use when conducting research in archives.⁷ Rhianna Edwards interviewed archivists at three provincial archives to better understand their attitudes toward genealogists.⁸ Christopher Barth conducted a small survey of genealogists and archivists to compare their attitudes toward each other and to investigate genealogists' level of familiarity with automated tools. He found that the digital environment was having a considerable impact on genealogical research, and he suggested that archives market their services within the digital world by putting more finding aids on the Web and digitizing more collections.⁹ A study reported in the library literature investigated the degree to which genealogists consult map collections in libraries. Perry surveyed map librarians to gather information on the use of map collections by patrons who were seeking genealogical information. Sixteen percent of the librarians surveyed thought they dealt frequently with genealogists, while 61 percent felt they served genealogists infrequently.¹⁰

Research to date suggests that all archival users prefer informal sources of information, such as the archivists, leads from secondary sources, and their own expertise over formal sources such as finding aids. They use names, dates, places, subjects, and sometimes events in the information requests. Furthermore, genealogists occasionally consult map collections in libraries. However, we do not know if the information-seeking behavior of genealogists differs from the information-seeking behavior of other researchers.

The research questions addressed in this paper include:

- How do genealogists identify relevant material in the archives?
- How do genealogists carry out their research in an archives?
- How do genealogists use descriptive tools, archivists, and colleagues during the course of seeking information?

Methodology

The study involved in-depth interviews with ten genealogists. To recruit genealogists for the study, we contacted a local genealogical society and

⁷ Gail R. Redmann, "Archivists and Genealogists: The Trend Toward Peaceful Coexistence," *Archival Issues* 18, no. 2 (1993): 121–32; Mary N. Speakman, "The User Talks Back," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 164–71.

⁸ Rhianna Helen Edwards, *Archivists' Outlook on Service to Genealogists in Selected Canadian Archives* (M.A.S. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1987).

⁹ Christopher D. Barth, "Archivists, Genealogists, Access, and Automation: Past and Present Trends in Archival Access Technologies and Their Implications for the Future of Genealogical Research in Archives" (1997), available at: <<http://www.arcticwind.com/cdb/writings//archives1.shtml>> (1 March 2003).

¹⁰ Joanne M. Perry, "Use of Map Collections by Genealogists: Responses to a Survey," *SLA Geography and Map Division Bulletin* 170 (December 1992): 22–31.

requested permission to discuss the research project and to recruit participants at their monthly meeting. Two individuals volunteered after the presentation. Another individual was recruited through personal contacts. After interviewing the first two volunteers, we decided to focus attention on professional genealogists to gain a better understanding of the information-seeking behavior of people who conduct genealogical research on contract for other people. We felt these people would have a broader view of the genealogical research process and would be more reflective of the constraints affecting archival research. Four professional genealogists were identified through published sources and from the participants. All agreed to take part in the study when contacted. A visit to Nova Scotia also provided an opportunity to recruit more participants. With the assistance of a local archives, three more genealogists were identified and invited to participate. Again, all agreed to take part in the study. The study participants included seven professional genealogists of varying expertise (two of the participants conducted courses in genealogical research and one of these had written a book on genealogical research), and three hobbyist researchers including one who had done extensive research in archives in Canada and the United Kingdom. An honorarium of twenty-five dollars was given to each participant after the interview.

The in-depth interviews used a semistructured interview protocol and each lasted approximately fifty minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Transcriptions were verified then analyzed using qualitative software, NVIVO, to identify themes and concepts. The two researchers coded the transcripts separately. Coding was compared and discussed until agreement was reached. Concepts were defined and refined as they emerged from the data. Some of the concepts that emerged from the interviews related to barriers faced by the genealogists during their research, their use of browsing to identify relevant records, their search strategies, how they orient themselves to a new archives, and their feelings around the reliability of on-line finding aids.

Limitations

This study includes only ten genealogists and therefore the findings are not generalizable. Furthermore, most of the genealogists interviewed were professional genealogists and therefore their behavior is more representative of expert researchers than novice genealogists. While the limited number of respondents reduces the representativeness of the sample, the extent of the interviews increases the depth and richness of the data and contributes to an in-depth understanding of the research process experienced by the participants.

