

The “e” Imperative

(Going Online with Your Genealogy)

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Note – This article defines what it means to “publish” genealogy information and gives an overview of the different ways to publish your genealogy on the internet with a discussion of the corresponding level of technical commitment (including time, expense, and expertise).

In this article, we will present an overview of how to put your genealogy research online and point out the various articles on the www.genealogyhosting.com website which will be helpful to accomplish this. We will first discuss the idea of publishing, what it means to go public with your genealogy information. Then we will discuss the basics of what technical products and services are required for publishing your genealogy information online. Finally, we will cover the different ways to create an online presence on the internet. There are actually four different ways to go online which are distinguished by the level of commitment required of the website author. As each topic is covered, the corresponding detailed technical article available on the articles web page of the www.genealogyhosting.com website will be listed. In this way, the reader can further delve into the technical details of each topic to obtain a more comprehensive explanation of that topic.

What Does it Mean to Publish Genealogy Information?

Our local genealogy society (Bellevue, WA) has an annual "Show-and-Tell" night in which folks bring their genealogy material and projects and display them on the library tables and walls. Always, there are several genealogy displays in which folks create these wonderful collages of pictures, diagrams, writings, etc. of their family history on big paste-board displays. They're fabulous works taking scores of hours to complete. The drive to create these genealogy projects is very strong in people, especially for us grey-haired seniors. This is one of the drives I think the pursuit of genealogy fulfills - the drive to create a memorial to one's heritage.

These family history collages are examples of what can be called “publishing.” What does this mean? In other words, what is the essence of publishing? In its most basic form, publishing means synthesizing and abstracting a large collection of details into a meaningful story so that the public can consume it, that is read it, and appreciate it. A significant component of creativity is required on the part of the author to construct and perfect the actual physical publication to properly tell the story. Then the author makes the physical publication available to the public somehow. The author has in mind that others will read and appreciate the contents of the publication so freely puts it into the public domain somehow.

In the case of the pasteboard collages, the author uses genealogy fairs or places where genealogists congregate (such as our annual "Show-and-Tell" night) to present his or her publication. In essence, the author "publishes" his or her publication by hanging the paste board pages on a wall or displaying them on easels. Then folks walk by and consume the publication. These steps represent the essence of what it means to "publish."

These family history collages are nothing short of incredible. They are informative, creative, and they show a dedication and commitment of the author to tell the story of the family heritage. However, they are very inefficient as publications. First, very few people will actually be able to consume the publication, to read it and appreciate it. Only the people who happen to be attending the function will be exposed to the paste board collages. Also, there's the problem of updates. Whenever new facts are discovered, the paste board page in question must be revised which usually requires completely replacing it with a new version. Then there is the problem of working with the physical media of paste boards. One needs special equipment and supplies and needs to have the physical skills to use them. Also, it isn't cheap. The equipment and supplies cost money especially as perfection is pursued.

Family history collages are but one example of creating a memorial to one's heritage. We are all familiar with the more common publication – the family history book. The purpose of the family history book is to celebrate the family – its traditions, stories, travails successes. The family history book often presents the author's family starting at the grandparent level and includes information on all the aunts, uncles, cousins – the progeny of the grandparents. Old pictures, marriage certificates, newspaper articles, high school graduations, army discharge papers would all be included in the family history book. Each family unit and people in that family would be presented in their own chapters. The family history book is often given to the children or grandchildren as a gift from a loving grandparent.

The family history book has the same problems as a publication as the family history collage. It is inefficient as a publications because only a few people will read and appreciate it. It is a static publication and there's the update problem – that if new information is discovered or errors are found then it requires an expensive update of the published books. It requires specialized expertise in which the author produces a series of physical books each containing desk-top published content or even hand-crafted pages with images. It's also expensive as the books are copied and put together.

