Using the Internet for Genealogical Research:

A Brief Selection of Web Sites

by **Connie L. Phelps**

Traditionally, many librarians have thought of genealogy as the province of public libraries. Many academic librarians are accustomed to automatically referring genealogy patrons to their local public library, since public libraries have traditionally collected more of the printed materials that genealogists have needed for their research. With the growing interest in genealogy and the proliferation of genealogy materials available on the Internet, academic will be able to offer more assistance to patrons who ask genealogical questions. Even elementary and high schools increasingly have access to the Internet, so the basic family history assignment of finding out the names of their grandparents and great-grandparents that many students over the years have completed may lead to more genealogical assignments in schools.

Certainly it is important to note that the Internet has not replaced traditional genealogical research. Cyndi Howells, who maintains a vast index to genealogy sites on the Internet, and is the author of books on genealogical research on the Internet, points out that there is no such thing as "Internet genealogy." She points out that the Internet is "just *one* of many tools in the genealogical researcher's toolbox" and that a genealogist cannot use just the Internet and hope for complete results. She contends that it is more accurate to speak about how we "*use* the Internet *for* genealogy."[1]

One of the dangers of directing patrons to the Internet for genealogical research is that they may believe that everything is on the Internet. If one is serious about genealogy research, one will still need to go to libraries, courthouses, and other sources of primary information. The library patron who is new to genealogy may need to be informed that not everything necessary for their research is available electronically. In addition to the fact that there is much genealogical information that is not obtainable online, libraries and librarians are also able to provide the researcher with research assistance that is not provided via Web sites. In genealogical research, as with other types of information "the Web is a useful research tool, but it is no substitute for a library. Library services have been greatly improved by...the use of the web, but the Web cannot replace all of the services offered by a good library." [2]

There are two main types of genealogical records: compiled records, which are records of previous research by others, such as a biography, family history, or genealogy; and original records, which are records created at or near the time of an event, such as birth, marriage, death, or census records. Many genealogy Web sites are predominately compiled records. Much of the genealogical information found on the Internet will still need to be verified. Serious genealogists will want copies of the original documents.

The use of the Internet for genealogy is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, material that is on the Internet is much more accessible to researchers. When researchers find someone else that has been researching their family, it can save them time, travel, and money. People may find that a distant cousin has already located a missing part of their family. On the other hand, some of the information that is available online may be inaccurate. Perhaps someone had erroneous information about a birthdate of an ancestor. He may, without realizing that the information was incorrect, have posted it on a Web site. Then, along came other researchers who found the information online, didn't check the accuracy of the dates, and used that incorrect information in their research. Of course, these errors happened in print materials, too. It is just easier and more accessible now to download the incorrect information from an Internet site into a genealogical software program.

Since genealogy is one of the most popular topics on the Internet, there are a vast number of genealogy sites. So, with many people newly interested in genealogy, and so many genealogy Web sites available, how is a librarian to direct a patron through the maze of Web sites? Entire books have been written on online genealogy. Just to list the books themselves would take a lot more space than just a brief article. First, it is important to distinguish between a software program that is used to keep track of a person's research and a Web site that provides access to primary or secondary materials. There are quite a number of software programs, each with unique features. These programs are usually something that a genealogical researcher will want to have on his own computer when he gets to a certain stage. This article will not discuss these programs.

There are many different kinds of genealogy Web sites and databases. There are the mega-sites, which provide either fee or free access to many kinds of information–from previously published material, to scanned-in or typed-in primary materials, to genealogy mailing lists and message boards, to individual family trees. Some genealogy Web sites are subscription sites; some are completely free. Trying to divide Internet genealogy resources into two groups, fee and free, may be a bit difficult, as even some fee or subscription resources may provide a certain amount of information for free. The following is a sampling of some of the features of the largest, most popular, free genealogy Web sites, along with their coverage of

specifically Louisiana-related material. The best way to become familiar with their features is to try them.

