

Tracing pasts: Hang on; new technology is on its way

[Comments 0](#)

April 27, 2009 07:12:00 AM

By [LINDA KLEBACK](#)

Genealogist Linda Pazics Kleback formerly was a researcher at the Bay County Public Library. She now lives in Maryland.

As a working genealogist for more 30 years, I thought I had a pretty good level of expertise in dealing with faded documents.

You've all seen them. They are the unreadable census records, the marriage records so faded you're guessing at most of what the document states, and the deeds you struggle with, using every hint you've ever found for reading the vanishing text. I've used yellow paper flat over a projected microfilm image. I've enlarged. I've darkened. I've lightened. I've photographed. I've scanned and scanned again.

Sometimes I just had to give up. I felt there had to be a way to retrieve these critical images, but it was way beyond any expertise I, or anyone else, had at the time.

Thank heaven for developing technologies. On April 22, Dick Eastman mentioned an article on Ancestry Magazine's Web site at www.ancestrymagazine.com/2009/04/genea-Logic/preserving-genealogicalrecords . You don't want to miss this.

The article "Preserving Genealogical Records" tells the story of Jack Reese who was dismayed when he tried to use the 1851 Manchester, England, census which was in poor condition: "Ink had faded. Water damage left mold that was eating away at what was left of the paper. Some pages were just fragments. Others? Completely blank.

For Jack it was a fun problem. After all, he's an engineer with a background in both computer imaging and family history. Jack and the census were the perfect fit. And creating a camera that could find words where it didn't seem there were any? That would mean building the perfect beast."

The story has a happy ending. Jack did indeed put together a camera that changed what had been invisible to writing in a readable form. The article includes some stunning examples. It also explains some of what went into the process, including modifying a Nixon camera, use of special lenses and lights and creation of a special light box. Obviously this isn't something we'll be able to buy for ourselves any time soon, but the possibilities are terrific.

Work had been done with these records previously by a team from the Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society who had used UV lights with some success. I'm sure other groups and individuals had also experimented with new technology and faded images. Jack Reese's camera is just one of the latest and the most successful. It shows what can be done, and what we may see happened in the near future.

Hopefully someone will produce cameras like this commercially so they can be used in all libraries and archives to recover the images we have lost. I know I have some pages from the 1860 Butler County, Pennsylvania, census

I would love to be able to read at last. And how great to be able to read all the pages from the 1935 and 1945 Florida State Censuses.

I've always believed the brick walls we run into doing our research are really just pauses. We need to wait for new records to be found or figure out a new way of looking at the problem. Sometimes we just need to hang in there until a great guy like Jack Reese with drive and expertise creates a new technology that can help us all.