

INTRODUCTION TO THE SURVEY INTERPRETATION

As demonstrated by the data compilation section of this report, the HomePLACE survey has generated a fairly extensive and complex set of data about local/family history materials in public libraries in Georgia. In this interpretive section we attempt to make some basic observations about that body of information, which will hopefully set the stage for developing realistic and practical plans for digitizing these historical materials.

In interpreting the survey data, we seek to clarify “the big picture” by looking for overall patterns that can be reasonably drawn from the aggregated data. While these observations hopefully provide useful insights, they cannot serve as a substitute for studying the complex individualized information contained within the responses from the various libraries – indeed, the 38 spreadsheets in the data compilation section must “speak for themselves” when deciding what specific items might be suitable for digitization efforts. The current interpretive effort isn’t exhaustive, in that additional analysis of the extensive survey data might be worth pursuing as our digitization planning matures and gains more detailed focus. Nevertheless, basic insights gleaned from the aggregated data can help establish a valuable perspective that might prove helpful in setting overall prioritization for proposed digitization activity.

This interpretive effort will use somewhat informal methods. This is not a “scientific” survey: the size and nature of the responding population, the structure of the survey, the difficulty of quantifying narrative responses, and other such factors dictate a rather informal approach. Hence the core of the interpretation lies in a set of interpretive bar charts based on simple tallies of the survey data, and it is from these rather simple computations that we will try to draw some useful conclusions.

TYPES OF MATERIALS CURRENTLY HELD (*Refer to interpretive chart 1*)

A good starting place is to gain some sense of the types of local/family history materials that public libraries currently hold. Please refer to interpretive chart 1, which graphically illustrates the relative quantities of these holdings among the responding libraries. Note the wide variety of types of materials held. Because this data is generated via simple check boxes on the survey form, it is readily quantifiable and should present a fairly accurate picture of the libraries’ holdings. (Some survey responses contained inconsistencies regarding materials held; in such cases, the spreadsheets have been edited to provide more realistic tallies; however, all editorial changes are marked with brackets so that the original raw data remains readily identifiable.)

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Here are some of the top rated answers:

- Newspapers, currently held by 72 of the 82 respondents, or about 88%
- Family histories or ancestry charts, 56 respondents, or 68%
- Cemetery gravestone or plat information, 54 respondents, or 66%
- Church records or histories, 52 respondents, or 63%
- Vertical files of local/family history, 51 respondents, or 62%
- Other types, roughly in order of decreasing response, include other local publications (48%), records of local societies/organizations (46%), newspaper clippings (46%), maps (44%), scrapbooks (41%), marriage records (38%), estate records (34%), letters/memos/correspondence (33%), deeds (28%), oral histories (26%), tax records (22%), artworks (22%), diaries/journals (21%), family Bibles (20%), business records (15%), voter lists (9%), transportation records (9%), industrial records (9%), criminal case files (9%), professional registers (7%), civil case files (6%), and records of craftsmen/artisans/builders (6%).

TYPES OF MATERIALS ACTIVELY COLLECTED (*Refer to interpretive chart 2*)

Please refer to chart 2 for a graphic representation of the kinds of materials the responding libraries are actively collecting. The fact that the libraries are actively building collections of such materials provides some good evidence of what they consider important and worth pursuing, things that have a higher priority for them.

Top rated answers include the following:

- Newspapers, actively collected by 51 respondents, or 62%
- Vertical files of local/family history, 35 respondents, or 43%
- Family histories or ancestry charts, 31 respondents, or 38%
- Cemetery gravestone or plat information, 22 respondents, or 27%
- Church records/histories and newspaper clippings are tied, at 21 respondents each, or 26%
- Other types, roughly in descending order of response, are other local publications (21%), maps (18%), records of local societies/organizations (15%), scrapbooks (11%), oral histories (9%), marriage records (9%), letters/memos/correspondence (9%), diaries/journals (9%), family Bibles (7%), estate records (6%), deeds (5%), artworks (4%), tax digests (4%), business

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records (4%), transportation records (2%), industrial records (2%), criminal case files (2%), civil case files (1%), voter lists (1%), professional registers (1%), and craftsmen records (1%).

STRONG RESPONSES FOR MATERIALS BOTH HELD AND COLLECTED SUGGEST PRIORITIES

The findings for currently held and actively collected materials can provide insight into the types of local/family history materials that libraries find valuable. Note, for example, that newspapers (*see data spreadsheet 5*) are the top rated material both held and collected, by a fairly wide margin, which suggests the high emphasis that libraries (and presumably their patrons) place on newspapers as major information sources for family and local history. This is reinforced by the respectable, although more modest, showing for newspaper clippings (*see data spreadsheet 7*). However, despite the demonstrated high value libraries place on newspapers, accessing the information in those newspapers seems to be a significant problem, as only 19 of the respondents indicated that they have newspaper indexes (*see data spreadsheet 6*). This strongly suggests that newspaper digitization should be a very high priority, because digitization properly implemented can provide a remarkable degree of access that isn't as feasible with other approaches.

