

GENEALOGICA & HERALDICA XXXV

REFORMATION REVOLUTION RESTORATION



CAMBRIDGE

2022

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ISBN 978-0-904858-07-5

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Photographs on the rear cover: Congress banners in Clare College Scholars' Garden by Jack Sain, plaque created for the Congress baton by Paul A. Fox

Printed in Great Britain by 4word Ltd, Bath

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www.theheraldrysociety.com

DONALD LINES JACOBUS AND THE SCHOLARLY GENEALOGICAL REVOLUTION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1922–1964

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A patent of a grant of arms from 1480 (**Figure 1**) may serve as an unlikely point of departure for this survey in American genealogical historiography – a token of the status quo of what passed as scholarly genealogy in the United States at the outset of the twentieth century. The grant is by John More, Norroy King of Arms, to Christopher Browne of Lincolnshire and Rutland. It is among very few original patents of grants of arms surviving from before the College of Arms was incorporated four years later, in 1484, and is almost certainly the only such original now in the United States,¹ where it is among the heraldic treasures of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston.²



Figure 1: the Browne patent of 1480. New England Historic Genealogical Society, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections. Reproduced by permission of the Society.

One great-grandson of the grantee was Robert Browne, a dissenting clergyman in Elizabeth I's reign (subsequently reconciled to the Church of England), after whom separatists at the beginning of the seventeenth century were often called "Brownists." Robert Browne's family figures in one of the interesting lateral pedigrees in Sir Anthony Wagner's 1975 *Pedigree and Progress* (lateral pedigrees demonstrate surprising connections, often by marriage, linking diverse contemporaries).³ This lateral pedigree

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demonstrated a connection between Robert Browne, the separatist, and William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, who helped shield his kinsman from persecution for dissent. But this chart includes a gross error: in it, Robert Browne is given a son named Edward who was said to have sailed to Maryland in North America with Lord Baltimore in 1634. But Robert Browne had no such son.⁴ Wagner, in error, had taken the statement about the American son at face value from Browne's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* [DNB].⁵ The false son Edward had not been in Robert Browne's *original* DNB entry, published in 1886,⁶ but was only added to an *Errata* volume in 1904⁷ and thence to the second edition in 1907.

The source of the 1904 'correction' to Browne's DNB article seems to have been a 1902 article in an American journal, improbably titled *The American Historical Magazine and Tennessee Historical Society Quarterly*, published at the Peabody Normal College in Nashville, Tennessee.⁸ The claimed author of the article (though it seems doubtful, from style and content, that it could have been written that early) was Morgan Brown IV (died 1840), an early Tennessee pioneer whose claimed first male-line ancestor in North America was Edward Brown, said to be a son of the separatist Robert Brown, and among the first Catholic founders of Maryland. This first Edward Browne of Maryland, however, was a Protestant, not a Catholic, and he settled in Maryland twenty years later than the first ship with Lord Baltimore and his Catholic gentlemen. There could have been no connection to Robert Browne the separatist.⁹

It is perhaps the authority suggested by the title *American Historical Magazine* – forgetting the subtitle about Tennessee – that led to the pious fiction of this Brown narrative being credulously accepted by the editors of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. At the other end of the publication spectrum, though with a similar title, was the journal *American Historical Review* (AHR). Founded in 1891 in imitation of *English Historical Review* (five years older), *American Historical Review* was the flagship of the new academic discipline of history, only recently introduced to American universities along lines pioneered by German academics. The publishing organization was the American Historical Association, still (in 2022) the leading professional organization of professors of history in United States universities. A stark organizational contrast with another subtle difference in name was the *American Historical Society*, an incorporated, for-profit publisher of genealogies and local histories, particularly the genre of local history. It was padded with self-written biographies (including genealogies) of wealthy residents of a given county, assembled into one or more fat appendix volumes following a more pedestrian town or county history. As these competing similar titles suggest, in 1902, publishing of both historical and genealogical periodicals in the United States was in something like a "Wild West" – caveat lector.

