

# Tracing pasts: Smithsonian is a great resource

May 29, 2009 11:35:00 AM

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Last week I had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Natural History, which is one of the museums of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The trip was sponsored by the Maryland Interlibrary Loan (MAILL) group of which I am a member and also the recording secretary.

We were able to visit many of the exhibits and get a behind-the-scenes tour of several of the work areas in the museum. Besides getting close-up looks at dinosaur bones and mastodon hair, we were able to visit some of the small libraries throughout the museum.

It was fascinating to see these various collections and to learn that the Smithsonian actually runs 20 major libraries including one in the Republic of Panama (the Earl S. Tupper Library of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute), one in New York (the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum Library) and others in the D.C. metropolitan area.

As a genealogist, I found many things of interest on this trip. It is always valuable to take a look at items from the past while thinking about those ancestors who may have hunted that mammal or mined that mineral. But it was also useful to talk with the librarians there, specifically David Steere Jr., the Natural History Librarian.

He works a lot with incoming interlibrary loan requests and reminded us of something that all researchers need to remember. Many of the requests we get can be easily filled by going to Google, Google Books or Google Scholar first. This is true whether the request is for a scientific journal or a family history question.

I appreciated the reminder. While I always remember to use Google at work, I sometimes forget to check or recheck the site for books and articles I need for my family history research. New material is added to the Google sites all the time. This is a great free source for all of us.

I did a Google Books search for Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, and got 3,880 hits. Many of the books that I had paid a lot of money for over the years are now available free there. And the Web site has the advantage of a search box for each book so it is easy to find names and other information.

Another advantage is that Google Books picks up text from inside books. I found a court case for Armstrong County people in the District Reports of Cases Decided in All the Judicial Districts of the State of Pennsylvania By Pennsylvania Courts, published by H. W. Page., 1893, Item notes: v. 2, Original from Harvard University, Digitized May 15, 2008.

When I did a search for my ancestor Benedict Grossman, Google Books even found a query I had placed in the NGS Newsletter in 1995. That's exciting!

According to the Google Books Web site, there currently are 7 million books available with many more to come. There are some books that show up in searches for which full text is not yet online. Because of Google's new agreement with authors and publishers, many of these should be digitized in the future. Or you can always resort to interlibrary loan through a local library if you can't wait.

Google Books is at <http://books.google.com> . If you'd like to explore the Smithsonian online, they have put up some great sites. Their main site is at [www.si.edu](http://www.si.edu) . Their Galaxy of Images digital library is at <http://www.si.edu/imagegalaxy>.

The Portraits section as well as the Society and Culture section are especially interesting to family historians. If you are visiting D.C. anytime soon, admission to the Smithsonian is free, and it's a great place to bring the kids.