The strong showing of vertical files (*data spreadsheet 20*) and family histories (*data spreadsheet 19*), in terms of current holdings and active collecting, similarly suggests that those family history related materials are considered valuable by libraries. The difficulties of managing and using some of these materials – especially vertical files – further suggests that digitization might be a good fit to improve access for library patrons. However, there may be privacy, permission, and copyright issues with some of these materials.

Cemetery information (*data spreadsheet 13*) and church records (*data spreadsheet 11*) also demonstrate strong showings as materials both held and collected. Some of these materials already exist in published form, but with very limited distribution, so might be potential candidates for digitization efforts if copyright and permissions issues can be worked out.

WHAT PATRONS ASK FOR: LETTING THE CONSUMER DETERMINE THE VALUE (*Refer to interpretive chart 3*)

Recently the managers of public institutions, including libraries, have been strongly influenced by the concept of “public value” which was popularized by Harvard professor Mark Moore in *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. One important concept (among many) in Moore's book is that public value is determined by the consuming public rather than the producer.

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Consequently, in the HomePLACE survey we included a question asking what library patrons ask for most often (*see data spreadsheet 33*).

Before examining interpretive chart 3 and drawing any conclusions from those findings, it's appropriate to mention some methodological notes. The first note reflects the fact that this survey question was free format, answered in a narrative manner; thus the analyst had to use some qualitative judgment in deciding what categories to use in quantifying the answers. Secondly, although the survey was structured at the request of librarians to reflect types of materials, some of the answers to this particular question departed from that model by stressing themes instead (for example, the Civil War). Thirdly, it's important to note that librarians filled out the survey on behalf of the patrons – the patrons themselves did not directly participate in the survey.

Please refer to interpretive chart 3, which graphically illustrates the responses to the question about what library patrons ask for. Here are the top rated answers:

- Cemetery information, mentioned by 27 respondents, or 33%
- Family history, 20 respondents, or 24%
- Marriage records, 16 respondents, or 20%
- The remaining answers (each less than 20%) include, roughly in order of decreasing response, census records, obituaries, other local history, county history, death records, vertical records, birth records, newspapers, Civil War, other military, maps, wills, newspaper indexes, newspaper clippings, directories, and naturalization lists.

Although none of these responses seemed as strong as those previously discussed sections, cemetery information stands out clearly as the leading item patrons ask for. Note that this would be reinforced by the fairly high response rates for cemetery information that we previously encountered in the analysis of materials currently held and materials actively collected. Given this unique standing in terms of “public value,” reinforced by the held/collected data, it would seem that cemetery information should be considered a high priority candidate for improving access through digitization.

Similar argument could be made for “family history” although it is not entirely clear from the narrative answers exactly what that might consist of – for example, it could be published/compiled family histories, or vertical files of family related documents, or some other type of family related information.

It's interesting to note that newspapers seem to fall somewhat lower in this set of answers, but here again there is some uncertainty about the meaning of the answer. For example, a patron may ask for information about his family, let's say an ancestor's death,

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without specifically asking for newspapers, which might contain the information he seeks in the form of an obituary. Therefore, great care must be exercised in trying to interpret what patrons ask for – they may well ask for some specific information without knowing or realizing (or perhaps even caring) what category of material(s) are most likely to hold the particular bit of data that they seek.

LIBRARIANS’ HIGHEST PRIORITIES *(Refer to interpretive chart 4)*

Because librarians appear to simultaneously occupy the role of both provider and consumer, it seemed appropriate within the survey to ask them what they consider to be the highest priorities *(see data spreadsheet 32)*. As chart 4 illustrates, the librarians’ responses to this question seem generally “flatter” than on the other charts we’ve discussed, that is, there was less variation among the answers, with smaller percentages (none exceeding 7%) across the board for all the categories.

Although few types of materials seem to really stand out in these responses, it’s worth noting that cemetery records is marginally higher, perhaps corroborating the stronger emphasis that cemetery information had in the previously discussed charts. Marriage records also appear here at the same level, but marriages were at lesser levels in the other charts.

