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Recommended Citation

Aydelott, Kathrine C., "Genealogy Behind Bars: An Update" (2022). *Faculty Publications*. 1403.
https://scholars.unh.edu/faculty_pubs/1403

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Genealogy Behind Bars: An Update

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University of New Hampshire

*This brief essay is an update to [“Genealogy Behind Bars: Professional Development Through Prisoner Requests: A Case Study,”](#) in *Genealogy and the Librarian: Perspectives on Research, Instruction, Outreach and Management*, Carol Smallwood and Vera Gubnitskaia, eds. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018, which see for context.*

Genealogy and the Librarian was published in 2018. There was a nice review in *Library Journal* in mid-September.¹ As a scholar, professor, and librarian, I humbly didn’t expect a wide readership for the niche title. Professionally, I was pleased to add “Genealogy Behind Bars,” and my chapter on [crowdsourcing genealogy](#), to my publication record ahead of my 2020 tenure bid.

In Spring 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world. The University of New Hampshire Library went remote as did everything else on campus. Libraries have long been hybrid environments that are both physical and virtual, and as a subject librarian who does reference and instruction, my own transition to remote work wasn’t as difficult as it was for some library staff, or for professors in academic departments who made the move from face-to-face to remote learning. Regardless of one’s work situation, living through such a challenging historical period is difficult: administrative tasks burgeoned exponentially, Zoom meetings filled whole days, new schedules, and work and home routines, caused stress and anxiety. Everything felt scattered and yet desperately urgent. You know.

I was awarded promotion with tenure in late June, and during a week of UNH-sponsored professional writing development that summer, I wrote a couple of genealogical articles based on other family research. My coach encouraged me to continue to write about this work, which was nice affirmation.

By late summer, I was back in the library a few days a week, working almost exclusively from behind my office door, the only place on campus where I was permitted to remove my mask. It was still a busy time. Campus would be open for both in-person and remote instruction in fall, and beyond continuing the logistical planning to open the library safely for employees and students, and to provide reference service remotely, it was time to refresh research guides and drive through the COVID uncertainty to plan for fall term library operations.

The email on August 19, 2020, therefore, didn’t initially seem out of the ordinary. It originated from outside of the university system, and so was branded with warnings that I could block such messages should I wish. Cynthia Dalton had found my email address on my contact page on the Library’s website. She could have been any student, faculty member, or third-party vendor reaching out to a librarian before the start of school.

But what I read in her message nearly floored me.

¹ Shreve, Sara. Review. *Genealogy and the Librarian: Perspectives on Research, Instruction, Outreach and Management*. *Library Journal*, Vol. 143, Issue 15, September 15, 2018, pg. 171.

“I just read about Carl Hughes on line. My grandfather is Fred Emery born May 7, 1891. His mother was Susan/Susie Emery. He was adopted by John R. Young who lived in East Parsonfield, Maine. He was about 9 when he was adopted. I was able before my mother passed away to locate his adoption records in Oxford County, this was some years ago, but this is how I found out about Susie Emery. Fred became by adoption Fred Eugene Young and married my grandmother Celia Mae Pratt on August 20, 1919. My mother Evelyn O. Young was born on August 6, 1923 in Fayette, Maine where Celia and Fred lived, their only child. Celia and Fred attended Kents Hill School and this is where they met. My mother married Carl B. Robbins, my dad. I've always wondered if Fred had siblings, and your article has proven, YES, he does! Thank you so much for all the work you've done for Mr. Hughes and now for my family!”

Cynthia’s grandfather was Fred Emery—Susie’s son Fred Emery. Carl’s Fred.

He survived. Fred survived. I read the message again—the brightest light in a dark year. Cynthia continued:

“I found you, by googling "Fred Emery Ossipee, NH born May 7 1891. If you're interested in knowing more about Fred, please contact me. I'd be happy to share any information and contact Mr. Carl Hughes if that's possible.”

She had even sent me a photograph of Fred and his family.

I was overwhelmed. Carl and I had succeeded. Our work had put his genealogical information out into the world. The Google Books snippet of “Genealogy Behind Bars” allowed Cynthia to find me. Carl had found his lost cousin. His lost family. I couldn’t wait to tell him. If I could find him.

I wrote to Cynthia immediately. I told her how happy I was that she had contacted me, and that I would be happy to put her in touch with Carl. Just give me a little time.

I hadn’t heard from Carl since August 2017. There wasn’t any reason for us to communicate: from my position as an academic librarian at the University of New Hampshire, and part-time genealogist, I had seemingly found everything I could for him, and without more research of a professional nature, which I wasn’t feasibly able to do from my library position, I wasn’t going to find anything new. I had sent him a paper copy of our chapter when *Genealogy and the Librarian* was published, but I never heard back. We had moved on. Time passed.

