



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

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Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons

Summer Camp for Genealogists

by Kay Haviland Freilich, CG

Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper presents the experience of one society who hosted researchers for several days to introduce them to the local and regional repositories in an effort to show off the collections. The idea of setting aside time to introduce researchers to collections would be a productive society project.

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Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons Summer Camp for Genealogists

by Kay Haviland Freilich, CG

INTRODUCTION

Take one group of genealogists interested in learning more about research facilities in an area. Add another group of genealogists experienced in using those same facilities. Mix in the archivists and librarians from the facilities and stir with a generous amount of careful scheduling and organization. The result is Summer Camp for Genealogists, a program developed by the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania (GSP) to introduce researchers to the myriad of repositories in the Philadelphia area.

Every area has them—research facilities with materials that can help genealogists as we search for our family history. Sometimes these are the places we immediately think of: the historical societies, county archives, and church libraries. Other times, though, these gems are lesser known and little used. Into this group we might place a university's alumni department, the county law library, or the museum devoted to a single ethnic group.

As anxious as we might be to venture forth, we know that first visit to any research repository is always the hardest. Finding the

facility, learning the rules, and becoming acquainted with the collection take up valuable research time. If the repository is in an unfamiliar location the idea of making that first visit alone can be truly daunting. Wouldn't it be nice to be guided by someone who knows the facility and its collections? Summer Camp was created to do just that.

SUMMER CAMP I

Summer Camp I, first held in 1996, was the idea of GSP's long-time program chair Vivian Taylor. That initial week-long session drew forty researchers who worked with four GSP volunteers—the camp counselors—while visiting the area's major repositories: Philadelphia City Archives, Philadelphia Free Library, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Archives of the Philadelphia County Register of Wills, and National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region. While campers came from all over the country, a large number lived within a day's drive of the city.

Campers spent one day hearing lectures by staff members from each facility, then spent the rest of the week researching at each location. The counselors, in addition to

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guiding campers from place to place using public transportation, shared their own knowledge of the facilities and offered suggestions for working in each place. Additional Summer Camp sessions in 1998 and 2000 followed a similar outline.

SUMMER CAMP II

In July of 2001, GSP introduced Summer Camp II—Research Philadelphia. The emphasis here was on the less known and less used facilities—places where one might find information to turn an ancestor from merely a name and dates on a chart into a real person.

Camp Director Susan S. Koelble, CGRS, specializes in Philadelphia research and she put together a list of fourteen repositories. From this list campers selected the five they most wanted to visit along with five “second” choices. Thanks to some careful scheduling by Koelble and GSP’s Executive Director James M. Beidler, most campers were able to visit their top five choices.

The list covered a wide range of research interests. In alphabetical order, the facilities were: American Swedish Historical Society, American Philosophical Society, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Balch Institute, Evangelical Lutheran Church Archives, Friends Historical Library, Germantown Historical Society, Grand Army of the Republic Civil War Museum and Library, Jenkins Law Library, National Archives Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Presbyterian Historical Society, University of Pennsylvania Archives, and the Urban Archives at Temple University.

Only the National Archives was a repeat from the first camp, and this time the emphasis was on the lesser used records, both microfilmed and textual, at NARA. Campers were provided with brochures from the facilities of choice and were encouraged to visit Web sites and

utilize on-line catalogs to plan research prior to arriving in Philadelphia.

COUNSELLING

Each Summer Camp II camper started the week with an individual session with one of the four camp counselors, Koelble, Beidler, Sandra M. Hewlett, CGRS, and the author. Research goals were reviewed and in some cases one repository was substituted for another after the reviews. Changes were made during the week too, as research led down an unexpected path. A counselor accompanied campers to each research location, again sharing knowledge gleaned from previous visits. Campers also had time to use the many resources in GSP’s Reading Room during the week. Once again campers came from all over the country, with many from the region.