But the broader landscape of genealogical publications and sponsoring organizations had already matured considerably by 1900 from origins in the mid-nineteenth century by a few leading organizations and journals. The oldest and largest such organization was the New England Historic Genealogical Society (1845), whose journal *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (1847), is the oldest continuously published dedicated *genealogical* periodical in the world. Leading regional or state followers included *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, published since 1870 by a state organization founded in 1869; *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, begun in 1877, and *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, begun in 1893. Many

other states began publishing genealogical periodicals from 1880 to 1900 and even more did so in the following century. The National Genealogical Society, founded in Washington, D.C., in 1903, grew slowly into its titular national scope, with its journal, *The National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, begun in 1912.

Along with journals, the other pillar of the field was the publication of books documenting an individual family's genealogy. This was the paradigmatic form of genealogical publication, a genre whose growth can be traced in bibliographies already printed from the mid-nineteenth century. The first bibliography of single-family genealogies was actually published in 1862: a prescient annotated bibliography organized by date of publication, running to 272 pages.¹⁰ Bibliographies blossomed to encompass thousands of individual works by 1900.¹¹

One other great institutional development in genealogy from the turn of the twentieth century was the lineage societies, a uniquely American phenomenon. These are social organizations in which descent from a particular type of qualifying ancestor is the principal criterion for admission. Joining was, or became, a necessarily genealogical exercise. The *Daughters of the American Revolution*, founded in 1890, is the largest and most iconic such organization. Many similar organizations appeared in the 1890s and they are still ubiquitous today. The genealogical standards employed by such groups have evolved over time, and form a separate avenue of inquiry into the history of genealogical scholarship, not addressed in this paper.¹² One by-product of these organizations was the publication of compendia of qualifying ancestors, some of which evolved into sophisticated research reference works.¹³

Certain hallmarks are identifiable for genealogical and local-history scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century. Local historical material that predominated in most regional and even national venues included editions of letters and documents; military history (including memoirs and ephemera related to the Civil War and earlier conflicts, depending on region); and narratives of the founding of communities (defined by geographical migrations, religious denominations, etc). In genealogical literature, male-line single-family genealogies dominated the private presses, with the periodicals often including indexes and editions of source material not published elsewhere. On the whole, neither the genealogical nor the local-history periodicals included anything that could be used as a case study or for a methodological, process-oriented discussion.

This, then, was the scene when Donald Lines Jacobus (1887–1970) of New Haven, Connecticut, came of age (**Figure 2**). Jacobus was a man of modest means, well educated at Yale university, but not trained specifically in historical research and methodology. His first genealogical article appeared in 1905, while still a university student. He graduated from Yale with the degrees of Bachelor of Arts in 1908¹⁴ and Master of Arts in 1911. Always a writer, he published volumes of poetry.¹⁵

Jacobus, in his self-written eulogy, gave thanks for “the ability and the luck to make a living and a career out of a boyhood hobby.” He also noted wryly that “in extreme youth I was called the ‘Boy Wonder of Genealogy’, and I have lived to hear myself referred to in old age as the ‘Dean of American Genealogists’.”¹⁶

In a sixty-five-year career Donald Lines Jacobus produced a very large number of single-family or all-my-ancestor genealogical compilations under contract to clients – some books bearing his name, some not – but his stature in the field was principally through the influence of his scholarship as displayed in his own journal, *The American*



Figure 2: Donald Lines Jacobus while a student at Yale University. Courtesy of the American Society of Genealogists.

Genealogist, and finally also through his personal example, as a genial mentor to many other genealogists, male and female, in his own generation, and in that which followed.

The American Genealogist began with a humbler title, *The New Haven Genealogical Magazine*; the first issue was published in July 1922. The principal content of the magazine for its first eight years was a serialized compilation, alphabetically arranged, of genealogies of the early colonial families of New Haven Colony. New Haven, established in 1637, was an independent colony until its merger with Connecticut Colony following a royal charter of 1662. The genealogies followed many New Haven families down to the mid eighteenth century, when many New Havenites migrated north or west. Though intended as a superficial compendium, vital dates are almost everywhere accompanied

by highly abbreviated citations to the original town records from which they were drawn. Interspersed throughout the eight volumes are insightful book reviews, occasional editorials, and a few other source compilations. Beginning with the ninth volume in 1932, the journal expanded its title, tone, and scope. It became *The American Genealogist and New Haven Genealogical Magazine*, then dropped the *New Haven* subtitle five years later, in 1937 (**Figure 3**). In this new incarnation, the journal inaugurated a model of genealogical case studies, thematic articles, book reviews, and editorials, and developed into a vehicle for instruction of a new generation of scholarly genealogists.

