

## Reasons for Maintaining Local History and Genealogy as a Special Collection in a Separate Reading Room

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In collaboration with the Guild Committee on Reference Service Consolidation

The Library of Congress is proposing to close a number of its research centers—among others the popular Local History & Genealogy Reading Room (LH&G). This consolidation is scheduled to take place by the end of the 2013 calendar year.

The I-900 plan calls for the closure of a variety of Library research centers, consolidating reduced staff in a single all-purpose Center of Knowledge. Although management has assured the genealogical community that the Library's genealogy collection will not be affected by consolidation, this plan will, in fact, disperse what is now a tightly knit local history and genealogy collection (including books, card catalogs, computer terminals, and filing cabinets) into several non-contiguous and less visible spaces in and around the Main Reading Room. It will also separate these collections physically from the genealogy reference librarians, while substantially diminishing the availability of those librarians themselves, so that genealogy specialists will not always be immediately available at the consolidated reference desk, as they have been in the LH&G Reading Room in the past. This will diminish reference services to genealogy patrons who often need immediate reference assistance to access the analog and digital collections. These changes will substantially decrease the effective use of the local history and genealogy collection by patrons, as well as by the reference librarians whose specialized knowledge is required to assist them.

Because of the size and extent of its holdings, the Library of Congress is the largest genealogy collection in the U.S. For genealogical research, it is the flagship local history and genealogy collection in the nation. Because of this, the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room has always been viewed as a special collection. The Library Science term *special collection* refers to a specialized reading room dedicated to providing extensive resources and in-depth access for researchers who are working with collections that have distinctive peculiarities in their coverage or formats, and whose resources are not adequately accessible by "general collections" cataloging and non-specialized reference sources, and which often require substantial intervention by library or archival staff.

Indeed, genealogy collections across the United States consistently define themselves as *special collections* for a number of reasons:

- They routinely maintain a specialist reference staff, often including librarians, archivists, or Certified Genealogists, who have subject matter expertise and know the unique features of the local collection.

- Their collections (unlike general collections at most institutions) are non-circulating to individuals.
- Their collections are not available for interlibrary loan and require onsite access.
- Their collections include many non-cataloged holdings.
- There are extensive filing cabinet materials on family names and local histories.
- There are specialized (and often non-digitized) indexes or catalogs.
- There are specialized subscription databases whose complexity often requires expert assistance.
- Special collections are serviced by special reading rooms.

The Library of Congress Local History & Genealogy Reading Room meets all of the above criteria for a special collection.

The Local History & Genealogy Reading Room of the Library of Congress is recognized nationwide as being extraordinarily important and especially distinctive. Genealogy.com ranks it among the 22 national level genealogy libraries. Within those 22 nationwide collections, the Library's local history and genealogy collection is singled out by *Family Tree Magazine* (2009)\* as one of only nine "to visit before you die." This high ranking results from the size and depth of the local history and genealogy collection, the strengths of the Library's special format collections, the expertise of the LH&G reference specialists, and the contiguous configuration of the reference collections in a special reading room.

Special collections function best when contiguous. However, local history and genealogy research is also dependent on the unique special format holdings of the Library of Congress (found, for example, in the Geography and Map, Prints and Photographs, Manuscripts, and Newspapers & Current Periodicals Reading Rooms). In fact, because of the importance of other formats to genealogical research, the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room serves as a gateway to the custodial special format collections through referral of local history and genealogy researchers to those collections. These referrals are not dependent on a physical consolidation of reading rooms; they are dependent on knowledgeable librarians who know how to analyze genealogical research problems and who know when appropriate referrals need to be made to formats such as maps, newspapers, and photograph collections.

The main advantage to local history and genealogy reference being housed in a separate reading room is that this configuration will best serve the considerable number of expert genealogical researchers, as well as the more casual visitors to the Library who stop by to explore family history. Genealogy is a popular subject, and it is common for Library visitors to wish to see if the Library has information about their own particular family. In keeping with this focus of genealogy and family history, the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room has always been family centered and open to new visitors to the Library. Members of the public can find out what resources the Library has for genealogy, ask a few questions, and decide if they wish to pursue more in depth research at the Library of Congress (in which case, they are directed to apply for a reader card). Fewer genealogists will use the Library if access to the genealogy collection is complicated or hidden in the Main Reading Room.

Since most genealogies and family histories are gray literature and not available through formal publishing channels, they are primarily acquired by the Library through the generous donations

of genealogists. If the local history and genealogy collection becomes more hidden from view, in a side deck area off the Main Reading Room, behind a closed fire door, in an area with no wifi available and no reading room name attached to it—and is no longer immediately adjacent to specialized librarians or computer terminals—there is a real danger that donations to the genealogy collection will wane, thereby over time endangering the status of the Library of Congress as a first rate repository of local history and genealogy materials.