Cyndi's List

A good starting place to refer patrons who are beginning genealogical research is Cyndi's List, http://www.cyndislist.com, an online directory of genealogical Web sites. The site currently indexes and cross-references over 174,000 genealogy links into more than 150 categories. Currently, Cyndi's List alphabetically indexes genealogy sites from A (Acadian, Cajun & Creole) to W (Writing Your Family's History). As a subheading under "United States," there is a section called States, Regions & Localities within the States. Currently, there are nearly 2,000 links under Louisiana. Cyndi's indexing also provides a broad category list that includes subjects such as Localities, Computers and the Internet, Help from Others, and Research Tools & Reference Materials. Beginning genealogy patrons may be a little anxious and want to look for a specific person's name immediately, but a little time spent with some of the links in Cyndi's List will provide them with lots of suggestions and background information about what to search and where to search for the person.

AncestryPlus

Many people, whether they are interested in genealogy or not, have heard of Ancestry.com. Ancestry advertises heavily, even on Web sites that have nothing to do with genealogy. Ancestry.com is a large, popular, partly free/partly fee genealogy Web site. A version of it, AncestryPlus, is available free to Louisiana public library users in Louisiana parish libraries, so it is listed here, even though the database is a subscription database, not a free database. Unfortunately, the product is not available to Louisiana academic libraries through the LOUIS consortium. AncestryPlus is a collaboration between Ancestry.com and the Gale Group. Part of the "Plus" in the library version of the product is the inclusion of two useful Gale products–the Gale *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index*, as well as Gale's *Biography and Genealogy Master Index*.

A patron sitting down at the home page of AncestryPlus sees a search box that will allow searchers to enter the name of a person that they are searching for. The search engine will conduct a "global search" through all of the sources in the product and return any findings for the name in categories such as Census; Birth, Marriage & Death; Military; Court, Land & Probate; and Community & Message Boards. Sources are constantly being added.

The census portions of AncestryPlus can save the researcher a great deal of time, since the database includes not only census indexes from 1790 through 1870 (head of household only) but also scanned images of all of the available censuses, from 1790 through 1930. Ancestry has compiled a head of household index to the 1920 census and an every name index to the newly released 1930 index. Where the indexing of a census is complete, there is a link from the index that goes directly to the image of the census page. This saves the patron from waiting for the time-consuming borrowing of census microfilm.

One feature of the AncestryPlus product is the Ancestry World Tree. This portion is comprised of files of family trees that are submitted by Ancestry users. All files are taken "as is" and the completeness and accuracy of the information are not guaranteed. Ancestry World Tree has combined its information with RootsWeb.com's WorldConnect (see below), so a researcher needs only to search one of these sites.

An AncestryPlus global search also provides indexing for the Ancestry and RootsWeb message boards. Message boards are a very important tool in genealogical research. Persons may either search the message boards to find information, or may post a query for information. In addition to the above-mentioned compiled databases and primary source documents, AncestryPlus has online newsletters and how-to hints, useful blank forms that may be printed out (such as family group sheets, ancestral charts, and blank census forms for recording information located).

The Web site offers a "Search by Location" feature, which will allow researchers to locate Louisiana-specific information in the following categories: Databases (which include all of the federal censuses through 1930, as well as databases containing other records), Sources (such as where to write for vital records, How-To's (such as information about Louisiana adoption practices and Louisiana land records), and Maps.

The AncestryPlus database, though it is a Gale Group database, doesn't allow for remote access. The patrons will need to come into the library to use it. Patrons with home Internet access may become individual subscribers to Ancestry.com. Currently, a year's basic personal subscription to Ancestry.com is $99. Other components, such as the census indexes and images cost individual subscribers additional fees.

Family Search

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormons, has amassed a wealth of genealogy material. The church has the largest genealogical library in the world in Salt Lake City, Utah. The collection includes books, microfiche, and microfilm. There are library branches, called Family History Centers, all over the world. In Louisiana, there are 14 Family History Centers. These centers can borrow materials from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, and are staffed by volunteers.

Many public librarians are familiar with the FamilySearch CD-ROM collection. Much of the same information is now available via a Web version of the databases, http://www.familysearch.org. The Web site provides a search box, which searches several unique databases–the Ancestral File, International Genealogical Index (IGI), Pedigree Resource File, Vital Records Index, along with family history Web sites. The "All Resources" search also includes the United States Social Security Death Index. The 1880 U.S. census, 1881 British Isles census and the 1881 Canadian censuses have just been added to the site. The site also allows one to search the extensive holdings of the Family History Library catalog. Personal Ancestral File (not to be confused with the Ancestral File database), produced by the LDS Church, one of many genealogy software programs, is available to download free of charge from Familysearch.org. This program will allow patrons to save data directly from the FamilySearch databases into the program.