The Genealogy Website as a Publishing Media

There is a much more efficient way to publish family heritage: as a website! What? (you may be saying at this point). Well, think about it. A website is the perfect way to publish genealogy heritage. The important thing is that the author is basically publishing his or her work to the world! Everybody on earth who has internet access could, by doing a few mouse clicks, read and appreciate the contents of the work. Also, there's the capability to update the work instantly as new facts are discovered or errors are detected. Since the website consists of computer files, the digital information can be updated anytime very easily. Also, the cost of a genealogy website is cheap compared to the materials and tools to create the physical paste boards or books.

But, you ask, aren't websites technology-intensive undertakings? Does the average genealogist have the necessary technical skills? It so happens that genealogists are perfectly capable of undertaking the technical challenges of a genealogy website. Genealogists are computer power users and are not intimidated by unfamiliar and complex sequences performed on the computer. This means genealogists who are not familiar with web technology have the underlying skills needed to pick up the basics quickly. Also, genealogists are used to synthesizing and documenting their family heritage. They have the skills to create complex multi-chaptered documents consisting of text and images. Also, genealogists skillfully manage the complex project of their genealogy research and have the discipline to pursue a multi-year project continuously making progress while working under the uncertainty of genealogy research. So genealogists have the technical skills or can easily obtain the technical skills necessary to create a basic genealogy website.

A website is a creative undertaking. Does the average genealogist have the necessary creative skills to undertake a website? As pointed out above, the goal of many genealogists is to create a memorial to their heritage. This is a very powerful drive in most genealogists – to create some sort of book, or pasteboard collage, or other literary work such as an essay celebrating their heritage. The point is that many genealogists have already self-selected themselves to create a literary work of some sort to celebrate their heritage. The creation of these memorials will require artistic skills of placing content on pages, organizing the information, and making it artistically pleasing. These are exactly the creative skills needed to create a website.

What Does it Take to Have a Genealogy Website?

There are two items of technology needed to create a website: first you need the technical plumbing of the website; then you need the software to create the website.

Technical Plumbing

A website is a series of files and folders which are housed on the hard drives of a special computer called a web server. The web server is connected to the internet. The author purchases a hosting plan from the company that owns the web server as well as a domain name for the website. Then the author creates the files and folders of the website and copies them to the web server.

- **Domain Name**

Visitors can access the website by its domain name. The domain name is a unique identifier that is used to form the website name. For example, the domain name of the website *www.mywebsite.com* is "mywebsite.com." Domain names are unique in the world and you obtain them by registering them with a domain registrar such as *www.genealogyhosting.com*. We have written an article available on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website explaining how to obtain and use a domain name:

"Stake your Claim with a Domain Name!"

- Website

The hosting plan is the account at the web hosting company which provides the website. When you register a domain name at *www.genealogyhosting.com*, you receive a free website. The free website is ad-supported in which commercial advertising appears at the top of each web page of the website. Alternatively, for a small monthly fee, you can purchase a website to avoid the ads.

Website Authoring Application

Websites contain, for the most part, text files which are encoded using “tags” (annotations) from a language called HTML (HyperText Markup Language). In a nutshell, HTML tags are what makes a mere text file into a web page which a web browser can display and process. The best known HTML tag is the hyperlink which is associated with some text or a picture to cause a link to be followed when a visitor clicks the text or picture. HTML has a large number of other tags available to the website author, especially the tags which instruct the web browser how to format the web page for the computer screen.

So the second item of technology needed to create a genealogy website is a website authoring application. This is a special-purpose application purchased or obtained by the author to create the HTML files of the website. With the website authoring application, the author designs each web page of the website. The website authoring application then generates it into the HTML files of the website. In other words, the website author seldom has to work directly in HTML but rather works in a design-mode and the gnarly HTML encoding is taken care of behind the scenes by the website authoring application.

A few of the projects to create a web presence described below do not require the actual design and creation of web pages so a website authoring application is not required for these projects. However, ultimately, a website authoring application will be in the future of any aspiring genealogist turned website author. The best known website authoring applications are Macromedia Dreamweaver, Microsoft Expression Web, or Microsoft FrontPage (which has been replaced by Microsoft Expression Web but is still popular).