SUCSESSES

Research finds were many and varied. Several found unit histories for their Civil War ancestors at the GAR museum. Some found World War I draft registration cards for their ancestors at the National Archives. A few found letters and documents signed by their colonial-era ancestors at The American Philosophical Society. Some found newspaper articles about their ancestors at the Urban Archives, which holds the “morgue” of the defunct Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. One camper found a long-lost great-aunt in a GSP manuscript. Those who visited the American Swedish Museum gained a better understanding of their cultural heritage.

New ancestors were identified as well, using unpublished meeting records at the Friends Historical Library. Along the way all campers gained an appreciation for the repositories and learned to expand their research possibilities. Many were already making plans for a return visit to one location or another.

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TIME OUT

There was time for fun, too, in spite of the days devoted to concentrated research. One evening campers joined a colonial Philadelphia “resident” for a walking tour of Old City, exploring the historic buildings, colonial churches, and narrow residential streets and alleys. Another evening many campers took advantage of evening hours at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for dinner and a visit to that institution’s world-class collection. Old City Tavern—a reconstruction of the colonial eatery that hosted many of the country’s founding fathers—was the site of the closing banquet.

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

Is Summer Camp an idea that can be adapted by other societies? Absolutely. Every area has its own collection of repositories with records of interest to genealogists. Rarely have all these records been microfilmed and even if they have, using the originals is always the researcher’s first choice.

Does it take much advance planning? Yes, indeed. Initial discussions about summer camp usually begin more than a year before the selected dates. Planners need to identify and recruit a staff of counselors. They need to compile a list of possible repositories to visit. Ideally the counselors have worked at the facilities and are very familiar with the collections and how to best use them. Dates for the camp need to be established. Each potential repository needs to be contacted to see if they are willing to take part in the program. Their hours need to be charted to determine that visits are possible within the time set. The space available at each facility for researchers must be considered, along with the availability of photocopy machines and microfilm readers.

In addition to telephone contacts, visits to each repository are a good idea, since they

allow for a personal meeting with the archivist/librarian and any staff members. Experience has shown staff members are much more comfortable with the idea of Summer Camp after these face-to-face meetings and for every Summer Camp session they have been most cooperative. They have made sure there is adequate staffing for the days campers will attend and in some cases have waived entrance fees and/or photocopy fees for campers. In many cases, they have also provided registration forms that could be filled out in advance.

The scheduling of Summer Camp I and II were different. In the first instance, each camper was assigned to a group that remained constant throughout the week. Each group retained the same counselor all week and visited each repository as a group. For Summer Camp II, each camper was assigned a primary counselor who conducted the initial research review and worked with the camper throughout the week. Campers also worked with the counselor assigned to the facility they were visiting that day. Because of the number of locations involved, some additional volunteers were recruited to assist at certain repositories. For their part, counselors worked in the facilities they knew best.

In an urban area such as Philadelphia, transportation can be handled easily by walking or using public transportation. Several facilities are within a dozen blocks of GSP’s headquarters where campers met each morning and most campers opted to walk to these locations. For those who did not want to walk, or for those facilities that were further afield, there were buses, trolleys, or the subway. Commuter trains were available for the trips to the Friends Historical Library in Swarthmore and to Germantown.

Part of the summer camp planning was determining how many tickets or bus tokens were needed for each day and making sure each counselor had the day’s requirement in

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advance so valuable research time didn't disappear while tickets were purchased. Obviously planning a summer camp in a area without public transportation, or where the research facilities are not convenient to the transportation would present some additional considerations.

CONCLUSION

Is a Summer Camp program worth the effort? Without a doubt. Comments from campers have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic, as well as helpful in planning succeeding programs. Many of those attending Summer Camp II had previously attended an earlier session. Several area campers have become more involved in other GSP programs. Many

have returned to the various repositories for additional research. There has been another benefit as well, one that was not anticipated. Staffers at the many repositories have become more involved in genealogical research. At least one facility produced a new collection guide geared to genealogists in anticipation of Summer Camp II. As a bonus, each camp session generated some income for GSP. Maybe now is the time to begin planning a summer camp for your society.

[About the author: Kay Haviland Freilich, CG, is an FGS director and a BCG trustee. She is a member of the program and publications committees for the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania and has been a counselor at both Summer Camp I and Summer Camp II.]

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