The Ancestral File contains information, such as date and place of birth, marriage, or death, on millions of people linked into family groups and pedigrees submitted to the church by individuals and organizations around the world. The Web site cautions: "Ancestral File is a collection of genealogical information taken from Pedigree Charts and Family Group Records submitted to the Family History Department since 1978. The information has not been verified against any official records. Since the information in Ancestral File is contributed, it is the responsibility of those who use the file to verify its accuracy." The submitters' names and addresses are provided.

The International Genealogical Index, (IGI) lists several hundred million names of deceased persons from throughout the world. It also lists some vital information for the persons, such as a birth or marriage date and place. Many names in the index come from vital records from the early 1500s to 1885, which have been copied or "extracted." If available, the source information, such as the microfilm number, is given. Other information has been submitted by members of the LDS Church, and there may not be a source document available.

The Pedigree Resource File contains names; family relationships; and birth, marriage, and death information for millions of people. The information in this file appears as it was originally submitted. The Pedigree Resource File is a new lineage-linked database of records available on compact disc containing family history records submitted by individuals through FamilySearch Internet Genealogy Service. Family information is organized in family groups and pedigrees. The online version gives the name and address of the submitter, as well as the compact disc number. The compact disc version includes submitted notes and sources. Many charts and reports can be printed from this data. Each compact disc contains about 1.1 million names.

The Vital Records Index (VRI) contains birth, christening, and marriage records from selected countries around the world. The online version currently contains only records for Mexico and Scandinavia. Some names found in the Vital Records Index may also be found on the International Genealogical Index (IGI). The indexes are not complete.

FamilySearch "All Resources" searches may be limited to Louisiana records. Other specifically Louisiana-related information may be found under the Research Guidance and Research Helps tabs. Since LDS records usually center around the "events" of birth, marriage and death, the Louisiana Research Guidance page is divided into time periods by these headings. From this point, researchers are offered a brief historical background of the state, with other suggested references; information for beginners, including a list of Louisiana Statewide Indexes and Collections; and a Search Strategy section, with types of records arranged in a suggested research order. There is also a very thorough Research Outline for Louisiana, which lists many sources of information.

RootsWeb

"The primary purpose and function of RootsWeb is to connect people so that they can help each other and share genealogical research. Most resources on RootsWeb are designed to facilitate such connections."[3] The Web site is located at http://www.rootsweb.com. Even though some databases are shared with Ancestry.com, unlike AncestryPlus/Ancestry.com, all of the information on RootsWeb is currently free to the public. However, since RootsWeb is now funded and supported by Ancestry.com, there is also an Ancestry.com search box on the RootsWeb main page. As with the other Web sites mentioned here, there is a section devoted to getting started with genealogical research and other guides to research.

RootsWeb has several large and important resources. RootsWeb sponsors the WorldConnect Project, which has just merged with Ancestry's Ancestry World Tree mentioned above. The WorldConnect Project allows users to upload, modify, link, and display their family trees as a means to share their work with other researchers. The site also hosts over 26,000 genealogy electronic mailing lists, including many locality mailing lists and surname mailing lists, which are searchable and browsable. The RootsWeb message boards are very important sources of information and wonderful places to connect with other researchers.

The RootsWeb Surname List (RSL) is a registry of more than one million surname entries that have been submitted by online genealogists. Associated with each surname are time periods covered by the researcher, locations of the surname, and information about how to contact the person who submitted the surname. Locating another person who is researching the same surname in the same geographical area during a specific time period can be an invaluable help to a new researcher.

Louisiana-related content includes RootsWeb's message boards for Louisiana and for all of its parishes. Mailing lists for the state and parishes are also available. There is a link from the main page to State Resources. The Louisiana resources page includes some useful links. RootsWeb provides server space for the LAGenWeb pages (see below).

