



All Faculty Publications

2015-11

A Genealogical Gold Mine: The Harold B. Lee Library at BYU

Therrin C. Dahlin

Brigham Young University, terry_dahlin@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>

 Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Terry Dahlin, "A Genealogical Gold Mine: The Harold B. Lee Library at BYU", *Crossroads*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 2015, 26-31.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Dahlin, Therrin C., "A Genealogical Gold Mine: The Harold B. Lee Library at BYU" (2015). *All Faculty Publications*. 1617.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1617>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

A Genealogical Gold Mine: The Harold B. Lee Library at BYU

by Terry Dahlin

Brigham Young University (BYU) has existed as an institution for 140 years. When the average person considers BYU, a variety of thoughts may come to mind. Some may have never heard of the university. Those who attended BYU may remember with fondness their days as students at the university. Others may think of it as a place to send their children or grandchildren to get a church-related education. Some people may view the university in terms of the sports teams that it sponsors.

While all of these aspects form part of the university's ethos, there is one important trait that is often neglected in the public mind: BYU is an exceptional place to do genealogical research. Many people don't think of BYU as a destination of choice for genealogists and family historians. Even those living near the university are not always aware of the many collections and services available in the Harold B. Lee Library (Lee Library), the central library at BYU. Administrators, professors, and librarians have worked together diligently over the years to create a premier library for those conducting genealogical research. In this article I will highlight the value that the Lee Library offers to all types of patrons doing family history and genealogical work.

Differing Library Missions

Nothing that I write in this article is intended to diminish the importance of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. The Family History

Library represents a fabulous world-wide resource for anyone doing genealogical research. The depth of the online, print, and microform collections as well as the competent staff and ambitious programs are second to none. And the Lee Library enjoys a good working relationship with the Family History Library.

The purposes and missions of the two libraries, however, are different. The Family History Library, according to its website <<https://familysearch.org/locations/saltlakecity-library>> was "founded in 1894 to gather genealogical records and assist members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with their family history and genealogical research," and it was further intended to be "open to the general public at no charge." This focused mission led to great depth in developing genealogical record collections and services.

The Lee Library, on the other hand, is a large research library designed to serve the teaching and research needs of a university composed of 15 colleges covering many subject disciplines. Within the limits of existing resources, the Lee Library also serves non-students who come into the library to work on their family history. BYU's emphasis on covering many areas of knowledge casts a wide net that requires the Lee Library to offer greater breadth in its collections and services. This breadth of scope is a key factor that distinguishes the mission of the Lee Library from that of the Family History Library.

Research

Look at the Numbers

For example, the sheer numerical size of the Lee Library sets it apart. In fact, the blog Genealogy's Star written by attorney James Tanner in the September 5, 2015 posting describes the Lee Library as "possibly the second largest genealogy library in the world." The Lee Library building itself spans approximately 750,000 square feet and holds 98 miles of book shelves. More than two million people pass through its doors every year. The library's collections included the following as of the end of 2014:

- 4,362,039 books
- 128,013 periodical and serial titles
- 3,061,042 microforms
- 376,445 government documents
- 288,995 paper maps
- 51,448 manuscript and archive collections
- 10,215,268 total materials
- 2,769,693 electronic resources

These numbers leave an important question unanswered: Even though the numbers listed are impressive, how much of the Lee Library's collections are focused on family history and genealogy? To answer that question, I will delve more deeply into the specific areas of the Lee Library that provide collections and services helpful for genealogical research.

BYU Family History Library

The Lee Library is organized into distinct units and areas. The BYU Family History Library (BYU FHL), housed in the northeast portion of the second level of the Lee Library, is one of those areas. The BYU FHL places a particular focus on helping faculty, students, and community patrons to be successful in their family history and genealogy research. Services to library patrons are provided by librarians, staff, student assistants, and 130 family history missionaries. The BYU FHL is open weekdays and Saturdays until midnight and is closed



Research

on the first and third Sundays of the month. Staff and missionaries are available to help you until 9:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday and until 6:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

Even though the university is designed primarily for faculty and students, the BYU FHL makes significant efforts to serve all types of patrons, including community patrons. Community patrons are given a guest log-in and password that allows them to access campus computers and a rich array of genealogical software and online databases. In most cases these databases must be accessed in the library or on the campus due to licensing restrictions set by the publishers. Community patrons are also able to order genealogical materials from other libraries on interlibrary loan.