It is noteworthy that the *Family Tree Magazine* (2009)\* description of the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room recognizes the entire Library as a resource for genealogists: “Library of Congress: The world’s largest library holds more than 50,000 genealogies, 100,000 local histories, 5 million maps and extensive collections of city directories and newspapers. Its North American, British Isles, and German collections are especially strong.” That is, the entire Library of Congress Capitol Hill campus itself is already a Center of Knowledge encompassing genealogy — and very effectively functions as such right now without the need for the radical consolidation of a very specialized reading room.

As the Library of Congress plans its future space requirements, the model for the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room at the Library of Congress should be based on best practices worked out in other major genealogy research centers, which are routinely treated as special collections or special libraries. Genealogy libraries of many sizes exist in virtually every Congressional District. Noteworthy models (to be carefully fitted to the culture of the Library of Congress, of course) would include several of the 22 libraries with national level genealogy collections, for instance:

- The Mid-Continent Public Library, built in 2008, and described as a “state of the art genealogy library.”\*
- The History and Genealogy Department at the St. Louis Public Library, part of a recent remodeling that received American Institute of Architects (AIA) and American Library Association (ALA) awards.\*
- The Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center, noted as a “unique and valuable resource, a remarkable family history destination for the entire genealogical community, incorporating one of the largest genealogy research collections available, including records from around the world.”\*
- The Milstein Library for genealogy at the New York Public Library.\*
- The History & Genealogy Department at the Los Angeles Public Library.\*

Genealogy researchers, as a rule, have very focused questions about specific individuals, specific families, or specific local areas requiring a broad array of available resources combined with precise and expert reference assistance to navigate them. It will be a true loss to the reputation of the Library of Congress, and to the national genealogy community, if the local history and

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Sources: Lauren Gamber, “9 Genealogy Libraries to Visit Before You Die.” *Family Tree Magazine*, 2009: <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/9-libraries>; Mid-Continent Public Library: <http://www.mymcpl.org/>; History and Genealogy Department, St Louis: <http://www.slpl.lib.mo.us/libsrc/h&gdept.htm>, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/06/buildings/lbd/growing-room-st-louis-public-librarys-grand-central-renovation/>, [http://www.slpl.org/pdf/pr/ALA\\_AIA\\_award.pdf](http://www.slpl.org/pdf/pr/ALA_AIA_award.pdf); Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center: <http://www.genealogycenter.org/>; Milstein Library, NYPL: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/schwarzman/milstein-division-us-history-local-history-genealogy>; History & Genealogy Department, Los Angeles Public Library, <http://www.lapl.org/branches/central-library/departments/history-genealogy>.

genealogy collection at the Library of Congress loses its excellence as a research center, let alone its special high status and ranking. Making genealogy a mere “side bar” to a Center of Knowledge, focused on generalized topics of minimal interest to genealogists, is a detriment, not a benefit, to genealogical research at the Library of Congress:

- It will dilute and disperse the contiguous configuration of the local history and genealogy reference collection—which presently includes computer terminals, digital materials, card catalogs, and filing cabinets as well as books.
- It will impact the current genealogy collection, as well as future acquisitions.
- It will substantially diminish patrons’ immediate access to the reference collection as well as to specialized genealogy reference librarians, requiring appointments to be made by readers and visitors who very often cannot come back at a later time.
- Restriction of access will result in a loss both of interest and use of the local history and genealogy collection, and of the Library as a whole, since easy access to LH&G has consistently resulted in an increase of patron interest in the rest of the Library.
- Genealogy is a popular subject which interests many visitors to the Library. If LH&G were moved to the Main Reading Room, interaction with new visitors would be substantially diminished.
- It will inevitably erode staff subject expertise and the research connections that come only from years of experience in dealing with highly specialized genealogical inquiries. It is simply not possible for the Library to provide the same level of expert reference assistance with non-specialist reference librarians. Attempts to provide genealogical reference services with generalist librarians have not been successful at other libraries or archives where this approach has been tried. This is why genealogical reference services are provided in special collections.

The Local History & Genealogy Reading Room at the Library of Congress should not be merged into a “unified” Center of Knowledge; it should remain as a special collection. Moving the Local History and Genealogy Reading Room to the Main Reading Room is a Procrustean solution for local history and genealogy research in that the present plan lops off limbs of the genealogy reference collection and relocates them in non-contiguous space and order, so that while the space configuration of the MRR is not disturbed, dispersal of the LH&G collection renders it less efficient and less useful to patrons and librarians. Concomitantly, by locating the analog collections at a distance from Library computers, in a location where wifi and personal computers cannot be used, less value is added from digital sources than in the present configuration. Finally, the Library’s Local History and Genealogy Reading Room is a national concept. Dismantling it would detract from the Library’s prestige and cause permanent harm to the institution.