USGenWeb Project

The USGenWeb Project, http://www.usgenweb.org founded in 1996, "consists of a group of volunteers working together to provide Internet Web sites for genealogical research in every county and every state of the United States." [4] The USGenWeb Pages, as are most of the states' GenWeb pages, are hosted by RootsWeb. The primary unit of organization for the USGenWeb Project is the county (or parish). County Web sites may include transcriptions of cemetery records, marriage records, census records, Bible record, wills, obituaries, tax records, biographies, historic maps and county histories. At this time, the marriage records, Bible records and other similar types of material are usually single entries posted by researchers, rather than transcribed lists of county records. The county GenWeb sites usually include a list of lookup volunteers, as well as a list of what they are willing to search. A queries section is usually available for each county. Sometimes these are independent query lists, but often they link to the RootsWeb Message Board for the county. Since the project is volunteer-dependent, the design and amount of content varies widely from county to county. Many counties have very little content available. All counties are looking for contributors! While a major part of the project is arranged at the county level, the state Web sites have statewide information. The Louisiana portion of the USGenweb Project, known as LAGenWeb, primarily consists of links to the parish Web sites. At this still very early stage of the GenWeb sites, it is not terrible likely that a person will find transcriptions of sources that will help them, but as the sites add information, it will become more likely. One advantage of the parish pages is that there are local people involved, so that a searcher may find a local contact in the area.

There are some parts of the USGenWeb Project that are being done at a national level. Three of the major nationwide projects are census transcriptions, tombstone transcriptions, and a Digital Library (Archives) Project, which offers actual transcriptions of public domain records. It contains copies of census records, marriage bonds, wills, and other public documents. There is a search engine that will allow searching of the contents of all the text files in the USGenWeb Archives, as well as search engines for each of the states.

In addition to the national, state and county/parish sites and information, there is also a page called "Help for Researchers," which includes basic getting-started tips, links to other getting-started pages and links to genealogical forms such as family group sheets, which may be downloaded. The miscellaneous information links (Cousins Explained, Old Occupations Explained, etc.) provide additional help. There is also a WorldGenWeb Project, www.worldgenweb.org, which is working on providing access to records in other areas of the world.

There are many other useful, free, smaller, more-specific genealogy sites that will interest patrons, such as the Ellis Island Web site, http://www.ellisislandrecords.org. Lists of these sites may be found through links from Cyndi's List or some of the above named resources. The Internet is very dynamic. Web pages may come and go. Likewise, content that is on one of these Web sites may be moved or removed. The Web sites discussed here, chosen in part for their size, free status, and useful information, have also been around for several years. For example, though FamilySearch.org is fairly new to the Web, the data has been being collected and made available (via CD-ROM databases, for example) for much a much longer period of time. And, though the content of the Web sites may change, more content is being added than is being removed. Genealogical research on the Internet is an active, thriving topic.

Notes

[1]Howells, Cyndi. "Internet Genealogy" <http://www.cyndislist.com/internet-gen.htm> (December 13, 2002).

[2]Weston, Wil. "Access to Scientific Literature: The web can complement libraries, but not replace them." *Nature*, 7 November 2002: 19.

[3]RootsWeb.com. "Share Your Family History" <http://searches.rootsweb.com/share.html> (December 26, 2002).

[4]USGenWeb Project. "What is the USGenWeb Project?" <http://www.usgenweb.org/about/about.html> (December 26, 2002).

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The Obituary Index Project: A Collaborative Gateway to Local History

by **Gerald F. Patout, Jr.**

Genealogists and local historians are converging on libraries and information repositories in record numbers, armed with questions, and determined to locate answers buried in the documentary annals of the past. This crusade is sometimes met with the same confounding and perplexing problems that challenge library genealogy and local history professionals–a proliferation of information resources, the question of the accuracy and validity of certain sources, and the daunting and repetitive task of instructing end users in meaningful inquiry and research. To aid in this search, the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) and The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) are collaborating on an effort to computerize and then upload to their institutional Web sites NOPL's Louisiana Biography & Obituary Index, the primary local history reference tool card file index of biographical information found in New Orleans newspaper obituaries from approximately 1804 to 1972. Currently, 14 aging metal file cabinets on the third floor of the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library contain over 650,000 index cards of information, some with multiple citations that have been described as a treasure trove and remarkable historical chronicle of local characters and color.