In 2017, Carl’s return address was in McFarland, California. Would he still be there? I Googled to find the [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation \(CDCR\) Public Inmate Locator](#), and although there was a Carl Hughes listed, it didn’t seem to be the correct individual—other identifying information didn’t match. Had Carl been released?

If he had, how was I going to find him again? While he was incarcerated, Carl didn’t have an email address. The whole reason our communication was by U.S. Postal mail was because inmates are not allowed to use the internet. I didn’t have a home address for him. “Carl Hughes” is not such a unique name that he was easily findable in Google searches. He could be anywhere.

Having worked on Carl's genealogy forward as well as backwards, and having seen [his mother's obituary](#), I knew he had a brother, Steven, who at one time lived in Oroville, California. I didn't even know whether Steven was in contact with Carl. But I found a White Pages address for a Steven Hughes in Oroville and drafted a letter—again, snail mail, as I didn't have Steven's email—and tried to write as succinct and clear a request as possible to someone I didn't know.

Dear Mr. Hughes,

I am a librarian in New Hampshire who had been corresponding with your brother Carl in 2016-2017 regarding some genealogical work he was pursuing with regard to the Emery family of Bartlett, NH.

He was looking for any sign of Fred Eugene Emery, born 7 May 1891, who is your grandfather Charles's brother. After much research, I was unable to find any sign of Fred. I wondered whether he might have died young.

With Carl's permission, I published some of our correspondence and my findings in a chapter of a book called *Genealogy and Librarianship*, which came out in 2018. I sent him a copy of the chapter at his location in McFarland, CA.

This week I was contacted by a woman who had read my chapter and wrote to tell me that she is Fred's granddaughter. Her name is Cynthia Robbins Dalton.

I was so excited to hear this and to know Fred had a good life. I only regret that your mother won't know about this good news—but perhaps she does know.

Cynthia is eager to make contact with you and—if possible—with Carl to share information with you both. I haven't been in contact with Carl since 2017, so I'm not sure what his address might be at this time, so I thought a letter to you would be best. Please share this news with him when you can.

If this letter finds you and you are interested in pursuing this connection, you are welcome to contact me at kathrine.aydelott@unh.edu or at the physical address above, and I will provide you with Cynthia's contact information. And if you can confirm Carl's address, I'd be happy to contact him myself as well.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Kathrine Aydelott

I had included the text of Cynthia's first email to me as well as a copy of the photograph of Fred and his family she had shared. Now all we—Cynthia and I—could do was wait.

Meanwhile, Cynthia—soon Cyndi—and I had shared genealogical information ourselves and found our own connections to cousinhood. We also shared our Maine connections in Oxford County. We both eagerly anticipated hearing from the Hugheses, and I said I'd contact her as soon as I heard anything.

But it wasn't quick or easy.

In the late summer and early fall of 2020, California was on fire, and, I noted ruefully as I watched the news one morning, Oroville was badly affected. It had been a couple of weeks since I had sent Steven's letter, and I hadn't heard anything by email or post.

It's not unusual these days to hear stories about new family discovered via genealogy and genetic testing: love affairs uncovered, one-night stands revealed. The genealogical term for this is having a non-parental event (NPE). We weren't talking about that here. But family dynamics are tricky and new family connections are not always welcome. Further, incarceration can lead to estrangement. Did I even have the correct Steven Hughes? If I did, was he interested in this information? Was he in touch with Carl? Would he want Carl to have the information? I don't get much hardcopy mail, but the empty mailbox was especially gaping every day I received nothing from California. No other off-campus email came in from strangers. I carefully checked my junk mail folder for misdirected "spam."

By October, it seemed, I needed a new tack. Cyndi was also eager and anxiously awaiting contact. We emailed each other to touch base, and I—never one to court controversy—nevertheless screwed up the courage to write one more letter to Steven. I told Cyndi:

"In genealogical matters, I haven't been able to identify where Carl Hughes may be at this time. I don't find him listed in the California inmate database or a likely address for him otherwise, and I still haven't heard anything back from Steven.

I did find a business address for Steven that seems current. I think the best plan is to resend my earlier letter to Steven at this business address and see if he responds to this second attempt. If he doesn't, I guess we'd have to conclude that he doesn't want to connect—right now. I'll certainly share all address info with you, if that's the case, and maybe you just follow up in a year or so and see if he's changed his mind. I don't know."

I resent the letter in early November, and again we waited.