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

Participants

The participants completed a short questionnaire about their background following the interview. The genealogists in this study were experienced researchers with all participants having used archives for more than ten years. Most of the genealogists had visited numerous institutions in the last five years with one person indicating that he had used more than ten archives, four noting that they had used six to ten archives, and three indicating that they had visited two to five archives. One participant did not answer this question. The participants were also frequent visitors to archives with two of the ten genealogists stating they used archives daily, four used archives weekly, two monthly, and two less than once a month. Nine of the ten genealogists were very confident in their ability to use finding aids and only one was moderately confident. All ten genealogists consulted finding aids on the Web. The education level of the genealogists varied. Three participants had finished high school, two had completed community college, three had finished an undergraduate degree, and two had completed a law degree. The age of the participants also varied. Three were in the thirty-six to forty-five age category, two were in the forty-six to fifty-five category, and five were over fifty-five. The majority of the participants (eight) were women, and only two were male.

Findings

The findings shed some light on the stages of genealogical research, how genealogists search for information, the access tools they use, the knowledge they require, and the barriers they face.

The Stages of Genealogical Research

Many people think that genealogical research is simply about collecting names and developing family trees. But as the participants explained and demonstrated, doing genealogy goes well beyond the gathering of information about births and deaths. One participant suggested that genealogical research has three stages. In the first stage, genealogists collect names of their family members, while in the second stage they gather detailed information about these individuals. He described the third stage in the following manner:

This is where you are no longer just building a tree or finding out information about individuals, but you are finding out about the society. People who are writing family histories have to go to this level to find out what is happening to the people, because they weren't in isolation. All this information, of course, feeds back on location. If you find that the town that people were

in was only settled in say 1827 as the result of another town burning down and they had to, you know, so much was destroyed they had to rebuild someplace else, then you've got a good clue as to which parish records to try and look at previous to what you were currently doing. (Subject 3)

Another participant also emphasized the importance of having a broad general knowledge of the time period of their subject before embarking on genealogical research.

One of the things that we stress when we're teaching new genealogists, is the fact that if you don't know what was going on, you can't understand where to look for your name. . . . And it's a case of most people who come to genealogy simply want to find name by name by name. And it's only as you try to teach them that these people didn't live isolated lives. They lived with their neighbours, they lived with the town, they lived with the state of the government. And if you don't understand what that's all about, you'll really have trouble finding their names. (Subject 5)

Novice genealogists in the first or second stage of research look for names and information about people. However, experts realize that the more background knowledge they have the better they will be able to identify sources that contain relevant information. Knowledge about immigration patterns, major historical events, and different types of records is important information that the genealogist needs to know. More seasoned genealogists increase their historical or contextual knowledge in order to increase their access to personal information. The stages of research are not necessarily linear as genealogists might gather names for one branch of the family tree, and at the same time, use their knowledge of history to gather more detailed information about another branch of their family. Whether collecting names, gathering personal information, and/or studying history, genealogists consult archives.

How Genealogists Search for Information in an Archives

In the first and second stage of genealogical research genealogists are predominantly seeking and finding facts about people. They do so by searching by name and place and by consulting specific record forms for a particular time period.

Name Collecting

During all stages of research genealogists search for, and collect, names. As one participant stated "It's name's that are genealogy . . . genealogy is name driven" (Subject 5). Genealogical research thrives on names and all participants

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

provided examples of how they searched for and used names to find other information. A record documenting an event in a person's life will contain information about family members such as parents, spouses, or siblings. One participant described the importance of names in the following manner:

The most important thing to a genealogical researcher is the name. From the last record you've looked at, preferably a baptism, you have the names of the parents. If you don't find the baptisms of the parents in the same records, you are stuck, you don't know where they came from. (Subject 3)

The genealogists in this study wanted lists of names, or names indexes, or search engines that retrieved by name to facilitate their research. Searching by personal names, however, provides a number of challenges including the need to differentiate between people with the same name or to retrieve names with different spellings. Five of the ten participants discussed techniques used to distinguish between individuals with the same name. Name differentiation can be an extremely time-consuming but an essential task for the genealogist. The participants provided a number of examples of using a record's dates to help them determine whether the information in a record related to their person or someone else with the same name. They consulted city directories or other reference tools to collect background information on numerous people with the same name to help them distinguish among them and identify the person they were seeking.

Place Name

Genealogical research thrives on names, but archival information systems do not always provide name indexes or facilitate name searches. Without access by name, genealogists must transform their request for information about a person to a request for particular types of records created in a specific location during a certain time period. As one participant pointed out, "if you only have names, you have to go searching through something to find location before you can go to the land records" (Subject 5). Many types of records are organized and accessed by geographic location, therefore geographic searches are the "second most important thing, aside from name searches" (Subject 3). The genealogists in this study highlighted the importance of knowing "where someone lived." One participant stated, "the other thing that's important to know is where people lived. That's what I always tell people. After a person's name the most important thing to know is where they lived" (Subject 4).