As the journal soared in scope, Jacobus became widely known for the pithy and conversational tone with which he wrote on a variety of genealogical topics. This style had already debuted in a slim book he produced during one hot summer week in 1930: *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession*.¹⁷ This book combines thematic essays and casually-narrated case studies – some mere anecdotes – selected to be particularly instructive to those desiring to build skills and experience as genealogists.

Case studies are the genre missing from prior genealogical literature. In most genealogical journals, including *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* and others emulating it, the goal of running compiled genealogies had been to read the family into a permanent record, beginning with the most notable families and filling in the corners with, say, the ranks of the first colonial settlers of a given locale. With case studies, on the other hand, the point was not so much who the family was (and where it fit into the social and political life of their particular colony or state), but how one might *learn* from the way in which a genealogy was solved and presented. In his short genealogical articles, Jacobus was writing for other professionals, or for amateurs who appreciated learning method while doing research. For other professionals, Jacobus presented a candid insider's view, including frank discussion of such topics as problematic clients and the myths from which they must be dissuaded.

It must not be forgotten that *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* includes a chapter on eugenics. This was to be expected from a well-educated writer in 1930 who combined an interest in new methods with the outlook and beliefs common to his generation. To his credit, Jacobus critiqued eugenics specifically on the basis that the quality of genealogical data underlying many eugenics studies was so poor as to cast their conclusions in doubt. He reserved judgment about the validity of eugenics-derived hypotheses, saying “let the research continue,” confident that fashionable but untenable generalizations – particularly dangerous in the 1930s – would be sifted out.¹⁸

Genealogy as Pastime and Profession, in print for decades, solidified the concept of a “Jacobus School” of genealogists embracing his example. It is not a straightforward exercise to characterize the generation of genealogists in the “Jacobus School” of the 1930s to 1960s. Many were well educated – professionals, academics, etc. – but were not professionally trained in the field of academic history. (A lone exception to this rule was John Insley Coddington, mentioned below.) Many, therefore, had research, analytical, and writing skills built in other fields that they then creatively applied to genealogy. Many were women, gifted and competent, but who did not, in the inter-war period, have the career paths open to them that would later be accessible. Most were in the Northeast, or in the Mid-Atlantic or Chesapeake regions. But Jacobus's influence would increasingly be felt nationally after World War II, a geographical expansion from the East Coast fueled in part by the activities of the Genealogical Society of Utah. Among these men and women,

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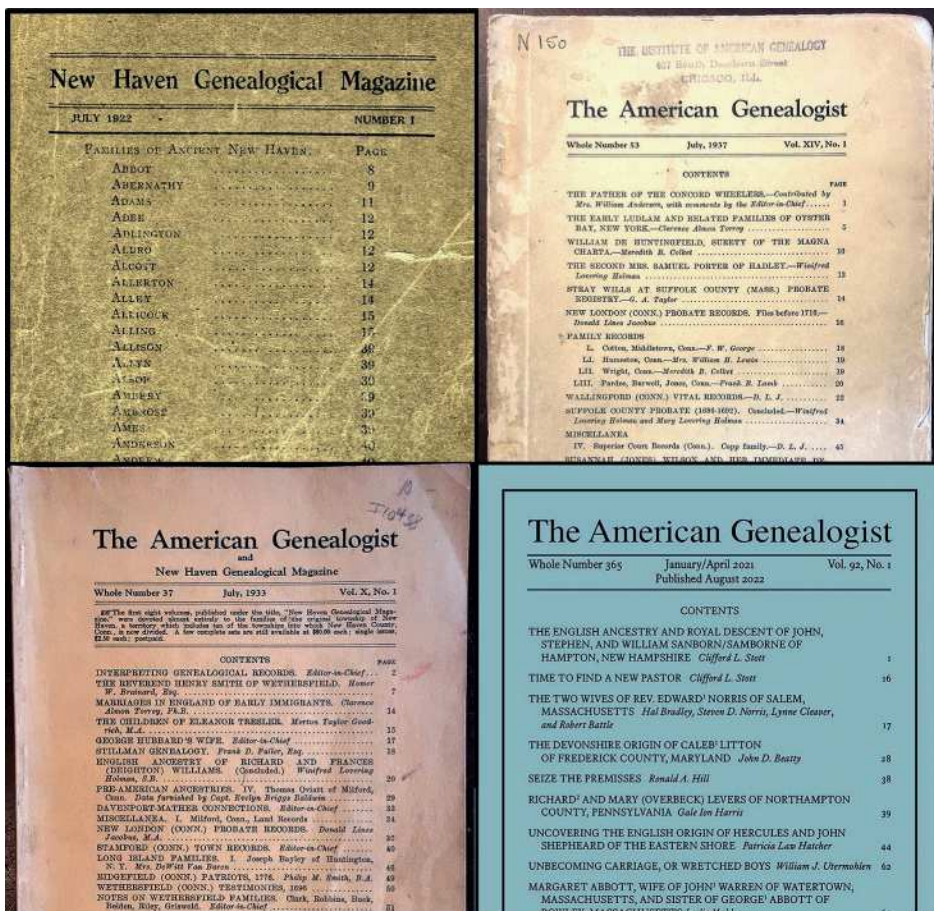