Meanwhile, at the university, in-person instruction ended on November 20, the Friday before Thanksgiving, just as campus cases of COVID were rising to unnerving levels. The rest of the semester would be held virtually, as planned. The library was closed to all visitors, even New Hampshire residents, which was tough as we are a public university that supports the needs of state residents as well as those of our students and faculty. The quiet term became even quieter during the first few days of December.

I was carpooling home with my husband when the email came through on my phone, the entire message in the subject line:

"Hi Kathrine this is Carl Hughes u had sent me a letter back in August but my brother (Steven Hughes) just got around to telling me about it. The letter was information concerning the whereabouts of Fred Emery and his family by a Cynthia yes I would li..."

Carl.

A flurry of email commenced. Even as he was still learning his way around the technology, Carl wrote back several times, eager to be in touch. Yes, he wanted to connect with

Cynthia. Yes, would I please call him. His cell phone had an Oregon area code. I could call him in the morning.

I emailed Cyndi. We had found Carl! I would talk to him the next morning and I would call her afterwards with his contact information.

So, this introvert with phone phobia was going to make two phone calls the next day to two strangers. Who were also not strangers. Who were all cousins. My cousins.

How early do you call someone on the West Coast from the East Coast?

I decided to wait until 9 a.m. Pacific Time. That seemed civilized. Although I had to wait until noon my time. I dialed Carl's number.

"Carl, it's Kathrine. I'm so happy to speak to you!"

"I am so happy to talk to you, too."

Our conversation, at the height of the COVID pandemic, between a New Hampshire librarian and a formerly incarcerated information seeker, had been a tough one to imagine, but it was nothing but shared joy and gratitude passed back and forth across the country's cell towers.

And I told Carl again that he had done everything exactly right. He had worked hard to gather the information he had acquired, and in spite of all of the difficulties, he persisted in asking people for more information that would help answer his questions. And now he had found what he wanted for his mother those several years ago: he had found his lost family.

"Yes," he said. Cynthia could call him. Anytime.

I immediately called Cyndi and gave her Carl's information.

And she asked me then, what she hadn't asked before: did I know what Carl had done that had caused him to be incarcerated?

"I didn't," I said. "I was simply trying to be a good a librarian and to be helpful. Carl's situation seemed none of my business." She was good with that, too.

Cyndi wrote back a few days later:

"I wanted to let you know that I've spoken with Carl. We had a brief but nice chat on Thursday, and again this evening.

He's me sending a lot of paperwork and information from the research he has done over the past ten years. I look forward to receiving it this week. In turn, I'm sending him what I have about Fred so he can learn about Fred's life. He shared what he knows about Charles and we had a very good conversation.

There's a lot more to the story, and I will keep you updated!

Thank you again, for all your help! This is so exciting!"

The year 2020 will long be remembered as a pandemic year, so difficult and so challenging for so many, a year of estrangement and isolation. But for me, and for two of my distant cousins, I hope it will also be remembered as a year where mysteries were solved, a year of connection.

EPILOGUE

Most of 2021 passed—not as uneventfully as we might have hoped—but passed just the same. I heard from Carl a couple of times that spring—he had emailed me a photograph of himself; I sent one of me—and then the silence that is the world where we all keep going in our own spheres.

And then we shared another flurry of emails in September:

Back in December 2020, Cynthia had an Ancestry DNA match with a woman named Carole, who was estimated to be Cyndi's second cousin. Not knowing how they were connected, Cyndi had contacted Carole via Ancestry messaging, but only heard back from her in August 2021. Again, good things come in time. As it turned out, Carole and Cynthia's most recent common ancestor was Susie Emery's daughter, Minnie Johnson. Carole and Cynthia were second cousins through the same family line I had worked on with Carl.

As it turned out, Carole had done quite a bit of research on Susie and the Emery family, and replied to Cynthia with a trove of material that told Susie's story more completely, a work mostly validated by documentation, but with a creative license to form a seamless narrative. Carole's information even included a photo of Susie—the only one known—as well as Charles Albert Emery's birth record, which lists his father's name, Martin L. Fall.

Cynthia shared this information with Carl, who now knows his grandfather's parentage, which was one of his original questions to me. And so another piece of the puzzle was found, and another mystery solved.

Carl sent me copies of Carole's information in his September emails, and amusingly, two days later, Cyndi wrote and sent me the same. It's lovely to be kept in the loop!

As I always say, "Be nice to everyone. They could be your cousin."

Special thanks to Carl Hughes and to Cynthia Dalton for permission to quote from their emails and to tell their story more completely.

February 2022