

GEORGIA HOMEPLACE SURVEY REPORT – ABSTRACT

Georgia HomePLACE, supported by a LSTA grant through the Georgia Public Library Service, encourages the participation of Georgia public libraries in the Digital Library of Georgia. HomePLACE conducted a survey of local history and family history resources in Georgia public libraries for the purpose of gathering information to assist planning future collaborative digitization efforts. The survey data, collected from June through November 2003, included 82 responses covering 90 counties and representing 50 library systems. The survey was not intended to be a rigorous “scientific” process providing exhaustive detail, but rather an informal effort designed to quickly capture the subject and nature of historic materials, with an opportunity for follow-up.

Informal analysis of the aggregated data reveals several basic observations regarding what materials are currently held and/or actively collected by public libraries:

- By a substantial margin, newspapers are clearly the most widely held and most actively collected materials
- Vertical files and family histories are both widely held and actively collected materials
- Cemetery information and church records are also widely held although slightly less actively collected
- The survey identifies more than twenty additional material types that are less widely held and/or collected.

Although all of the surveyed materials relate to local history in specific locales and/or the genealogy of specific families, some of them speak to people, events, and places associated with larger themes of state, regional, and national history. Examples include materials related to the Civil War and World War II, to black history and women’s history, to Georgia’s Gold Rush, to the history of Georgia’s major cities, and to various aspects of the state’s economic/agricultural/transportation/industrial history.

The survey also sought the preferences of library patrons regarding these materials. IMLS Director Dr. Robert Martin, drawing on Dr. Mark Moore’s seminal book *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Harvard, 1995), emphasizes that the consumers – the library patrons – rather than the producers are the proper determiners of the “public value” of library services. The survey narrative data indicates that librarians hear library patrons asking for the following:

- Cemetery information is the most commonly sought item
- Family history (vague, may include various types of materials) rates second
- Marriage records rate third place
- Other items to a lesser extent (some are thematic rather than types of materials)

GEORGIA HOMEPLACE SURVEY REPORT (COMPILATION 4) - ABSTRACT

Newspapers hold a great deal of genealogical information (e.g., births, marriages, deaths) as well as much additional information about local history – perhaps explaining the strong showing of newspapers as the most widely held and actively collected resource related to local/family history. Despite the widespread distribution of newspaper microfilm holdings, the survey indicates that many do not have indexes or other practical means of locating and accessing specific pieces of information within the vast totality of newspaper holdings. Thus digitization of newspapers could provide a very important means of accessing this valuable information.

The survey responses describe “original” materials for which digitization could provide improved library patron access while also helping to preserve the original physical materials. However, in most cases there are additional digital asset management issues that need to be addressed before digitization could proceed: many would need archival processing and organizing, as well as review in terms of privacy, permission, and copyright issues.

The survey also reveals factors outside the public libraries that affect digitization planning – for example, many local/family history materials are held in academic libraries, archives, historical and genealogical societies, museums, and other organizations. Moreover (drawing on Moore’s “strategic triangle of value”), planning effective digitization projects involves consideration of, in addition to the historic materials themselves, issues related to political/legal support and administrative/operational feasibility.

The HomePLACE survey has taken the important initial step of asking public libraries about their local/family history materials. In doing so, the survey process has established an open ended dialogue with public libraries that encourages follow-up discussion as we move toward an effective strategic plan for collaborative digitization efforts.