Most records with genealogical data, such as church records, deeds, land records, or census records, emanate from a particular locality, and archives usually provide geographic access to these records. The need to search by place

to locate information about people was emphasized by almost all the participants. Nine of the ten genealogists in this study provided specific examples of searching by geographic name to locate relevant information. They discussed searching the Internet by place name, or narrowing a search for information by geographic area. They highlighted not only the importance, but also the difficulty in identifying the place where their ancestors lived. Genealogists often know the general area where their people lived, but they may not know the exact location or the name of the town. Therefore they need to consult reference tools such as maps and gazetteers to obtain this information. Six of the ten participants described the importance of maps to their research. One participant described how he used maps to obtain place names:

. . . parish records rarely record where someone has come from. They just suddenly appear in the record. You then have to go to maps to find adjacent parishes and draw a circle and basically just wander through a number of possibilities, usually unsuccessfully. Our ancestors seemed to move much more often and much farther than is currently recognized, particularly people like weavers who would be job hunting almost annually. (Subject 3)

Another participant highlighted the importance of maps with a suggestion that the archives move a map closer to the microfilm collection because “if the map was closer, it is easier to look at to find the abstract, the deeds, or, trying to see what county you wasn’t [*sic*] to look at, which township you want to look at” (Subject 1). Current maps provide the names of communities, towns, and cities in an area, but the names and boundaries of places often change over time. Archives usually organize and index records by the name a locality had when the records were created. Therefore genealogists must be able to link current place names with former place names, and vice versa. One participant described the process in the following way:

if they find a birth record and it gives that the person was living in, or was born in Waterloo in 1824, then they will . . . Waterloo Township, they would say Waterloo Township, Gore District, Upper Canada. If they were born here in 1828, they have to say York, York County, Home District, because the records are accessed under Home District or York. (Subject 5)

Genealogists consult older maps or gazetteers to find previous names a community was known by so they can use these names as search terms when they look for information about people.

Dates

People are born, live, and die in a specific place and at a particular time; therefore, genealogists need to know the general time period when an event

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

took place, for instance, when a person was born or married, to limit the number of records they need to consult. All participants provided examples of narrowing their searches by dates and determining the relevancy of material by the date they were created. One genealogist suggested that the ideal search engine would permit searches by place and date. He stated:

Well, if I had my druthers, I would like to be able to do a computer search on the name with a Boolean search on location and year, or with parameters say, not earlier than five years before, not later than, you know, three years. Pull up the people, and also location, and then get the original record. (Subject 3)

The ideal search engine for this genealogist would support a search by name, geographic area, and a range of dates. It would also contain digitized images of the original documents.

Genres

In the course of seeking information in records, genealogists become records experts. Over time they learn which types of records contain what kind of genealogical data. They are aware of the various record forms, how they are organized, and how to access them efficiently and effectively. The genealogists in this study provided numerous examples of how they used their expertise to seek information in an archives. One participant suggested that finding genealogical information requires that one “think like a genealogist.” When asked to explain what it means to think “like a genealogist,” she replied, “to evaluate the evidence and to be able to sort of tunnel into the records and figure out what piece of paper might have been left to record that event” (Subject 7).

Thinking like a genealogist means figuring out how to access archival material. Genealogists have to figure out what type of documentary form would contain the kind of information they seek. For instance, they know that if they are looking for birth, death, and marriage information, they consult parish records. Wills contain information about family members and property; assessment records contain addresses and property values; land records also contain names, dates, and property information. Genealogists reframe their searches for information about people to requests for certain types of documentary forms or events. One participant pointed out that this was particularly important when using large federal or provincial archives, because these have event-related records. She explained that, “going to the National Archives, I would expect even less, ‘people related’ and more ‘event related’” or, “how can I put it because when you go looking for land records, I don’t call that ‘people related,’ you’re looking more at a ‘system related’ material that happens to have people names in it” (Subject 5). All participants in this study knew how to

transform their need for information about people into a request for types of records that documented certain events. After many years of research they had become experts on the records that contained genealogical information, and all participants provided examples of linking specific data to particular forms of records. They knew the records that facilitated access to information about people and the ones that contained name indexes. With this knowledge they were able to circumvent the archival retrieval system and directly access relevant records. One participant described her process: "Well, I've been doing these records now for fifteen years and I do most of my research from memory. There are few times when I actually consult the binders [finding aids] because, as I say I do this from memory, and anything that I have to consult and any time on a regular basis" (Subject 8). The participants described gaining knowledge about different types of records from repeated use. "I don't know if I do or not after a while, you then tend to repeat the same strategies over and over again in your searching" (Subject 9). Another suggested that experience working in a legal office gave her knowledge about records, "my background is in legal work . . . I work in legal offices, and I knew what format the documentation takes in the way of wills and transfer of property" (Subject 2).

