

Local History in Alexandria

BY CHAR MCCARGO BAH

When embarking on a genealogical research project in Alexandria, one of the first places to start is the Local History/Special Collections Section of the Alexandria Library, located in the library's Waller Barrett Branch, 717 Queen Street, in Old Town.

Often called just Special Collections, this is where you will find expert reference librarians who want to help with your research. They have one of the largest compendiums of local history in Alexandria but their materials are not limited to our city. They include other Virginia counties, jurisdictions, and selected research items on the District of Columbia. The collections are comprised of local history, genealogy, civil war, photographs, microfilm, manuscript collections, rare books, maps, periodicals, and collections on African Amer-



icans.

In my genealogical research projects, I used Special Collections regularly when researching the descendants of the Alexandria Freedmen and Contraband's Cemetery. The library's city directories

from 1870 to the early twentieth century helped me track down African Americans who were in Alexandria after and before the Civil War.

A library-compiled index that I found useful was their *Obituary Index to the Alexan-*

dria, VA Gazette: 1916–1946. This index is organized by the last and first names of the person, day and year of death, and *Gazette* publication date, with page number. It was very useful to me in locating descendants of the Freedmen's Cemetery. For example, if John Doe died in 1917 and the paper ran his obituary, it would list his death date, his wife's name, how many children, if any, and where his children were living at the time of his death. It would also list any siblings or parents alive at the time of his death and details about his funeral arrangements.

This type of information is a goldmine for genealogists. An obituary can help you to locate family members a hundred years after the death, because you are not researching only the deceased person but also names of people who were or are related to him. This is called collateral re-

search; it gives you a host of family members' names to also research. By identifying a person's family members in the early stages, you may be able to obtain other documents about them and their family that can reveal present-day relatives.

Have you done research in Special Collections? Please share your experiences and feel free to share any of your genealogical research methods by emailing AskGenieChar@gmail.com. I will post your stories in the next issue of "Ask Genie Char." And if you have any questions about researching genealogy, email me.

Char McCargo Bah is a published author, freelance writer, independent historian, genealogist and a Living Legend of Alexandria. She is a columnist for three newspapers and maintains two blogs, <http://www.theo-theralexandria.com> and <http://www.findingthingsforu.com>.



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Sue Goodhart

sue@thegoodhartgroup.com

Allison Goodhart DuShuttle

allison@thegoodhartgroup.com

thegoodhartgroup.com
703.362.3221