While there are many fine website authoring applications, the problem is that most genealogy authors don't have any experience using them and they could cost money (although many are free or low cost). Also, the purpose of these applications is to create sophisticated websites and they have their own steep learning curve. All the author of a genealogy website wants to do is just to create the contents without having to continually refer to a technical manual to find out how to satisfy the mysteries of website technology. In short, when attempting to use one of these sophisticated website authoring applications, technology hampers the artist.

There is a very easy solution to this problem: To get started quickly, just use Microsoft Word using its native HTML format! That's right! Microsoft Word supports HTML as one of its native formats. While most of the time, when we use Microsoft Word, we just use the default DOC format for our documents, we could as easily select HTML!. A document written in Microsoft Word HTML has all the capabilities of a document written in the traditional DOC format. Any formatting, features, or fancy stuff you use

in your traditional Microsoft Word documents in DOC format can also be used in the HTML format. But the beautiful thing is that this HTML document is, in fact, a proper web page and can be put on the internet to be accessed by a web browser!

This means you can put off for the time being purchasing or obtaining then learning a "real" website authoring application. Using this strategy, you would initially just focus on the content of your genealogy, website and use Microsoft Word to "rough" it in. Later, once you have your feet wet, you can obtain and learn how to use a proper website authoring application.

The Four Levels of Web Presence

A genealogy website is the most sophisticated level of internet presence and the most demanding as it relates to technical commitment (including expertise, time, and expense). However, there are many other ways to establish a web presence. We have arranged them in rough order of technical commitment that the genealogist would have to make to the project.

Easiest: Get a Domain Name for Your Free Genealogy Website

Thousands of genealogists have already made the plunge and have setup a free genealogy website. For example, Rootsweb.com has the "Free Pages" service in which genealogists can have a genealogy website which is then indexed to form a vast ancestor search capability on Rootsweb.com. If you've already setup a free genealogy website then you can register a domain name for it to make it easier to access.

For example, if you have a free site from Rootsweb.com then visitors would have to enter a complex URL of the form: "http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~jasperhornfamily" where "jasperhornfamily" is your particular site name in Rootsweb. You register your genealogy domain name of, for example, "jasperhornfamily.org." Then your visitors can access your free Rootsweb.com site under the URL of "http://www.jasperhornfamily.org" (obviously much easier to remember and use as well as a permanent marker to your web presence).

The physical plumbing that allows you to use your domain name to access your existing free website is called "domain forwarding." With domain forwarding, network messages destined for a domain name are forwarded to a URL of another website you specify. We have explained in detail how you can easily setup domain forwarding in the article available on our articles web page:

"Domain Forwarding (Have Your Cake and Eat it too)"

Easy: Create an Instant Genealogy Website

Remember, you get a free website when you register a domain name with www.genealogyhosting.com. So the second way to get started quickly on your web presence is to upload your genealogy data to this free website. Most genealogy software programs allow you to export your genealogy data to a series of HTML pages (i.e., web pages). The result is a complete "mini-website" which contains the data you selected to

export in a very usable, efficient, integrated series of web pages. Then you copy these files and folders of your "mini-website" to your free website on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* web server (a process called "publishing" the website).

Once you publish your "mini-website," then it will be indexed by search engines, such as Google. At that point, you have made available your genealogy data to the world. Fellow genealogists around the world, and most importantly, your family will find your website when they do searches or by entering its URL in their browsers (e.g., "http://www.jasperhornfamily.org").