Origins of the Index

The Obituary File was begun by Works Progress Administration (WPA) staff working in the City Archives Department in the 1930s. The department was located in City Hall (now Gallier Hall) and the adjacent annex building on St. Charles Avenue. It contained, in addition to the manuscript journals and ledgers of city government dating from 1769, the largest collection of bound New Orleans newspapers in existence. From this newspaper archive, the Obituary Index was created as one of several WPA indexing projects conducted in that department (including the Louisiana News Index, which provides coverage of news articles, exclusive of obituaries). The indexes were kept up by the City Archives Department staff after the WPA project closed down.

Although the City Archives Department was transferred by ordinance in 1946 to the New Orleans Public Library, it was not until December 1947 that the newspaper files and the WPA indexes were moved to the old main library on Lee Circle. As the library staff began to go over the Obituary Index cards, they began to uncover inadequacies in the file. It included references only to deaths of prominent citizens, and it usually omitted editorials or feature stories relating to deaths (instead, such articles were filed in the Louisiana News Index under such unhelpful topics as "people"). The Obituary File was also divided into three sections: 1804-1936, 1936-45 and "current," the last category covering the portion of 1946 that had been completed at the time of the transfer to the library. To remedy these deficiencies, library staff initiated a project, beginning with the year 1946 and extending forward, to index *all* obituaries. They also began to re-index retrospective time periods, beginning with the Civil War era, in order to fill in incomplete coverage.

Because of staffing limitations, the Louisiana News Index shut down permanently in the 1960s; coverage stops at the end of 1963. Staff work on the Obituary File continued, but in the early 1970s volunteers were recruited to take over the project. The decision was made to stop ongoing coverage of obituaries at the end of 1972, when printouts of indexes to statewide death certificates began (temporarily, it turned out) to be made available. The volunteers began to concentrate on filling in the gaps in the index that the library staff had never had the time to work on. This volunteer effort brought full coverage back to 1858 before the project was put on hold for a number of years. In 1998, the project was revitalized, and a massive effort was made by several volunteers to fill in coverage of obituaries in the *Daily Picayune* back to its beginning in 1837.

When this part of the project was completed, NOPL could finally say that the Obituary File had complete coverage from 1837-1972. While only the *Daily/Times Picayune* is *fully* indexed, the index also includes references from the old *New Orleans States* and the *New Orleans Item* during the post-World War II years, from all New Orleans dailies during the Civil War era, and from a number of other newspapers, such as the *Louisiana Gazette*.

The index also includes references to biographies of Louisianans appearing in selected collective biographies published before 1960. Thus, the index eventually came to be designated the "Louisiana Biography & Obituary Index."

Computers & Collaboration–A New Age for a Card Index

After much discussion, careful deliberation between the institutions, and even a summer of field testing the possibilities for such a challenging undertaking loaded with enormous potential and some peril, an agreement of co-operation to begin the project was signed in April 2000, and in June of that year, two part-time staffers from the Historic New Orleans Collection began data input on premises at the New Orleans Public Library. Arriving at

this point of data input was also the result of considerable application software analysis and technology discussions between the participating institutions that would not only satisfy the purposes of the effort, but would be visionary in addressing the needs of this slumbering body of print information.

Although numbers of criteria were employed to evaluate various database options, two interrelated and important factors guided the final decision in selecting the Minisis database management tool for this project. Firstly, additional vendor costs for proprietary web uploading program software, and, secondly, the fact that The Historic New Orleans Collection had just chosen Minisis as their new institutional information management software were critical factors that impacted this project decision.

The Minisis application selected was designed and built to meet the general requirements for this database project as well as simultaneously to meet the greater institutional information management needs of the archival, library and museum components of The Historic New Orleans Collection. Minisis is a multi-platform object-oriented relational database management tool that has been developed, distributed and supported since 1975 by the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada. Fully bilingual, with over 450 pre-defined data elements, the user-friendly nature and easy customization features provided application development and solutions for this specific database project that enabled the project to take off. A sample of the customized Minisis Obit Index main data input screen is provided to demonstrate some of the types of fields of information and various features of software tool.

