

## Genealogists index Norwalk marriage and death records

By **ROBERT KOCH**

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NORWALK -- While some New England families can trace their ancestry back to the passengers on the Mayflower, most others' roots are less glamorous and more difficult to ascertain.

Take, for instance, the Barnes family.

"They were regular working people. A lot were oystermen and a lot of shoemakers, which was a little craft everybody did," said Paul Keroack, semi-retired reference librarian at the Main Library on Belden Avenue and member of the Connecticut Ancestry Society. "A lot of people think, 'Well, Yankee families came on the Mayflower and their genealogy is done. But no, there's just loads of families (whose histories) have never been written.'"

Over the course of several years, Keroack and two other members of the Connecticut Ancestry Society indexed Norwalk marriage and death records for the years 1848 until 1861, moving from old, bound and handwritten books to printed, alphabetized volumes the names of Norwalk's most famous and least famous families, and all those in between.

"I did it partly because it needed doing, but I was also researching an old Norwalk family named Barnes," Keroack said.

Keroack, Connecticut Ancestry Society President Nora Galvin, and member Barbara Dempsey this spring presented Norwalk Town Clerk Richard A. McQuaid and his staff the two bound indexes which record local deaths and marriages for the 13-year period.

The three members of the Fairfield County-based genealogical society compiled the indexes to help residents and visitors find information about their 19th-century ancestors. The group plans to continue its work by indexing death records for the years 1862 through 1878, and marriage records for the years 1862 through 1869.

When family researchers come into the Town Clerk's office and ask for help finding information about their ancestors, McQuaid recommends that they first check the indexes provided by the Ancestry Society. Sure, their ancestors names may well be in the original, red, handwritten bound volumes, but a quick glance in the alphabetized indexes could save time.

"They had beautiful handwriting but their spelling was very poor," said McQuaid of the original records. "When we go researching (names), it's very tough. Now with the index (it's easy). I've used them many times."

According to McQuaid, family research in the Town Clerk's Office is not uncommon. One woman earlier this month spent the entire day in the office searching for records, he said.

And, of course, McQuaid has searched the records out of curiosity about his family history.

"We're in there," said McQuaid, whose ancestors came from Ireland and Russia.

Keroack said he does not have ancestors in the Norwalk records. But he has researched his family elsewhere and discovered that he is distantly related to the famous Beat Generation writer Jack Kerouac.

"That is quite distant, but with the rare surname it was not too difficult to trace," Keroack said. "The emigrant from France to Quebec, in 1721, had two sons. I descend from one, Jack from the other, and we are seven generations later. Jack was sixth cousin to my father, same generation. I would be a seventh cousin to Jack's daughter."

As for others wishing to pursue their family history, the Connecticut Ancestry Society recommends beginning with yourself and going back one generation at a time. Find and copy names, dates and places of birth, marriages and deaths of each ancestor.

Death records will give the date and place of birth and name of spouse. Birth records will give the date and place of birth and names of parents. Marriage records will include the birthplaces and parents' names of each partner.

The Connecticut Ancestry Society was founded in Stamford in 1954 to further genealogy research in Fairfield County and help members find their ancestors anywhere in the world. The society holds seven meetings a year, all open to the public, featuring talks on genealogical topics and workshops where attendees discuss their research problems and successes. Members receive quarterly issues of the society journal, which publishes articles by experienced genealogists and others sharing their family research, as well as extracts from vital and historical records useful to the family historian.