

DISCOVERING *Family*

By John W. Carlin

In the research rooms of the National Archives and Record Administration's Genealogy Center in Washington, D.C., one often hears the sounds of discovery. "Oh, my God," one researcher will cry out. "There he is," another will later say aloud. People swap stories about their quests and their findings.

They share tips and leads. Sometimes they offer encouragement to others to keep moving along the research trail, to realize that despite the often tedious work, they will find additional clues and evidence of the past.

James Eli Shiffer, a staff writer from the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News and Observer*, recently found evidence of the journey of his Jewish grandmother from a small town in Poland on the Russian border to the Port of New York in 1923. Now a woman in her eighties living in a small apartment in Greenwich Village, she has told her story to her family many times—that she had come to New York alone after her mother died to rejoin her father who had left the family ten years earlier. At the National Archives, Shiffer tried to find his grandmother's name in the lists of passengers arriving in New York between 1902 and 1943. The name did not appear. Shiffer questioned his grandmother further. Fortunately, she was able to remember the exact date she had arrived. Shiffer resumed his search. In a passenger manifest for the ship *Aquitania* he found her name. It had been misspelled. During the seventy-two years since her misspelled name was written in the log, she had gone on to learn a new language, marry,



become a mother, lose relatives and friends in the Holocaust, and witness the births of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Shiffer later wrote, "A grainy photocopy of the passenger list in my hand, I called her up again. 'Grandma,' I said with triumph, 'I found you.'"

At NARA many threads of family history are woven together and many family roots are uncovered. It has been nearly two decades since Americans were first introduced to the life of Kunta Kinte and the lives of other ancestors of Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*. Both in print and on television we cheered them on in their struggles against overwhelming odds. In 1964 Haley visited the National Archives and discovered in the Alamance County, North Carolina, census records of 1870 information that confirmed much of his family's oral history traditions. "Rolls of microfilm were delivered," he wrote. "I began turning film through the machine, feeling a mounting sense of intrigue while viewing an endless parade of names." Here were names Haley had heard in the stories of his grandmother. "It was simply so uncanny sitting staring at those names actually right there in official U.S. Government records." The discovery set the determined author on a thirteen-year quest for his African origins.

Haley's book and the subsequent television series a year later helped inspire a burgeoning national interest in genealogy. NARA, custodian of many of the essential documents for genealogical research in the United States, felt the impact

immediately. Our microfilm reading rooms experienced long waiting lines. Hundreds of thousands of written inquiries rained in from all over the country. Public interest in family research soared and continues to rise.

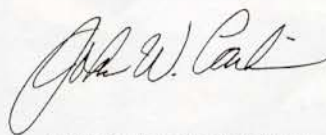
NARA has custody of millions of records relating to individuals who have had dealings with the federal government. For genealogical researchers, therefore, NARA is a very valuable resource institution for discovering crucial historical evidence. Census schedules, land records, passport applications, personnel records, claims for pensions and bounty lands, military service records, immigration and naturalization records, and ship passenger lists—the records in NARA are replete with information that can aid almost any researcher tracing family history.

Today, the national interest in genealogical research and family history is extraordinary. Across the country are national, state, and local genealogical associations and societies; genealogical research institutions; genealogical courses in colleges and universities; workshops and seminars; a growing industry in electronic access and automated finding aids; publications ranging from genealogical dictionaries to map guides; action groups supporting efforts on behalf of document

preservation and access; and thousands of individuals sharing information.

In Washington, D.C., and at all of our regional archives, we host a wide range of educational programs on genealogy. For example, the National Archives–Central Plains Region in Kansas City and the National Archives–Great Lakes Region in Chicago are among several regional facilities that offer regular genealogical workshops. In July 1996 I welcomed the National Institute on Genealogical Research to the National Archives Building in Washington for their week-long course on genealogical research techniques.

At NARA facilities nationwide, bureaucratic red tape of the past can become guideposts connecting us to family history and genealogical roots. Sifting through passenger arrival lists and bounty land records can be enlightening and enriching detective work. Thousands of individuals each year are beginning the research journey. We at NARA are proud to be a part of it.



Archivist of the United States

C o n t r i b u t o r s

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