[See Illustration 1 - Data Input Screen – Main Screen]

Since June 2000, THNOC data input staffers are now routinely entering individual card information, like names, death dates, and the specific newspaper citation(s) into the computer database. Recognizing the tedious and monotonous nature of this process, the data input process does get interrupted and slows when specific concerns about information contained on a certain card is questioned. To this end, the project utilizes volunteer support staff that routinely check "snag" obit cards with newspaper citations, enabling the data input personnel to specifically continue data input. Starting with the A's and B's of the card file index, project data input staffers have now developed very keen senses related to obit card details as well as the nuances related to the handwritten notes or the numerous typefaces on these historic records. In addition to maintaining a

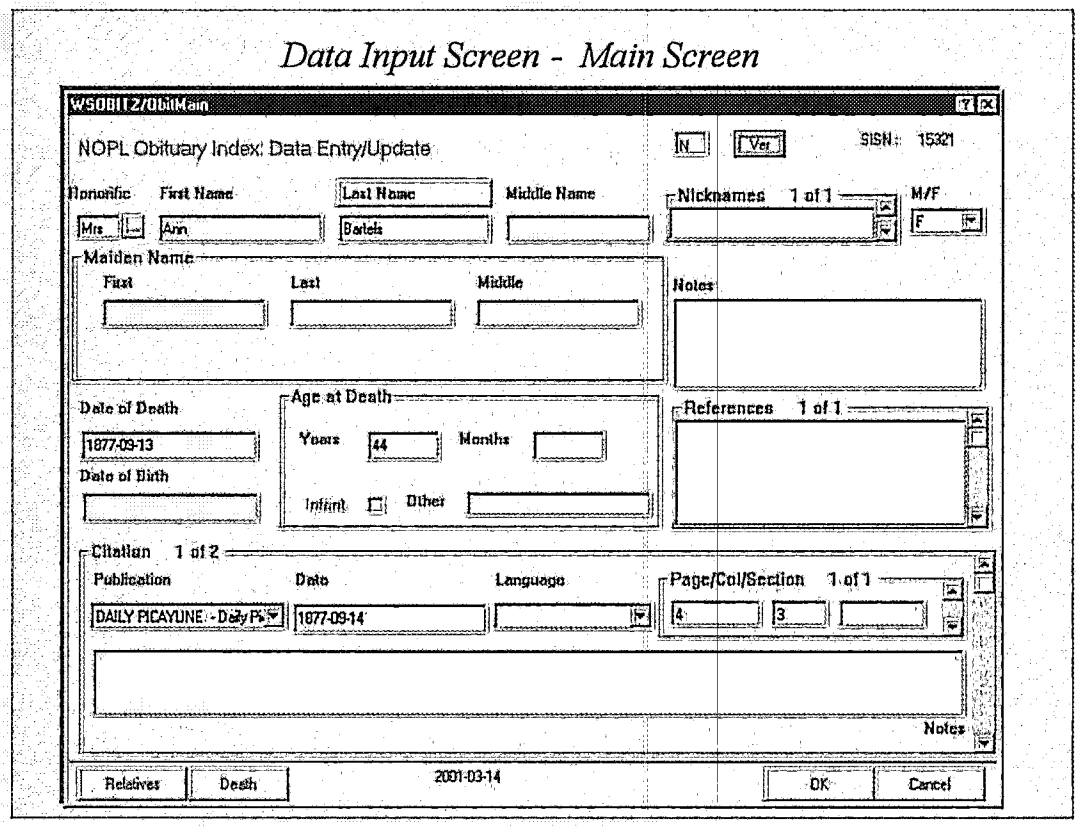

Illustration 1 - Data Input Screen – Main Screen

processing journal that records the development of this project, the data input personnel regularly spot noteworthy and some very interesting obituary index cards. With this process in place and over 2,000 hours of data input having been completed, nearly 70,000 obit index cards have been keyed into the new computer database. Also, countless volunteer hours have been employed in validating and verifying specific card data.

Importance of the Obituary Index

For the genealogist and local historian, the importance of the Obituary Index is found in the access to newspaper information and the focus that it provides when initiating a specific inquiry. The index can help researchers rapidly narrow a genealogy search to a specific time frame, a specific religious affiliation or specific sets of government and religious records, thus making more efficient use of time and effort. In addition to access and search strategy attributes, the index tells us about ourselves, the community and collectively records local history over a substantial time period. Besides historical demographic data, the computerized indexed information will be able to detect trends, verify those periods of epidemics as well as economic prosperity. As an access point to research as well as confirming legal information, the computerized edition of the index is certain to broaden and expand accessibility, making use faster, simpler and more productive for end users. For genealogists, web accessible and computerized obit index records will certainly accelerate the process of substantiating all-important birth, death and cemetery location, all-important aspects of basic genealogical inquiry.