Figure 3: *The American Genealogist*: cover montage: issues from 1922, 1933, 1937, and 2022. Courtesy of *The American Genealogist*.

some pursued genealogy as commissioned work; others as an unremunerated passtime. What they shared was the realization that genealogical scholarship involved dedication and standards, as well as experience, skill, and a certain knack.

A major step in the institutionalization of the “Jacobus School” was the establishment in 1940 of the American Society of Genealogists. This is an honorary society, with membership capped at fifty living fellows, honoring the most skillful, prolific, or influential genealogical writers, judged principally through the corpus of published genealogical work. The American Society of Genealogists was conceived by three genealogists – not including Jacobus, who with his modest income and elderly mother rarely traveled – who met during the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1940, at a hotel bar in New York City: Arthur Adams, Meredith B. Colket Jr., and John Insley Coddington.¹⁹ Of these three, only Coddington was a trained academic historian; Adams was an English professor and librarian, as was Colket. By this time the American Historical Association, the organization of professional academic historians, had long

looked down on genealogists. It should be no surprise that the first person the three founders tapped to join the newly conceived society of fellows was Donald Lines Jacobus, who is therefore number four on the roll of Fellows of the American Society of Genealogists.²⁰

The organization went on to play a major role in spreading and codifying the ethos of the Jacobus school over the next fifty years, and arguably, still today. By the 1950s the society had grown to its full complement of fifty fellows, including some foreigners whose work was influential on or of use to Americans – including Sir Anthony Wagner, elected in 1944.²¹ Fellows' ranks included prolific or influential genealogists, both professional and amateur, and journal editors.

Two very different organizations that may be identified in part as offshoots of the American Society of Genealogists suggest different aspects of the influence of the Jacobus School. The first, founded in 1950, was a bit of a *jeu d'esprit* in the field of lineage societies: the “Descendants of the Illegitimate Sons and Daughters of the Kings of Britain,” or “Royal Bastards.” Founded in 1950 by ten charter members (including Sir Anthony Wagner) who were all fellows of the ASG, it was intended to be a tongue-in-cheek, yet scholarly, mirror-image of the lineage societies such as “Americans of Royal Descent” or “Order of the Crown of Charlemagne” that, since the end of the nineteenth century, had enshrined unscholarly claims of remote royal lineage. The organization exists today, and is generally viewed as the most scholarly and educational among lineage societies – one for which, uniquely, the application process is essentially a tutorial learning experience.²²

A more sober contribution of the ASG to genealogical scholarship was the publication, in 1960, of a genealogical primer, *Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources*.²³ Like Jacobus's *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* thirty years earlier, it was conceived as a guide for practitioners and experts as well as novices. No longer the conversational discourse of a single writer, it distills decades of knowledge from top experts in various thematic subfields – although Jacobus himself wrote four of the six chapters in Part 1, ‘General Considerations.’ In some thematic chapters it has not been superseded, even after sixty years and the computer and internet eras.²⁴

