After You're Gone:
Future Proofing Your Genealogy Research

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Try as we might, we really have little control over what will happen to our possessions, even our bodies, after we die. Yes we can draw up legal documents, we can express our wishes to family members and more; however, there are no guarantees when it comes to these matters. The best we can do is prepare, plan and communicate now.

When it comes to your years of genealogy research and material, what plans have you made to ensure that it doesn't die with you? Here's some advice on creating a realistic plan to get your "genealogy affairs" in order so that the next generation of researchers can benefit from your years of hard work.

The Perils of Inaction: Lost Genealogy

To gain some insight as to what could possibly happen to all your genealogy stuff, simply read the haunting story *Cleaning Mother's House* by genealogist Michael John Neill. As you hear the words, just imagine one of your children or grandchildren being in the same situation and not knowing the importance of your genealogy research.

You have a responsibility to safeguard your research and to make sure it gets passed on properly. If you don't act now, someone else will act on your behalf.

Basic Planning and Data Successorship

How can you create a plan for the future of your genealogy research without knowing what you have? The first step is to create an inventory of ALL of your items.

Hard Copy Items

Use a special notebook, a document on your computer, or a spreadsheet. Just get it down in writing and also realize that you should update it periodically. Items to include:

- Genealogy research binders, folders and stack of paper
- Genealogy books and magazines purchased over the years
- Photos, slides, negatives, videos, CD-ROMs
- Technology items such as scanners, software programs, flash drives
- Miscellaneous items such as audio recordings, gadgets, etc.

It helps if you label each item or include a note; remember that the person cleaning out your possessions may not be a genealogist.

Digital Items

And what about your genealogy data? You may not realize how much information you have and where it is stored. The easiest way to organize all your digital assets is to create two backups: one in the cloud and one on an external drive or CD-ROM.

- Genealogy database files
- Scanned photographs and documents
- Digital books, magazines and guides
- Digital writings such as PDFs and blog posts you've written
- Emails from family and other researchers as well as emails that you've sent
- Any other items you believe are important including social media posts

<u>Online Profiles</u>

More and more, genealogists are leveraging online websites, apps and social media for research purposes and to connect with others. While you may not have valuable information stored at these sites, at a minimum you should allow family members to disable or shut down accounts. This way your followers are informed and also it avoids having these accounts hacked or mis-used.

Create a list of website names, their URLs (addresses) and login credentials. Keep the list in a safe place – print out and keep with estate planning papers or store online with a master password to access the list; make sure your executor knows the password.

Working with Societies, Libraries and Archives

There are many "myths" about being able to donate your genealogy to organizations:

- "You can donate any and all of your genealogy 'stuff'" to the National Archives."
  False: The National Archives is the archivist of record for the United States government; it does not typically archive personal items.
- "You can donate your genealogy to the Library of Congress."
  Partially true: The Library of Congress does accept published genealogies and other items of importance.

If you plan on donating anything related to your genealogy to an archive, a library or a genealogy society, here is a plan you should follow:

- **Contact the organization**. Always check a repository's policies before making a donation or directing your executor to make a donation.
- **Inform family members**. Let your family or friends know what your plans are involving the organization.
- **Include a monetary donation**. It costs money to process donated materials no matter how well organized those items may be. If possible, make sure you include a financial donation to the institution. Another option is to direct your executor to sell off specific items to raise money for preservation of the collection.

Finally, realize that you can always donate items NOW rather than after your passing. By donating now you have more power to direct how the items will be used and which organizations can benefit from those items.

Technology to the Rescue

As with other industries and even hobbies, genealogy has moved into the digital realm, for better or for worse. Advantages include the ability to preserve fragile items through scanning and digitization as well as the ability to share items with other researchers. Disadvantages include the ability to easily delete items with the touch of a key or failing to update technology like moving from floppy discs to flash drives. And there is also the fear of having your digital items stolen or "hacked."

Another idea is to utilize one or more websites that offer a virtual "lock box" for digital items including photos and documents such as **Protect Their Memories**. Or create your own using DropBox or Google Drive since online services can and do go out of business from time to time (remember **MyFamily.com**?).

Best Practices for Genealogy Future Proofing

In summary, here are some tips of future proofing your genealogy research and making sure it is preserved for others to use for generations to come:

- **Take inventory**. Determine what you have and this includes hard copy as well as digital assets and online sites.

- **Include in estate planning**. Create a codicil to your will or make sure there are some form of instructions concerning your genealogy research.

- **Appoint a legacy contact**. Ancestry, Google, MyHeritage and other sites that store personal information allow you to appoint a "legacy contact" … someone to take over your account in case you pass away or become incapacitated.

- **Backup your data**. Backing up your genealogy data is a good habit for the living and it will keep all your info in one place for your executor.

- **Futureproof your technology**. CD-ROM discs degrade over time. Negatives and movie films can fade and fall apart. Transfer items to digital ASAP.

- **Have that conversation with your family**. Be very clear about where your genealogy research is located, why it is important, and what you want done with it.

- **Contact organizations**. Determine which libraries, societies and archives will accept all or part of your collection. Donate items you don't need NOW.

- **Post items online**. Consider starting a blog – even a private one – to preserve your family stories. Do the same with a family tree on Ancestry or one of the popular genealogy sites.

- **Do stuff NOW**. Tell your own stories NOW. Write that genealogy book NOW. Interview family members NOW.

Resources

Articles and Books

- **5 Tips for Donating Your Genealogy**
  https://www.familyhistoryfanatics.com/donating-your-genealogy
- **Cleaning Mother's House**
  https://rootdig.blogspot.com/2010/11/cleaning-mothers-house.html
- **Donating Your Personal or Family Records to a Repository**
  https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs
- **Money Saving Resources for Preserving Family Photos, Slides and Home Movies**
  https://www.genealogybargains.com/moneysaving-scanning

Organizations Accepting Items

- **Allen County Public Library**
  http://www.genealogycenter.org/Donate.aspx
- **FamilySearch**
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/FamilySearch_Library_Donations
- **Library of Congress**
  http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/gifts.html
- **New England Historic Genealogical Society**
  https://www.americanancestors.org/give/donate-materials

Apps, Products and Websites

- **Ancestry Legacy Contact**
  https://www.ancestry.com/account/security/legacy-contact
- **Artifcts**
  https://artifcts.com/
- **Digital Assets Codicil**
  https://genealogybargains.com/digital-assets-codicil
- **Forever**
  https://forever.com
- **Genealogy Future Proofing Action Plan**
  https://genealogybargains.com/genfutureproofplan
- **Knotify.me**
  https://knotify.me/
- **Organize Your Family History**
  https://organizeyourfamilyhistory.com
- **Permanent.org**
  https://permanent.org/
- **The Organized Genealogist**
  https://www.facebook.com/groups/organizedgenealogist/