

Researching Genealogical Information In An Academic Institutional Archives : An Alumni Database For The University Of Maryland, Baltimore

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The proliferation of personal family genealogy projects has brought substantial numbers of individual, non-affiliated researchers to the archives departments of academic libraries. As highly complex organizations, universities and colleges experience numerous instances of school mergers, renamings, and other reconfigurations. These phenomena present significant challenges when searching for a given individual's name among the documentation of an institution's family history.

This certainly holds true at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. As the home of the university's professional schools of Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Nursing, Social Work, Law, and an interdisciplinary Graduate School, the campus originated in 1807 with the founding of the College of Medicine of Maryland. By order of legislative mandate in 1812, the College of Medicine annexed onto itself several other disciplines to become the University of Maryland, and thus began the evolving history of our much larger entity.

Our institutional family history encompasses four schools of medicine – 1) the College of Medicine of Maryland was the first, and it officially became the University of Maryland School of Medicine in 1813 ; 2) The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Baltimore, a separate rival school, began operation in 1872 ; 3) The Washington Medical College, which opened in 1827 and later changed its name to the Washington University School of Medicine, closed its doors and merged with the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1878. Then in December 1915 the College of Physicians and Surgeons in turn merged with the University of Maryland School of Medicine ; 4) The Baltimore Medical College, founded in 1881, operated separately for many years, but it too merged with the University of Maryland in 1913.

There were similar circumstances in the field of dental education. The history of our School of Dentistry dates back to the 1840 founding of the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, the first dental school in the world. It operated independently for many years. The BCDS encountered its first rival in 1873, with the founding of the Maryland Dental College. That rivalry lasted only a few years, as the MDC merged with the BCDS in 1878. Then the University of Maryland established a Dental Department in 1882, and The Baltimore Medical College followed suit by doing the same in 1895. The BMC Dental Department joined the University of Maryland family in 1913, as part of the merger that also brought their two medical schools together. This left two dental schools, the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery and the University of Maryland Dental

Department. Finally, one last merger came to agreement in June 1923, when the BCDS relinquished its separate operations, and became part of the University of Maryland. By legislative order, the official name of the resulting school became “Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, Dental School, University of Maryland.”

Pharmacy was not so complicated, but still experienced one major event. The Maryland College of Pharmacy began in 1840, partly as a membership professional society of trained apothecaries who devised standards of practice, and who took on the additional purpose of providing educational training for new practitioners. In 1904, the Maryland College of Pharmacy became the University of Maryland Department of Pharmacy.

The University of Maryland Health Sciences and Human Services Library serves all the schools on the Baltimore campus, with the exception of Law, which has its own library. The HSHSL’s Historical/Special Collections Department houses materials documenting the history of the campus as reflected by those schools the Library serves. In this regard, the Department functions in the capacity of the campus Archives.

The aforementioned widespread personal family genealogy activity is what provides much of the research traffic of our Historical Collections. To date, the greatest quantity of individual subjects are chiefly, though not exclusively, from the disciplines of medicine and dentistry. Individual outside researchers typically approach the Department by expressing that their ancestor attended “the medical school” or “the dental school.” The average researcher’s pardonable unawareness regarding the breadth of our institutional family components often posed difficulties when trying to pinpoint any one ancestor among such a number of sibling schools. The varying sophistication and skill, or lack, of researchers frequently presented a wide range of accuracy and reliability as to their suppositions regarding their ancestors’ educational details. Some researchers were entirely incorrect in their information, while others simply weren’t absolutely sure of the relevant particulars.

In the face of searching one name against so many institutional components, we felt the need for a comprehensive name index to serve as an effective portal into our various schools and time periods. Given our collection of mergers, descriptions such as “the medical school” and “the dental school” actually involved four separate sets of records for each of those disciplines. Searching through those multiple resources was a daunting prospect indeed, especially in the frequent cases where the exact school affiliation of the desired ancestor was either unknown or supplied incorrectly.

The college catalogs are the most accessible and consistent sources in our collection for verifying early student matriculation and graduation. Therefore, we chose those as the principal sources of our data. We began our project by devising a fairly simple Microsoft Access database. The included fields were last name, first name, middle

name, and third name. To those we added an abbreviated name of school, year of graduation, and also home state or country if known. This served the purpose quite well as we began making our way doggedly through the catalogs of our myriad schools of medicine and dentistry. In almost no time at all, the growing database proved to be a godsend by eliminating troublesome willy-nilly guesswork and instead efficiently linking a name with its proper place in our institution.

In time, and with the exponential growth of the Access database, we considered the advantages of mounting the database as a public searchable web-based resource. This took the form of two separate interfaces, consisting of a back-end administrative module for entering and maintaining data, and a public searchable presence, accessible from the home page of the Library's Historical/Special Collections Department, which is viewable here:

<http://www.hshsl.umaryland.edu/resources/historical/index.cfm>

The actual search page behind the "Looking For An Ancestor?" button is here:

<http://www.hshsl.umaryland.edu/resources/historical/alumni.cfm>

We have shared these links with the staff of our Medical Alumni Association, who very agreeably have linked to the database search from their home page. Additionally, we likewise shared the links with colleagues on other campuses of the University, who frequently receive queries which researchers mistakenly send to them rather than to us. Thus, these sources have been a great aid both on our campus and beyond.

The entry "card" for each person in the database shows the school name in abbreviated form, but also includes a convenient link to a separate list of the schools' full names, with helpful explanations about the period of coverage for each. And the front search screen includes instructions for requesting deeper reference assistance from the Historical Librarian.

With the information about the correct school and exact year in hand, our typical next step is to visit the catalogs, yearbooks, original School of Medicine theses, and other items for further information about any individual graduate. In recent years, the increased availability of digitized versions of those publications greatly has facilitated the dissemination of further details to researchers.

We hope that in time more and more independent researchers will find their own way directly to the database search. In any event, the resource continues to be an invaluable tool in the Library's response to genealogical requests, and its eventual increased direct use by researchers surely will be of even further merit.