Another second institutional offspring – in part – of the American Society of Genealogists, is the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), created in 1964 by a group including fellows of the American Society of Genealogists, officers of the National Genealogical Society, and others.²⁵ The BCG was the first credentialing organization in genealogy in the United States.²⁶ The Board awards the postnominals “CG,” for “certified genealogist,” to those who complete a rigorous educational program and submit a qualifying dossier of professional work. As there is no statutory regulation of the genealogical profession in the United States or in any U.S. state, this credentialing process is entirely voluntary. But one measure of the wide impact of the BCG on the field as a whole is the general currency of the Board's codification of professional genealogical standards, gathered for the first time in 2000 and revised three times since then, most recently in 2021, with the incorporation of additional standards applying specifically to the use of DNA evidence in genealogical research.²⁷

On the other hand, those who write genealogy, especially for publication, and especially for genealogical journals, know that codifications of standards are sterile without frank and candid exploration of case studies, with opportunities to discuss those

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cases and build on them. This was, in large measure, the gift to the field of Donald Lines Jacobus and his contemporaries in the 1930s to 1960s, even though the field has changed so much in the decades since.

This survey leaves off at the end of the 1960s, at the cusp of even more revolutionary changes in the genealogical world. In the United States, a seminal moment was the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots*, both a cause and an effect of the explosive democratization of genealogy stemming from the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Within the next decade came another revolution: the application of computers to problems of project management, data indexing and access, and other areas profoundly affecting genealogical research among myriad other fields. The decade after that saw the advent of DNA data of use for both the 'deep' genealogy of the human species and proximal genealogy in historical generations.²⁸ Each of these developments has, on its own, further revolutionized the fields of genealogy, but these new transformations have taken place within the context of a field professionalized and enriched by the scholarly genealogical revolution of the Jacobus School.

¹ For one collection of fifteenth-century patents with texts and sources see Sebastian Nelson, "Fifteenth Century English Patents of Arms," online, <http://verysleepy.itgo.com/grants.htm>.

² Boston, New England Historic Genealogical Society, R. Stanton Avery Collection, bequest of Edward Ingersoll Browne (1901). Browne had purchased it in England sometime in the 1860s–1880s, and erroneously believed himself descended from the patentee.

³ Sir Anthony Wagner, *Pedigree and Progress: Essays in the Genealogical Interpretation of History* (London, 1975), pedigree chart 67 (p. 226), discussed in text at p. 102.

⁴ F. Ives Cater, 'Robert Browne's ancestors and descendants', *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society* vol. 2 (1905–6) pp. 151–159. Cater's discussion of Robert Browne's nine children, apparently complete, includes no mention of an alleged son Edward, implying that Cater was not aware of the claim in the 1904 DNB errata volume before his article, still the last word on Robert Browne's family, went to press.

⁵ *DNB* 2nd ed., (London, 1908–9), vol. 3, pp. 57–61.

⁶ *DNB*, 1st ed., (London, 1885–1900), vol. 7, pp. 57–61.

⁷ *DNB: Errata* (London, 1904), p. 39. Typically in the *new DNB* less information is given on family members of subjects, and the article on Robert Browne does not discuss actual or alleged children (Michael E. Moody, 'Browne, Robert (1550?–1633)', *New DNB*).

⁸ "Sketches and Anecdotes of the Family of Brown and Some Others With Whom They Are Connected, or From Whom They Are Descended," *The American Historical Magazine and Tennessee Historical Society Quarterly* vol. 7 (1902), pp. 148–64, 219–43, 362–71.

⁹ Based on Wagner's mention in *Pedigree and Progress* [note 3], this Edward Brown of Maryland was included in the *Roll of Arms* of the Committee on Heraldry of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. The registration has been canceled; notice will appear in *A Roll of Arms of the Committee on Heraldry of the New England Historic Genealogical Society: Twelfth Part*, projected for publication in 2023.

¹⁰ William H. Whitmore, *A Handbook of American Genealogy, Being a Catalogue of Family Histories... Chronologically Arranged* (Albany, 1862).