We have explained in detail how to create an instant genealogy website using these techniques in this article available on the articles web page:

"Instant Genealogy Website"

Very Doable: Write and Publish a Genealogy Essay as a Website

The "genealogy essay" website contains a high quality piece that you write to capture the meaning of your family history. The genealogy essay website fulfills the drive to create a memorial to one's heritage not unlike the genealogy collage or family history book described above. In fact, this is the first appearance on the commitment scale of the genealogy website as a literary work instead of a repository of GEDCOM-type facts. The genealogy essay is not factual genealogy per se (although genealogy facts are almost always included). Rather it is an essay about your family and often features a particular episode or interesting story in your family's history. The genealogist doesn't have to have a lot of technical expertise or spend a lot of money and can use Microsoft Word to publish the essay to the free website received from *www.genealogyhosting.com* when registering a domain name.

In our humble opinion, the genealogy essay represents the most important type of genealogy writing and deserves to be published as a literary work in its own right. It is limited in scope and therefore very doable as a project. Even though a genealogy essay can be published in hardcopy, the perfect way to publish the genealogy essay is to make it a website. That is, it should be put on the internet as a single-purpose website containing just the genealogy essay. This is very feasible! Not only is it simple, it is also cheap and can be done for a few dollars a year (the cost of registering a domain name).

We have explained in detail how to create a genealogy essay as a website in the article:

"The Genealogy Essay (A Website with Meaning)"

More Challenging: The Simple Three-Layered Genealogy Website

Once published, the genealogy essay (above) is the starting point of a proper genealogy website. Any website (not just the genealogy type) should be designed with an eye on the underlying information structure of the website. This is where the theory of multilayered information structures is useful. That is, any website should be designed as a multilayered structure. What does this mean?

A multilayered structure is our theory about information structure that proposes that any body of information can be divided naturally into a series of logical layers. A particular layer of a multilayered structure consists of information elements which are all on about the same level of generalization – specialization. The multilayered structure is organized so that the layers go from the most general to the most specialized. The multilayered structure can be used by authors to organize any non-fiction literary work including books, essays, or in our case websites. In this way, any consumer of the literary work will have an intuitive understanding of its overall structure.

We have explained in detail what a multilayered structure is especially as it relates to a genealogy website in the article:

"Using the Multilayered Structure to Design a Genealogy Website"

How does the author of a literary work adapt the multilayered structure? Most literary works fall naturally into a three-layered structure: a top "general" layer, a middle "synthesis" layer, and a bottom "detail" layer. The three-layered structure is especially useful for designing the information structure of a genealogy website.

So how does one adapt the three-layered structure to a genealogy website? Remember that the purpose of genealogy website is to celebrate the heritage of the family as we explained above. The genealogy website is an alternative media to implement the contents of the paste board collages or the family history books discussed above. Keeping this firmly in mind, the author would proceed as follows:

- The bottom "detail" layer of a simple genealogy website consists of documents (i.e., scans, transcriptions, or snippets of historical documents). The bottom layer provides the proof or the detailed information about the family heritage of the website.
- The middle "synthesis" layer of a simple genealogy website brings together the information of the bottom documents layer into meaningful generalizations. Synthesis is defined as bringing together disparate detailed information into a whole. Genealogy research produces a huge number of facts which are contained in the documents of the bottom layers. So the middle layer contains various topical web pages which draw-out the meaning from the documents referring to them via hyperlinks – in short, synthesizing them.
- The top "general" layer consists of the genealogy essay described previously. Now it is modified to contain hyperlinks to the synthesis or documents layers to support the statements made.

The author can use Microsoft Word to create a simple three-layered genealogy website. The following article available on the www.genealogyhosting.com articles web page explains how to use the three-layered structure to create a simple genealogy website.

"The Three-Layered Genealogy Website (Simple and Very Effective)"

Conclusions

The above levels of web presence are all very attainable for the dedicated genealogist. Also, all of them are very affordable. Notice that all of the above levels of web presence start by registering a domain name. Then, when you register a domain name at *www.genealogyhosting.com*, you also receive a free website. Coupled with that, most likely you own and know how to use Microsoft Word. So for the small yearly fee of a domain name, you have all you need to get started on any of these levels of web presence.

What are you waiting for?