

Carroll Yesteryears
14 November 2021
Genealogical Society Helps Families Capture Their Past
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Forty years ago a group of 25 enthusiastic, amateur genealogists formed the Carroll County Genealogical Society under the guidance of Janet Riley Colburn, a reference librarian at the Carroll County Public Library, and Margaret R. Price, a former high school history teacher. Although both founders are deceased, the society (CCGS) still enjoys a partnership with the Westminster Library where its extensive collection of genealogical and family history reference material is available for in-house use by the public.

Martha Makosky, director of the library (CCPL) in 1981, recognized that genealogy and family history were becoming popular hobbies, and the library already housed important local history resources in its Davis Room. CCPL and CCGS, working together, would encourage more use of the library and help the new society grow. The first two genealogy publications, *A Guide to Genealogical Research in Carroll County* and *Carroll County, Maryland Marriage Licenses, 1837-1899*, were underwritten by the library. Income from their sales enabled CCGS to begin publishing future books and a newsletter using its own financial resources.

As popular as Ancestry, FamilySearch, and FindAGrave are today for tracing your ancestors, they didn't exist in 1981. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was not hosting a public television program called "Finding Your Roots." DNA meant a great deal to biologists, but not to genealogists. Forty years ago, trying to locate your ancestors could mean endless correspondence with county courthouse clerks, church historians, visits to the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Maryland State Archives, or possibly sending a letter to a resource in Germany, Italy, or Ireland. It was a time-consuming effort to capture your family's past . . . if you could.

Enter the age of personal computers. About 1990 genealogists began using computers to organize their family stories and family trees. Ancestry.com was launched in 1996, FindAGrave in 1998, and the wealth of genealogical information available online has grown exponentially ever since. The Carroll County Genealogical Society's founding thus occurred at a critical moment in the popularity of this pastime. In all probability, the isolation required by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 has allowed more opportunity than usual for genealogists to search the internet looking for their family history.

Enthusiasm was high among the founding members of CCGS. By 1984, the first edition of the research guide appeared thanks to its editor, Dr. Howard Lanham. The publication, which coincided with the 350th anniversary of the founding of Maryland, offered insight into the county's history, local resources, and resources in other repositories including where to find Carroll's church records, its cemeteries, and copies of Carroll County newspapers. The guide was so popular that CCGS published a second edition and that is also out-of-print.

The first issue of the Society's quarterly newsletter, the "Carrolltonian," appeared in May 1982. Today, it reaches approximately 200 individuals and organizations including the Library of

Congress, the Daughters of the American Revolution Library, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, and the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) in Salt Lake City. Current CCGS members live in many states, an indication of how early families traveled beyond Carroll's borders to Kentucky and Tennessee, Missouri, the upper Mid-West, and all the way to California. In spite of these migrations over the centuries, Carroll County still has the names of many of its first settlers represented in the population—Roops, Yinglings, Schaeffers, Dayhoffs, Shrivvers, and Hofffs to name just a few.

Because cemeteries can be a source of so much family history, CCGS members concentrated their initial efforts on identifying and copying the inscriptions on gravestones in all the county cemeteries established before 1950. Copying became the work of dedicated individuals or members and their families who gathered on Sunday afternoons in the spring, summer, and fall for over 20 years. Deciphering inscriptions on weathered stones offered many challenges, and copiers frequently consulted on the most likely interpretations. Was that date 1834 or 1831 or perhaps 1854 or 1851? Return visits to perplexing stones were sometimes necessary.

In 2011, six CCGS members searched an abandoned cemetery on a hilltop on the outskirts of Uniontown. Years before, the owner of the land had allowed cows to wander through the area, but on that autumn day, the site was a quiet oak forest with its floor deep in leaves—no cows. Burials had been reported there as early as 1882, then again in 1966, and in the 1980s. What stones still remained was the question. In fact, a great many were found, some in German, most in English. The earliest, a tiny crude marker barely visible among the leaves, marked the 1769 death of someone named Andres or Anders. Other burials dated from the 1780s to the mid-1850s and offered more information about the deceased. This ancient burial ground, referred to as the Nusbaum or Runnymede Cemetery, was on land patented in the 1760s and probably occupied by tenant farmers who paid rent to the land speculators who owned it. Additional fascinating information discovered that day included the variety of spellings for one family's surname now spelled Yohn. Long ago it appeared as Jun, Youn, and Yon on headstones.

George Billingslea, head of the Westminster Cemetery Company, granted CCGS permission to copy that huge cemetery in 2003, and Harold Robertson singlehandedly set about the task through that fall and winter. The following year CCGS published the last of its nine books of inscriptions which included approximately 70,000 names from over 250 cemeteries.

During its 40-year existence CCGS has launched numerous other efforts to gather and share valuable genealogical information. One involved finding family Bibles still held locally. Owners were encouraged to bring them to CCPL branches if they included birth, death, and marriage records so they could be photocopied. Dozens of people responded. Other efforts included trips to the Maryland State Archives where members helped its staff by indexing Carroll County insolvency records and unpacking, unfolding, and dusting off early wills prior to their being digitized.

Over the years, CCGS has benefitted from the expertise and commitment of dozens of its members. George and Ann Horvath began accumulating information on Carroll's early families and land holdings long before the society was founded and helped lay the foundation for much of the society's later work. Wayne Adams offered advice on how to organize inscription data so

researchers could locate an ancestor's headstone without walking through an entire cemetery. He also spearheaded the first CCGS publications including Carroll's early marriage licenses. For four years, Dot Benedict and Kathryn Riley teamed up to abstract the minutes of Carroll County's Orphan's Court from 1837 through 1885.

Eileen Mummaugh and Charles Scott poured through records in the Register of Wills Office to produce two handsome, hardbound volumes of indices to wills, administrations, inventories and sales of personal property, etc. Other members too numerous to mention have also made significant contributions which have appeared as books, booklets, CDs, in newsletters, or posted on the CCGS website. CCGS continues to share the abundance of information its members have uncovered over the years and current President Russ Hudson keeps the CCGS website – ccgsmd.org – a valuable resource for anyone doing Carroll County research.

Today, members of the society continue a tradition of providing free genealogical advice to walk-ins on "Research Thursdays" at the Westminster Branch of CCPL between 1 and 4 p.m. if the branch is open. When it is possible to resume monthly meetings, CCGS will once again welcome members and guests to its lectures and opportunities for sharing information. Check its website for dates and times.

Mary Ann Ashcraft, a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County, was a founding member of the Carroll County Genealogical Society, a newsletter editor, and head of its Cemetery Committee for many years.



Photo 1 – Courtesy Carroll County Genealogical Society – Terri and Dave Coppersmith copied inscriptions and photographed gravestones at the ancient, abandoned Nusbaum/Runnymede Cemetery on the outskirts of Uniontown in 2011.