¹¹ William H. Whitmore, *The American Genealogist*, 2nd and 3rd eds. of title in prev. note (Albany, 1868 and 1873). In 1898, an alphabetical arrangement was published as *Munsell's American Genealogist* (Albany, 1898). The same Albany publisher, Munsell, also produced terse indexes to genealogies appearing in local histories or other compilations, as *Index to American Genealogies....* in several editions from 1868 to 1900, similar to Marshall's *Genealogist's Guide* for England.

¹² For an excellent sociological overview see Shannon Combs-Bennett, 'A New Aristocracy? The Evolution of Lineage Societies in the United States', also presented at this Congress.

¹³ Two of these are *Adventurers of Purse and Person: Virginia, 1607–1624/5*, 4th ed., ed. John Frederick Dorman, 3 vols. in 4 (Baltimore, 2004–7), orig. ed. 1954, published by the Order of First Families of Virginia; and Meredith B. Colket Jr., *Founders of Early American Families: Immigrants from Europe, 1607–1657*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Keith M. Sheldon (Cleveland, 2002), orig. ed. 1975, published by the Order of Founders and Patriots of America.

¹⁴ By coincidence, one of Jacobus's classmates in the class of 1908 at Yale was another nationally renowned genealogist, Walter Goodwin Davis (1885–1966) of Portland, Maine, who followed Jacobus as the second genealogist named to the National Genealogy Hall of Fame in 1987 (Jacobus had been elected in 1986 as the

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founding inductee in this project, under the aegis of the National Genealogical Society: ngsgenealogy.org/hall-of-fame-members). Davis came from more wealth and sophistication than Jacobus; the two did not know each other as students, but worked cordially together as genealogists in later years.

¹⁵ *Poems* (New Haven, 1914); *Five Currant Bushes and Other Verse* (New Haven, 1927)

¹⁶ “The Jacobus Memorial Service,” *The American Genealogist* vol. 47 (1970), pp. 259–62, at 260. This unique tribute includes several photographs and personal reminiscences.

¹⁷ Donald Lines Jacobus, *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* (New Haven, 1930; rev. ed., 1968).

¹⁸ “Genealogy and Eugenics,” *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* [note 16], 1st ed. (1930), pp. 121–126, at 126; retained in the rev. ed. (1968), pp. 102–5, at 105.

¹⁹ Dr. Arthur Adams, Meredith B. Colket Jr., and John Insley Coddington (on whom see above).

²⁰ A chronological roll of fellows is at the website of the American Society of Genealogists (fasg.org/fellows/all-fellows/).

²¹ The two other Englishmen elected the same year were Alfred Trego Butler (Windsor Herald, d. 1946), and C. L’Estrange Ewen (d. 1949, author of books on surnames, witchcraft persecutions, and East Anglian families).

²² Walter Lee Sheppard Jr., “Descendants of the Illegitimate Sons and Daughters of the Kings of Britain,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* vol. 62 (1974), pp. 182–191. The website is royalbastards.org.

²³ Milton Rubincam and Jean Stephenson, eds., *Genealogical Research: Sources and Methods* (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Genealogists, 1960).

²⁴ (A notable thematic chapter that is still of value is that on heraldry by Dr. Harold Bowditch.) A companion volume, *Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources, Volume II* was published in 1971, with chapters of specific guidance on research in various American regions beyond the East Coast, and additional special topics.

²⁵ “History of BCG” (online: bcgcertification.org/about/history), citing Kay Haviland Freilich, “BCG History,” *OnBoard* 7.1

²⁶ Another organization, the Utah Genealogical Association, also began awarding a credential to professional genealogists in 1964; the credentialing arm of the Utah Genealogical Association has since been renamed the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists.

²⁷ These standards were codified successively in *BCG Standards Manual* (2000), *Genealogy Standards: 50th Anniversary Edition* (2014), *Genealogy Standards*, 2d ed. (2017), and *Genealogy Standards*, 2d. ed. revised (2021).

²⁸ Some of these changes have been addressed from a personal perspective by Dr. Janet Few, ‘The Family History Revolution’, in this Congress. Many of these more recent trends, as well as the earlier developments traced here, have also been addressed in the past decade in histories of the field of genealogy, written both by professional historians (François Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* [New York, 2013]) and by practitioners of genealogy (Michael Sharpe, *Family Matters: A History of Genealogy* [Barnsley, 2011]).