The BYU FHL offers significant outreach programs that strive to serve patrons who are unable to come to the library during usual service hours. The BYU FHL is kept open on the second and fourth Sundays of the month to accommodate busy patrons. Missionaries are available to offer assistance, and special classes are taught on various aspects of family history. The current schedule of classes is found online: <<http://sites.lib.byu.edu/familyhistory/sunday-classes/>>. The BYU FHL hosts a Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/byufhl> and a YouTube channel <<http://sites.lib.byu.edu/familyhistory/education/>> containing approximately 100 instructional videos on a variety of family history topics. Plans also are being made to offer webinars in the near future to extend the reach of the library's family history educational offerings.

The BYU FHL contains a computer lab of over 60 workstations loaded with specialized genealogical software. It also includes a multiplicity of digital scanners for various types of scanning. There are ten scanners dedicated to scanning microfilm and microfiche. There are scanners to digitize photographs and photographic negatives, slides, books, documents, and loose sheets. The BYU FHL contains black & white and color printers as well

as a large format printer to print pedigrees and fan charts. In addition, there is a Multimedia Lab on the south end of the fourth level of the Lee Library that offers equipment and consultation for digital audio and video manipulation. For example, patrons can get help with using software to clean up old family photographs, or they can get assistance with digitizing audio tapes.

Even though the library is heavily invested in helping genealogists by providing them high-tech equipment, the BYU FHL also gives patrons access to low-tech solutions. There are 22 of the older analog microfilm readers and several analog microfiche readers. Some patrons prefer the older technology, and the BYU FHL makes efforts to accommodate their information needs.

The BYU FHL has an ample collection of over 300,000 microfilms from the Family History Library in Salt Lake. If a specific one of their microfilms is not available at BYU, it can be ordered and retained in the BYU collection. There are also thousands of Family History Library microfiche, as well as tens of thousands of other microfilms and microfiche on many genealogy related topics.

The Lee Library has a strong collection of city directories in print and microform. The city directories cover many cities in the United States and constitute an often neglected source of useful genealogical information. Some of the city directories are housed in the open stack areas of the library while others are available only in our Special Collections area.

If the Lee Library is a genealogical gold mine, then the BYU FHL webpage <<http://sites.lib.byu.edu/familyhistory/> HYPERLINK "<http://sites.lib.byu.edu/familyhistory/%20%20>"> would have to be viewed as the mother lode. The BYU FHL webpage is actually a portal that can guide you to a very large group of services and collections offered at the library. On the front page there is a link to a brief online tour of the area as well as a link offering a live

Research



online chat with a librarian. The front page includes links to the Sunday classes and the Facebook page and YouTube channel mentioned earlier. You may also reserve a scanner online through the webpage.

The BYU FHL webpage can lead you to nearly 1,000 unique online genealogical databases and webpages. Major databases such as FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, FindMyPast, WorldVitalRecords, HeritageQuest, and Fold3 are made available to patrons without charge when they are used in the library. Many fee-based genealogical databases are only accessible within the library due to licensing restrictions established by the publishers. The links on the webpage lead you to many guides and indexes that help you to speed up your research.

The BYU FHL webpage provides access to huge collections of online historical documents. There are multiple large databases of online historical newspapers (unique historical newspapers are

also available on microfilm, many from Utah). There are U.S. colonial newspapers, nineteenth century newspapers, twentieth century newspapers, African American newspapers, women's movement newspapers, and illustrated news publications. The BYU FHL webpage offers online access to similar types of newspapers for the United Kingdom. The webpage includes huge collections of online county histories and digital American Civil War records. The size and scope of the online collections are too large to adequately cover in this article. The best way to discover the richness of these collections is to spend some time personally exploring the various facets of the webpage.