EXISTING DIGITIZED MATERIALS *(Refer to data spreadsheet 34)*

The survey results indicate that only a few local/family history materials in public libraries around the state have already been digitized. The scarcity of existing digitized assets provides a strong incentive for pursuing a vigorous digitization program that would increase public access to the non-digitized materials. (HomePLACE staff has developed a separate set of spreadsheets, with hyperlinks to associated web sites, that describe existing digitization projects in the state and elsewhere; those spreadsheets are not included in this report but are available upon request.)

“SPECIAL/UNIQUE” ITEMS FOR DIGITIZATION *(Refer to data spreadsheet 35)*

The survey included a free format question asking “What is the one item (or collection) you have that you consider special/unique which you would like to have digitized?” The responses provide a number of good suggestions for individual digitization projects associated with various public libraries across the state – indeed, the Hawkins diary, from Lake Blackshear Regional Library, is one of

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the digitization projects selected for the current fiscal year. Prioritization of these individualized items as potential digitization projects would involve considerations beyond data compilation and analysis, therefore in this report we do not go beyond a simple listing of the responses. (HomePLACE staff has developed separate planning spreadsheets that reflect those additional considerations; those spreadsheets are available upon request.)

ORIGINALS VERSUS COPIES

The instructions included on the survey form (*see appendix*) asked respondents to “Please focus on original materials (although copies may be relevant if they are the only source available).” In planning the survey, we envisioned that future digitization efforts would most likely focus on “original” materials, with “copies” used in those few cases where original materials might not be available. To accommodate the anticipated range of possible answers, the survey form included fields for various formats including paper, microform, and digital.

The responses provide an interesting, and in some ways unanticipated, picture of the resources that actually reside in the public libraries. Although many responses do seem to have focused on “original” materials, there are a number of cases where “copies” are emphasized and listed at length. The most extensive example would involve newspapers, where in most cases only a few (usually recent) issues are retained in paper form, while the majority of issues are available primarily on microfilm (*see data spreadsheet 5*). In addition, some governmental records, for example marriage records (*data spreadsheet 23*), seem to be held mostly as microfilm. The fact that respondents devoted such lengthy coverage to these “copy” materials suggests that we ought to pay close attention to them as potential candidates for digitization.

Although the need to establish basic access remains a major rationale for the digitization of original unique materials, it would seem that the primary rationale to digitize newspapers and other similar materials reflects a somewhat different need. Historic newspapers are already widely available in microfilm format – the biggest unresolved issue seems to lie in the fact that there is usually no effective way to actually use the newspaper information. As discussed in a previous section of this report, attempts to ameliorate this problem through indexes have been only partially successful. It seems that some sophisticated form of digitization, providing full text searching and other advanced capabilities, would be the approach most likely to resolve these difficult and longstanding issues.

In addition, the distinction between “original” and “copy” has several implications for the digitization process. Original materials are usually unique – which of course often leads to access problems including the risk of damage with increasing usage – and digitizing

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them means either scanning them at their existing location or else physically transporting them to another location for scanning. Digitizing copies is inherently amenable to a more centralized and efficient scanning approach.

LIMITATIONS OF THE SURVEY

Although the survey data itself, along with our interpretation of that data, does provide an important basis for digitization planning and may suggest some priorities, there are many additional considerations that must be taken into account in planning for digitization.

One obvious factor is that the survey is limited to the public libraries, whereas much of the state’s local/family history materials exist in other places – for example, note that the survey did identify historical/genealogical groups (*see data spreadsheet 36*) that might be worthy of separate surveys. In addition, the digitization program of the Digital Library of Georgia must take into account other repositories, including academic libraries, archives, etc., that hold cultural and historical materials.

Another major complication is that the actual local/family history materials themselves are but one factor in establishing a viable digitization program. Applying Mark Moore’s “strategic triangle of value” suggests that, beyond consideration of the materials themselves, lay the equally important matters of political/legal support and administrative/operational feasibility.

Less obvious, but equally important, is the subtle tug of war inherent in trying to digitize local/family history materials on a statewide basis. Local history is inherently localized in emphasis, and genealogists usually focus on their own families, yet digitization as a coordinated state activity must somehow establish digitization priorities that reflect a larger statewide perspective.

Finally, it’s important to realize that, although the accumulated body of survey data is extensive and the situation they document is complex, many of the responses deserve additional investigation to fully understand the nature of the materials described. Indeed, the HomePLACE staff continues to follow up in a number of cases with additional correspondence and site visits, but a great deal more would be required to really complete this work. As a matter of practicality, further investigative effort should probably focus on particular areas judged to be of interest in terms of what, in addition to actual content/substance considerations, would be judged to be politically/legally supportable and administratively/operationally feasible.