

Tracing Pasts: Visit ancestors' home-towns for up-close history

[Comments 0](#)

January 08, 2009 01:11:00 PM

[By Linda Pazics Kleback](#)

Here in Maryland we are caught up in the preparations for Barack Obama's inauguration. Our newspapers are full of practical details as Washington, D.C., which is less than an hour from where I live, prepares to handle a massive crowd. Officials are cautioning those coming that hotels are booked, both in D.C. and outlying areas like Baltimore. Anyone planning to park a car in the downtown area is making a big mistake. Special tickets are being sold for the trains, and they are almost gone. Several expressways will be closed to provide parking for the 10,000 tour buses expected. People are renting their houses and apartments to visitors for hefty fees.

We've been having great discussions at work with those attending as they plan the logistics for the day. I wish I could join them at this amazing and momentous occasion myself, but I'm not able to do the walking and standing that will be required. I'm envious of those who will be there and admire their determination to be on site at the parade and swearing -in ceremony.

Of course we all know that of the millions of people there, few will get a close look at our new president and his family. Why, then, are so many making this journey? They would have a better view of the events on TV. Instead, they will battle huge crowds to be in the same general area when history is made.

As genealogists, we may understand better than most what drives the inauguration attendees. For us, a goal we share is to visit the places where our ancestors lived. The history of our families may not be a national milestone, but it is of huge importance to us. And those of us who have managed to make a trip to our family homesteads know how much the journey has added to our understanding of our forebears.

What can a research trip to the areas where your families lived do for you? There is always the opportunity for on-site research. This will give you a chance to visit local libraries, courthouses and cemeteries. But there is more you can do. What about visiting the churches that were so important to their daily life? What about the schools they attended? If you are working on recent relatives, what about neighbors? What about the cousins you rarely or never see? They may be a source of information you'll never find in a record book.

Walk down the streets where your ancestors lived. Survey the surroundings and the towns. Get a sense of the climate. What was life like for them? If the weather there is extreme, was that why they moved to another area? You can research an area from home and even pull up great pictures and facts online, but it still isn't the same as being there.

Just as those attending the inauguration will always be able to say that they were actually there to share in the atmosphere of a historic day, we can do the same with our personal histories. There is a feeling you get when you stand where your ancestors stood. We often feel so close to these people we research; visiting their home areas can be both exciting and satisfying.

If you possibly can, try to plan a visit to your areas of interest. It can be a homecoming just for you and your family and a memory you will cherish. Oh, and if you are coming to D.C. for the inauguration, have a great time! Bring patience and good walking shoes.