Professional genealogists usually seek the same type of factual information about people, and with records expertise and historical knowledge they can access records in a specific archives without relying on the archival information system. Knowing the form of record or document that contains the information they need helps them circumvent the available archival reference tools. Because their research is often confined to seeking the same kinds of information, they develop a set of strategies for finding the information they need, which they can use repeatedly for different research projects.

Consulting with Others

At times, however, genealogists will need to consult with archivists or colleagues to answer specific questions and for assistance when seeking general information or identifying records relevant to their research.

Archivists

Most of the participants talked to archivists when they needed specific facts related to the collections or records they consulted rather than help identify relevant records. The reasons for this were varied. One participant suggested that she knew the archival collections very well and only needed to talk to an archivist when using the photograph or map collections, which she used less frequently. In some cases, access to collections is only possible through

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

consultation with the archivist. In the following case, the researcher needed to find a photograph of a client's family home, but since the photographic collection was organized by the photographer rather than the subject, she had to consult the archivist:

Our photographic collection here at the Nova Scotia Archives is housed by the person who originated the photographs, by the photographers, really. So to go through a collection they can have anything in them. They're not done by subject. So, and they're certainly not indexed because a collection can have thousands of photographs in them. . . .

. . . the photographic collection . . . is not an easy collection to use and it really has to be used, I think, in conjunction with an archivist. (Subject 10)

Another participant suggested that she only consulted with an archivist when something was missing from a reel of microfilm because she only used a few sources that she knew well. And yet another participant explained that she worked at night so she did not have access to archivists. One researcher commented that archivists would give specific answers to specific questions, but often what is needed is an overview of how material is organized in the archives itself. This researcher adopted an interesting technique to uncover the mysteries of archival organization:

The best archivist I think they ever had there, the most user-friendly archivist, was _____. And you could go and ask him anything and he could tell you. But occasionally he would take people on a tour and tell them stuff. And of course you go and ask him something, you get a specific answer to a specific problem, but you have no concept of the framework that that's in. I used to follow people around when he was taking them on tours to try and pick up some of the stuff, because he never did take me on a tour. I always felt a little bit bitter about that. (Subject 4)

Three of the participants provided examples of talking to reference archivists when they needed to find information at the beginning of a search, and one suggested that novice genealogists should ask archivists how the system works before beginning their research. Although archivists are used from time to time to answer specific questions and for help when consulting unfamiliar collections, genealogical researchers tend to rely on their own expertise once relevant records have been identified. They also tend to share their expertise with other researchers.

Consulting with Colleagues

Colleagues were an important source of information for nine of the ten participants. Participants discussed the type of information they were seeking

with other genealogists because they were close at hand, they were using a microfilm reader close by when a question arose, for example, or because certain genealogists were particularly knowledgeable about records from a certain area. Many of the genealogists in this study provided the names of people who gave courses or wrote genealogical books. These individuals were seen as important sources of information. Some of the participants had given courses and considered themselves experts. Other genealogists drew on their colleagues' expertise, especially nights or weekends when no archivists were available.

A strong genealogical network exists among researchers, which is fostered through courses, genealogical society meetings, and newsletters. They willingly share their knowledge with other less-experienced genealogists. Genealogists often become experts in researching particular communities. When genealogists find themselves doing research in new localities, they may consult with other researchers who are more familiar with the area to get leads on the names of the people they are interested in. An extensive social network of fellow researchers facilitates the work of genealogists:

... there have been times when I have checked, well not so much with a fellow professional researcher, but someone who's done a lot of research on Annapolis County. I've asked that man if he knows of this particular individual that I've looked all through other members of the family and not been able to come up with them and he said, "Well just a second I'll check my notes at home" and sure enough he has a reference for that particular man. (Subject 10)

One participant suggested that a general conversation between genealogists, although not a common practice with this participant, will result in the sharing of knowledge about records and research techniques:

For instance, in the time I was doing the Garret Fergus Presbyterian session minutes, I naturally wrote down the entire entry, which included all the people who had been kicked out of the church. Well, the next day I was talking to some other person ... it's very rare for genealogists to be able to talk about their families because nobody cares. So when you talk to another genealogist, you almost never mention who you are researching, you mention your research techniques, but she was new at it so she told the family name. I would never have mentioned it except it was one of the names that I'd just come across, so I made a copy of the entry and gave it to her. (Subject 3)

Through conversations with other genealogists, working with specific record types, attending courses and reading, the genealogist slowly builds up the expertise needed to do genealogical research in an archives and becomes a records expert. When they need help they consult with colleagues and less frequently with archivists.