As the computerized obit index begins to take shape in electronic form, the body and the "soul" of print card file information extracted and compiled thus far is quite telling and interesting. Obit cards do tell us that voodoo doctors were actually a part of the local landscape as were any number of characters who roamed the streets of the French Quarter. Noted authors Henry Castellanos and Robert Tallant mention the mystical cast of New Orleans characters in their respective writings, but the Obit Index actually validates voodoo doctor James Alexander's colorful existence in time and space.

[See Illustration 2 - Alexander, James – Obituary card from NOPL Index]

Miss Louisiana "Lulu" Rebel Blackmar is not only noteworthy in name, but her obit notes that her very famous father, A.E. Blackmar, a prolific and controversial songwriter was fined and imprisoned during General Benjamin Butler's occupation of New Orleans for publishing the "Bonnie Blue Flag." Personalities aside, the computerized index literally speaks to our native tongues, eccentricities and ethnicities. Blanchard family names are very rich and revealing, with Clerfruy, Clerphe, Clesida, as well as, Odalie, Oliziphore, Onesaphore and Orelo Blanchard being just a linguistic sampling of some of the exotic first names! The computer index picks out "place" name people like Illinois Barconey and Mrs. Kentucky Barclay and "cool" names like Etienne Beausoleil Batcave. There are "nicknames" for "Okey Dokey" Bagnerise and "Short Block" Adams but perhaps, most indicative of the power and potentiality for this developing electronic resource, the obit citation for one Joseph B. Albite declares on his obituary card that he died of lock jaw!

Whether this collaborative endeavor produces what some might consider rather esoteric scraps of biographical information or whether it realistically documents actual footprints on the path to local history, the automation of the Obituary Index is certain to serve as primary vehicle for launching genealogical inquiry related to New Orleans and Louisiana. Replication of this collaborative model between institutions and organizations sharing common goals of public service is one that should be considered by the entire Louisiana library community.

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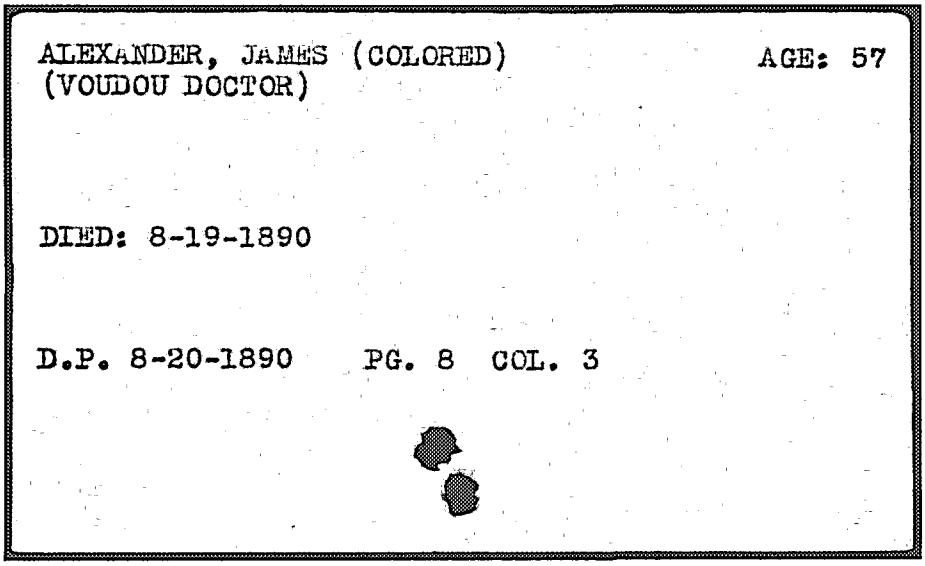
ALEXANDER, JAMES (COLORED) AGE: 57
(VOUDOU DOCTOR)

DIED: 8-19-1890

D.P. 8-20-1890 PG. 8 COL. 3

Illustration 2 - Alexander, James – Obituary card from NOPL Index

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