One of the remarkable characteristics of the Lee Library is that the expansivity of the library's genealogy-related collections and services is not confined solely to the BYU FHL. Likely because of the unique mission of BYU and the particular interests of the faculty and students that live and

Research

work there, other departments of the Lee Library also offer valuable resources to genealogical researchers. I will give brief descriptions of a few of the other relevant Lee Library departments.

Social Sciences and Education Department

The Social Sciences and Education Department is housed in the northeast end of the first level of the library. This department houses large collections of printed family histories collected over many years. There are also excellent collections of county and local histories for both the United States and Europe. Also included are print collections on heraldry, paleography, numismatics and related disciplines.

The Social Sciences and Education Department has responsibility for collections of hundreds of thousands of government documents. As is well

known, government publications are very useful to those who are seeking to know more about their ancestors. There are documents available online, in print, and in microform. The Social Sciences and Education Department has librarians, staff, and student assistants that are available to help patrons with their research.

Science and Maps Department

The Science and Maps Department is located in the center section of level two of the library. The maps area of the department houses an extensive collection of nearly 300,000 print maps, which is particularly strong in topographic maps. The Maps Reference Collection is composed of atlases, gazetteers, and helpful map guides. There are significant collections of print maps covering a variety of foreign countries.



Research

Even though print maps may be very useful for genealogists, online maps and geographic databases offer other powerful tools to help patrons locate that elusive ancestor. The maps area of the Science and Maps Department has ample resources in geospatial technologies. The area gives access to a number of rich online map databases. There are two geospatial experts on tap to help patrons with geographic information systems, global positioning systems, and remote sensing. The librarians and staff there have created a Geospatial Services and Training lab in which the staff can help patrons create new online maps to meet their needs. There is also a large plotter that can print very large format maps. More information about geospatial technologies is available in a very useful guide hosted by the maps area: <<http://guides.lib.byu.edu/c.php?g=246326>>

L. Tom Perry Special Collections

Another treasure trove of genealogical resources is found in the Lee Library's L. Tom Perry Special Collections. The items stored in Special Collections are the types of materials that require special handling and storage because they are rare, expensive, or highly specialized. As noted earlier, Special Collections holds over 50,000 manuscript and archival collections.

Special Collections builds collections in literature, world history and culture, arts and communications, music, photography, and BYU history. Of particular interest to local genealogists are materials relating to Utah, Mormons, and the American West. For example, there are handwritten journals of early Utah pioneers that provide precious facts about historical events and the daily lifestyles of those pioneers. These nuggets of local history are very valuable to genealogists hoping to learn more about their ancestors and the times in which they lived.

Special Collections has a wealth of other resources useful to genealogists. There are many county histories and city directories that give detailed information about the individuals that lived in those areas. The Saints at War series, which

collects documents on Mormon veterans, includes memoirs, personal papers, interviews, journals, biographies and photographs. Not to be missed is the Photograph Archives of hundreds of thousands of photographic images from the beginnings of photography in the 1840s to the present. The Photograph Archives places special emphasis on the history of photography in Utah and the American West.

A Gold Mine Revisited

To return to the original metaphor, the Lee Library at BYU is a gold mine of collections and services of great value to genealogical researchers. Even though the Lee Library may not leap to mind as a preferred destination for genealogists, it is hoped that this article will turn the attention of many potential patrons to the wealth of resources available to them at BYU. The BYU Family History Library offers specialized help to genealogical researchers, but there are other departments of the Lee Library that also are focused on meeting the needs of genealogists. The Lee Library forms an important part of the system of libraries and archives that are useful to those conducting genealogical research.

Bio: Terry Dahlin is the family and local history librarian at Brigham Young University. He holds a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in library science, both from BYU. He has presented on family history and genealogy topics at a number of genealogy conferences. He has been involved in libraries and genealogical research for many years.



Terry Dahlin is the family and local history librarian at Brigham Young University. He holds a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in library science, both from BYU. He has presented on family history and genealogy topics at a number of genealogy conferences. He has been involved in libraries and genealogical research for many years.