

Summer 2015

Preservation Perspectives: Connecting the Next Generation to the Past

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Repository Citation

Stolz, B. (2015). Preservation Perspectives: Connecting the Next Generation to the Past. *Kentucky Libraries*, 79 (3), 29-30.

https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ul_pub/199

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PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES: CONNECTING THE NEXT GENERATION TO THE PAST

BY BILL STOLZ

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Recently we took two of our nieces, ages 7 and 12, on a trip to Springfield, Illinois, to visit the home, tomb, and presidential museum of Kentucky native Abraham Lincoln. This was the first stop on what the nieces have coined “The American Presidents Tour.” Our ultimate goal is to visit as many of the burial places and historic sites of past presidents as we can. Their mother even sent me a note to say, in preparation for the trip, the seven-year-old checked out biographies of Lincoln, Washington, and Taylor Swift (priorities!) from her local library. Watching the girls read the exhibits and old documents got me thinking about what we can do as librarians and archivists to connect young people with our archives and local history collections.

When we think of archives and special collections, we don’t often visualize elementary or middle school students conducting historical research, but we should. It is this connection to the next generation that makes our collections visible, creates wonderful educational opportunities, and establishes life-long users/supporters of libraries and archives. Just think, the fifth-grader that visits your repository seeking information for a History Day project on Lincoln may one day return as a graduate student in search of material for her dissertation, or as an author working on her next book.

One of the wonderful things about archival collections is that the material can serve as a connection between the past and present. These connections can be visible when we view items like photographs, postcards, and other visual documents. Images can help illustrate the change, or – if you are fortunate enough – the lack of change in the built environment of a hometown over the past century. Those homes and buildings that students pass every day on their way to school suddenly

take on a new light, when those students realize the buildings have stood for over a century or more. Diaries and letters are also wonderful tools to establish the connection. Reading a diary passage describing a picnic from 1875 or a Fourth of July fireworks show from 1900 shows how many of our summer-time traditions have been passed down generation by generation.

Connecting to young researchers can be as simple or complex as an institution wants, and can be anything from traveling or digital exhibits, classroom visits, and/or tours. For several years I regularly gave tours and presentations to school groups, typically ranging from fifth grade through high school. While they seemed mildly excited about Civil War letters and presidential signatures, the students of all ages were captivated with a travel diary of an anonymous young woman, probably around the age of thirteen, who migrated from Kentucky to Missouri in the fall of 1857. The students could definitely relate to the author because of her age and writing style. The entries capture the trip through her eyes and detail the daily hardships, changing landscape, and people she met along the way. Students were shocked that the trip of roughly 680 miles took the family several months to complete. One student even pointed out we can travel this same distance in a car in a single day now.

To spark conversation I would ask for a brave volunteer to read a passage or two out loud to their classmates (you would be surprised at the number of volunteers). The diary almost always created great dialogue and feedback from the students, no matter the age. The conversations often covered topics such as the comparison of 1850s travel to that of today, westward migration, the hardships faced by families (Remember the Oregon Trail game?

Kids love to talk about old diseases), changes in the natural landscape, and so on.

For preservation purposes, we had a scanned copy of the diary available for the students to page through, but also had the original diary on the table so they could see the tiny leather bound volume that was over 150 years old. In one instance, we helped an enrichment teacher write a travel grant to have her students visit in order to use collections related to WWII.

When preparing for outreach to students, here are some ideas to consider:

- Survey collections held by your repository to see what would interest students of various ages. Do you have a photograph collection featuring the schools in town or, perhaps, the personal papers of the individual the school is named after?
- Partner with a local school and/or teacher to discuss how your collection can help to support the curriculum and offer tours to the class or volunteer to visit and speak about your collection and Kentucky history.
- Collaborate with the children's or young adult department to create a joint program on a historical topic or event. Think locally, regionally, or globally depending on your collection.
- Create a traveling or digital exhibit with photographs and documents that highlight the history of your town, county, or region.
- Get involved in National History Day. This is a great way to showcase your collections

to local students and to help them with their historical research. More information on History Day in Kentucky and the Kentucky Junior Historical Society can be found here: <http://history.ky.gov/portfolio/kentucky-history-day-and-kjhs/>.

- Talk with the local after-school and/or recreation programs about taking a tour of your repository.
- Speak with the leaders for youth groups like the Cub Scouts, Brownies, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts about assisting with one of their merit badges. Most of these organizations now have merit badges for both genealogy and American History.

Our collections are only truly valuable when they are accessed and shared with researchers and the community they represent. While preservation is about preserving and protecting historical documents for future generations, it is also about making sure those same generations are interested in their history.

Author's Note: I am the Kentucky History Librarian and a Certified Archivist with the Kenton County Public Library Local History and Genealogy Department. I have been very fortunate to work in both archives and public libraries during my career. Future columns will explore security, basic photograph and paper preservation, storage, and other issues we all face in protecting and preserving Kentucky history.

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