

The Genealogy of Genealogy: Present, Past and Future

By Libby Garland

As an historian, I think a lot about the role of history in both education and cultural transmission. How do we see the past shaping us, and what do we want to pass on about the past to future generations? But instead of talking about the kind of history I do, I want to consider a kind of history other people do.

A few years ago, I was at my parents' home and they were going through the mail. In with the bills was a special offer for a personalized reference book. The mass-produced cover letter asked, "Curious about Garland family history?" Well, it went on, the first Garland to come to this country was Walter Garland, who arrived in Virginia in 17 something. For a low, low price, a book about all of Walter's American Garland descendants could be ours. Now, my parents' parents and grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. So the idea of 18th century Virginia Walter Garland made my parents laugh. Oy, said my mom, do they have the wrong Garlands.

Well, the marketing ploy got something wrong. But it also got something right – namely, that there is a huge market out there for information about family history. Genealogy—the search for and study of family lineage—is, I would argue, one of the most important ways Americans today imagine what they have inherited from the past and construct the history they want to preserve for the future.

Genealogy comes close to being a national obsession these days. According to Rachel Fisher, director of the [Genealogy Institute of the Center for Jewish History](#), its popularity as a hobby is surpassed only by gardening.

This enthusiasm for genealogy is something any historian who goes to archives encounters. When I go to the National Archives or the Center for Jewish History or the New York Public Library, many of my fellow researchers are looking for documents that mention their relatives. I vie with genealogists for microfilm readers and photocopiers.

Yet, many institutions concerned with cultural transmission and the relevance of the past don't pay much attention to genealogy. Academic historians tend to look down on it. Genealogy, many of us might say, is okay, but not really very *historical*. We see history and culture changing in macro-structural terms. We attend to large waves of migration or the introduction of television or the rise and fall of political regimes, whereas genealogists are more interested in who begat or married whom than in such large-scale shifts. Like the academy, many religious and ethnic institutions are uninterested in genealogy. Rachel Fisher observed that Jewish institutions focus on fostering Jewish identity through participation in religious ritual and making historical connections to Israel and the

Holocaust, but remain virtually unaware of genealogists' experiences of forging Jewish identities through researching family history.

Genealogy is, in fact, interesting in part because it is such a thoroughly grassroots phenomenon. There is an entire subculture of genealogical societies, conferences, and Internet chats, both ethnically based and broader, all largely unconnected to mainstream educational or ethnic institutions.

This is not to say that no one has noticed. Research institutions often have staff dedicated to genealogy; sometimes, their very systems of cataloging and storage are tailored to genealogists' needs. And, as my Walter Garland story suggests, the marketplace knows about genealogists. You can buy elaborate family tree software programs or pay for access to a genealogy Web site's particular set of data. This month, by the way, is [Jewish Genealogy Month](#)—you can buy the poster to prove it.

A historian might point out that the genealogy craze is itself “rooted” in a larger historical context. In the late nineteenth century, researching ancestry was mostly done to prove an elite pedigree in order, say, to gain membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution. The current boom is different, largely the product of the 1960s and '70s upsurge in popular interest in ethnic roots. In his book *Mystic Chords of Memory*, cultural historian Michael Kammen argues that the new passion for genealogy reflects a wider American nostalgia for the past; in this age of emphasis on newness and fast-paced change, he suggests, people crave history. Genealogists, like those who flock to historical museums or battle reenactments, are expressing a modern longing for connection with the past.

Genealogists themselves give a number of reasons for their involvement in family history. Some say it makes history personal instead of abstract and dull. Some say genealogy is a fun puzzle; many describe it as addictive. Some do it for spiritual reasons—the Mormons, for instance, constitute a notable exception to religious institutions' disregard for genealogy; in fact, they maintain the world's most impressive genealogical records for religious reasons. Some genealogists say their work gives them something to pass on to their children. Most see their family history as *their own* history; family history is the thing from the past that explains and creates identity. That is, genealogists say they are learning who they are by learning “where they come from,” whether they are adoptees researching their biological families, or Jewish Americans researching nineteenth century *shtetl* forebears.

All this might seem straightforward. But I want to suggest that genealogy is a practice riddled with contradictions about how we imagine and engage in cultural transmission. It insists on the primary role family history plays in passing on cultural identity, even as it acknowledges that often we know about such history only if we do intensive labor to trace it—a more obvious measure of distance from the past than of connection to it. I would suggest that the practice also

encapsulates both radical and conservative notions about how cultural transmission works, and that it is both deeply mainstream and deeply countercultural.

On the one hand, for instance, genealogists learn that family histories are seldom tidy, that they often reveal a good deal of ethnic and racial mixing, that “tradition” and culture are fluid (Hasidic parents may beget Socialist children, for instance), that irregular and illegitimate relationships have always abounded. On the other hand, as historian Karen Miller points out in an insightful essay, charts and diagrams genealogists use generally represent “family” in terms of biological descent and the legal institution of marriage; other sorts of relationships remain outside the historical frame of “where I come from.” Miller also notes that genealogists’ visions of their ancestors’ lives often reflect a deeply privatized view of history as well, even as researchers rely on large-scale public institutions—government archives, social security records, telephone directories—to tell them of their relatives’ lives.

A few thoughts about the future: Genealogy may affect and be affected by many societal shifts, including changing ideas about race, ethnicity, tradition, and biology. Let me focus on two issues: information technology and the rise of genetic science. The spread of the Internet and digitization will spur, I think, another boomlet in the genealogy world—it is already doing so. While this will certainly make for even more high-tech gadgets to peddle, it is noteworthy that, despite the brisk commerce in genealogy products, genealogy is also a pursuit that privileges non-market relationships. This is true both because genealogy insists on the historical importance of family, and also because genealogists volunteer an enormous amount of time to communal projects that extend far beyond their own families—for instance, to creating the vast, free databases of historical information accessible via the Internet. Might this be an interesting model for future grassroots data-sharing, up there with Linux and Napster?

As for genetics, it’s interesting to ask whether genealogy will fit well with our new genetic determinism, or challenge it. On one level, it would seem a perfect fit—two modes of thinking that emphasize lines of biological descent in explaining “who I am”; you can already buy a service that lets you combine cheek cell DNA data with surname-based records in your genealogical research. On the other hand, I like to think that perhaps genealogy, for all its culturally conservative implications, might continue to provide a vision of family and history that insists more on the centrality of personal stories—the when, where, how and with whom of people’s lives—than on chains of nucleic acid in creating identities.