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

Constraints

The expert genealogist accesses information in archives efficiently and effectively. But genealogists gain their knowledge in spite of the system, not because of it. Archives are organized by provenance or creators, but as previously noted, genealogists seek records that contain information about people or names of people. Therefore, provenance-based finding aids provide significant challenges to novice genealogical researchers. Many participants discussed problems they had encountered and the feelings of frustration that inexperienced genealogists feel when using an archives. One participant described the problem:

Until an individual who's not used to an archives realizes that everything about an individual will not be found in the same place, that individual . . . , because if you go looking at an individual, you are looking at cross creators, if you want, at multicreators, and so you have to start thinking not about the individual, but you have to change your focus and look at, OK, I need land records, created by this group, I need birth records created by this group, I need something else, court records, divorce, whatever created by this group. I've got to look in about six places. Now I've got to learn how to figure out, I've got to figure out how to get through the system to the individual record. And it is a system. (Subject 5)

The novice genealogist must reframe his or her request for information about people to a request for information about record forms and creators. This reframing is extremely difficult to do. Novices must gain the knowledge of an expert and learn to "think like a genealogist." They must be able to link a request for information about an event such as a death to a variety of record forms that may contain information about that event, such as death records, obituaries, cemetery records, and so on. Furthermore, many archives are challenging to use because they require a great deal of tacit knowledge. The system often requires that the genealogist knows which records contain genealogical information and how to retrieve them. Without this knowledge the archival system is difficult and frustrating to use. One participant described the way she had felt when she first used an archives:

. . . there's this index over here you look at for cemeteries. There's another one for churches. And we've got this biography card file. And if you're looking for, you know, for example, records of native people, well, you know, there's a binder in around the corner if you know it's located there, and the marriage ones are up on the shelf. And if you go upstairs . . . like there's a lot of little bits and pieces, and it's . . . I mean if you know where everything is it's fine, you don't think about it after a while, but for people who are coming there for the first time it's incredibly frustrating. . . . it's a very piecemeal system, or so it appears to me. And I can remember myself the first time, the first

few times I ever came there thinking like “I don’t think I’m going to bother coming back here because this is just . . . I don’t need this grief.” (Subject 9)

The novice researcher who tries to retrieve information from a piecemeal system without a central portal will have difficulty and will probably feel aggravated. Other participants also expressed similar feelings of confusion and frustration. Another participant expressed it slightly differently, but suggested that the archival retrieval system is more of a hindrance than a help:

This is the trouble you see. Because of all these different layers of archival invention, you sometimes have to go from one thing to another thing to another thing to another thing to another thing, and hope that by the time you get there you find the right thing. (Subject 4)

The system that this participant had to use led him from one type of finding aid to another without a holistic view of the system or a good understanding of how the system worked. This participant had used the archives for many years, and yet he was still not sure if he would find what he wanted when he consulted these “archival inventions.”

Most archival systems have been developed to meet the needs of archivists and historians. The format and content of finding aids have not changed significantly in the last fifty years though the types of users wanting access to archival records have changed dramatically during this time. Most archival systems do not meet the needs of users who want to know “where is the list with all the names of the people” (Subject 4). Because the archival system did not meet their needs, over half of the participants had created their own finding aids, and they had bought and used finding aids produced by their local genealogical societies. Many genealogists develop a parallel system to help them retrieve records because the archival information system fails them. This parallel system includes finding aids organized according to the genealogist’s point of view, along with a strong network of colleagues and courses. With this parallel system and personal expertise, genealogists are able to circumvent the archival retrieval system and find the information they need.

Time Constraints

This alternative system lets genealogists overcome many of the barriers they face, but genealogists still need to overcome concerns about time pressures. All of the professional genealogists working in Nova Scotia, for example, indicated that time constraints impacted on their research. They all suggested that they needed to access records efficiently because they worked on an hourly basis:

WHERE IS THE LIST WITH ALL THE NAMES?
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS

I do my homework. I read it over and I make a check list of the things, resources, that will yield the most information in the least amount of time. Because as a paid researcher, that's what I feel I have an obligation to do for my client. If I was researching for myself, there are things that I would do differently, but because we're being paid by the hour by the contract, one has to, I feel one has to consult the sources that are going to give you most information. (Subject 8)

Professional genealogists must account for their time to their clients. Genealogists work on an hourly basis and therefore they have to find efficient ways to retrieve information. Professional genealogists in this study consulted records that facilitated access to names before they consulted other records. Some participants checked their personal finding aids and developed lists of records to consult in priority order before visiting an archives. They worked through their list until they found the information they needed or until they had consulted all of the records on the list, whichever came first.

The nonprofessional genealogists in this study had fewer problems with the lack of time, but they expressed concern over the archives limited hours of service. One participant suggested that she preferred to use microfilm copies because they were accessible in the evenings and on weekends while originals were not. Another participant suggested that access to the archivist was only possible during the day and therefore she had to come during the day or communicate through writing. One participant described an archives where access to finding aids was restricted at night:

I did find it bizarre that the archivists and all the finding aids, etc. . . . well the reference archivists, finding aids, they were all in one room which got locked up at 5 o'clock, but you had a reading room which stayed open, at that point, twenty-four hours a day. And it just blew my mind that yes, I could understand the archivist had to go home, but why did the finding aids have to get locked up along with them? I mean that was bizarre! (Subject 5)

Archives that limit access to archival materials, archivists, and finding aids on nights and weekends present significant barriers to nonprofessional genealogists. Archives provide full service during the daytime, but provide less service after 5 P.M., the time when most hobbyists visit. Consequently, novice genealogists who need the most help often get the least.

Discussion

The findings of this study support some of the findings of earlier studies. The genealogists in this study seemed to prefer informal sources of information

to formal sources such as finding aids, as Gordon suggests.¹¹ However, they relied more heavily on colleagues and an informal network than on archivists. The participants consulted maps throughout their research to identify names of communities within a geographic area. They also obtained a number of leads from other records. They provided many examples of using secondary sources, but these sources were often finding aids published by genealogical societies.

Genealogical research is iterative. The genealogists in this study followed a number of different strategies to find information and when one strategy or source failed, the participants had no problem changing their strategy and following a different route. They often developed a set of strategies that they could repeat each time they sought new information.

Genealogists are usually looking for facts about people, and when searching for information they search by name and place, and they qualify their search by date. They often know the geographic area related to their request, but they need to consult maps and gazetteers to identify the names of localities within the geographic area. The professional genealogists interviewed in this study were records experts, and they were extremely knowledgeable about the geographic area and historical time period in which they did research. Not only do they know the types of information that different record genres contain, they also excel at linking documentary forms to events.

The participants have developed strong networks, which they rely on when seeking information. They have learned to work around the archival systems because the systems do not meet their needs. When they require help to locate information they often rely on colleagues and they consult personal finding aids. Professional genealogists use archival finding aids, but novices find provenance-based finding aids confusing and frustrating to use. Furthermore, the archives' hours of operation present a significant barrier to many genealogists who visit the archives on nights and weekends.

Genealogists represent the majority of users in many archives.¹² And yet, the traditional archival information system does not meet their needs. As previously stated, the content and format of finding aids, whether paper based or Web based, has not changed substantially during the last fifty years even though the archival user population has changed dramatically. EAD finding aids are organized following the same archival principles and contain the same content as traditional finding aids. EAD facilitates searching across finding aids, which provides great advantages, but they do not necessarily enable the type of searching needed by genealogists. New finding aids systems designed to meet the needs of genealogists are needed. For example, an archival information system

¹¹ Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage*.

¹² Shelley Sweeney, "The Source Seeking Cognitive Processes and Behavior of the In-Person Archival Researcher" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2002).

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designed for this user population would retrieve by name, by place, by type of document, and by event. Furthermore, it would support Boolean searching using a combination of these search elements and would enable a user to limit any of these searches by date. This system would also include readily available maps and allow a user to identify a geographic area on the map even if the user did not know all the names of places in a given area at a particular time. New developments in information retrieval and visualization may foster the design of systems that meet the needs of this user group. Such a system should include an expert system that simulates the knowledge of the professional genealogist, linking events to documentary forms and facilitating novice researchers as they learn to “think like a genealogist.”