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### Mississippi State University Libraries' Annual E.O. Templeton, Jr. History & Genealogy Fair

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# Mississippi State University Libraries' Annual E.O. Templeton, Jr. History & Genealogy Fair

Authors: Corinne Kennedy, Jennifer McGillan, DeeDee Baldwin  
Mississippi State University Libraries



## Developing & Hosting MSU's Genealogy Fair

Mississippi State University (MSU) Libraries has held an annual Genealogy Fair for the last twelve years as a way to engage the greater surrounding community. The fair, named for E.O. Templeton, Jr. in 2013, features a variety of sessions, workshops, and research opportunities for history and genealogy enthusiasts, including hands-on research help from MSU librarians and archivists. Attendees learn about genealogical resources held in the MSU Libraries' collections, develop and improve genealogical research skills, and pick up tips for preserving family history. Hosting public events involves everyone in the community, not just the scholarly community.

The E.O. Templeton, Jr. History & Genealogy Fair is held the first weekend of June every year. The fair committee begins planning the event in January because every part of the fair takes careful consideration and time.

The committee, comprised of faculty from Special Collections and Research Services, strives to create a fair that features information on popular topics in genealogy, that is accessible to all community members, that draws on the expertise available in the state and region, and that reflects the diversity of Oktibbeha County and the state of Mississippi.

Speakers are selected based on a variety of criteria, including topical expertise, the committee's previous experience with their work, recommendations from colleagues, and geographic proximity. State television personalities, representatives from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the archivist from a local public library, and faculty from the University of Mississippi have all been speakers at the event. Members of the committee attend other genealogy fairs in the region to identify possible speakers, to get ideas for programming, and, of course, to learn more about genealogy.

Until 2017, MSU's fair followed a format of two speakers in the morning, at one hour each with a break between them, followed by lunch and library museum tours, followed by an afternoon speaker and one to three workshops. In 2017, the committee added genealogy and local history themed entertainment to the lunch time offerings and started giving away door prizes. In 2018, the committee opted for a panel talk instead of a second single-speaker presentation and started giving away packets of information about the university and Oktibbeha County.

The panel featured two MSU faculty members and one independent researcher. The independent researcher was from Michigan, so as a library on a slim budget, MSU had to get creative to find a way for him to participate. The successful solution involved setting up a screen in the auditorium and arranging for the panelist to Skype in. Trials were performed before the event to make sure everything was in working order.

The topics of the hands-on workshops vary, but usually focus on "hot topics" in genealogy research. There is always at least one workshop about online resources and how to use them, led by MSU library faculty. Other topics have included international sources, working with family narratives and unreliable narrators, and working with archival materials in special collections.

As noted above, lunch time entertainment, door prizes, and local information packets are relatively new offerings at the event.

Entertainment is provided by students from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS), who participate in the nationally acclaimed "Tales from the Crypt" program. Students in the program conduct extensive research on an individual buried in Friendship Cemetery in Columbus, MS, and then write and perform a dramatic monologue about the person.

Door prizes were first offered in 2017 and included books about family history research. In 2018, a committee member solicited donations of door prizes from organizations identified as having products of interest to genealogists, with enormously successful results. Almost two dozen donations were received, including a DNA test, grave-cleaning solution, a portable scanner, books, tote bags, t-shirts, and a mug.

The fair is promoted first via "save the date" cards sent out in early spring to previous attendees, and, starting a few weeks before the fair, via the Libraries' website, Facebook and Twitter pages, posters displayed on campus and in local businesses, and flyers sent to all of MSU's consortium partners. In previous years, the event has been covered by the *Starkville Daily News* and other local news organizations.

At the end of the fair, attendees are asked to fill out a simple survey about the event. The committee uses those responses to assist with the planning of future fairs.

Mississippi State University Libraries

<http://lib.msstate.edu>

## Why Should an Academic Library have a Genealogy Fair?

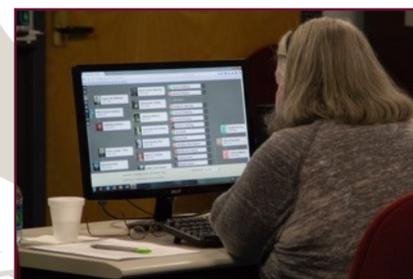
As a land-grant university, MSU's mandate and mission is to provide educational resources to the people of the state of Mississippi. The genealogy fair supports this mission by offering research skills training to the general public and introducing attendees to research resources within the library.

The genealogy fair also offers opportunities for library faculty to make connections and develop relationships with community members, particularly with populations under-served by libraries and archives.

The fair is an opportunity to demonstrate to a community the benefits of donating family and other records to academic institutions:

- **Assist others with their research!** This is especially true of records of enslaved persons, such as receipts, probate records, and plantation records, which are vital for African-American genealogists.
- **Ensure safe storage.** Highlight benefits such as safe, climate- and pest-controlled storage and professional attention, ensuring that their treasured records will be preserved for future generations.
- **Neutral territory.** For some families, the academic library may qualify as "neutral territory" where access is not impacted by familial politics and disagreements.
- **Support education.** Faculty and students use family collections for research and teaching. Donating family papers directly supports teaching and research and better investigations of the historical record.
- **Everyone is important.** A family doesn't have to be prominent or famous to be important. "Average" is often better, as those papers will document and reflect a more common set of experiences.

The process of organizing the event facilitates making connections with other cultural organizations in the community, state, and region by inviting colleagues and peers at other institutions to be speakers, or to have institutional displays. These connections can lead to other collaborations in the field of genealogy or other areas of library practice.



## Suggestions for Implementing a Fair at Other Institutions

- **Whenever possible, use your own facilities.** Not only does this save money, but it invites first-time visitors to become familiar with your library and feel "at home," encouraging future use. You probably don't need a huge space, especially if you're holding your first fair.
- **Start small.** Unless you have a huge budget to throw around, you won't ask Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to be your keynote speaker. Local genealogy enthusiasts, fellow librarians, and community historians often make your best speakers. Attendees love personal, local stories that relate to them and the people and places they know.
- **Offer variety.** Your fair can include a mix of speakers, hands-on instruction at computers or with documents, panel discussions, interviews, and even performances. Try to offer something for everyone, from beginners to experts.
- **Ask and you shall receive!** Don't be shy about contacting businesses and online sellers for door prizes and flyers for your guests' information packets. Be friendly and personal. Many sellers are happy to promote their products and their brand in this way, and the worst they can do is say no. A thank-you card is always a nice touch. If you make a good impression, they're likely to donate again.
- **If at all possible, make it free.** If your library has the budget, it's best to make this kind of event free and open to the public. The idea is to bring in people who might not normally visit or use your library.
- **Be prepared.** Make sure microphones are in good working order. Get computers started and logged in before workshops begin. Perform trial runs of technology and have a back-up plan.
- **Take advantage of social media.** Make a Facebook event page; these get shared, and people see when their friends indicate that they're interested in an event. Spread the word on Twitter, and post photos from the event on Instagram. Stream live video from your event on Facebook. Social media not only spreads the word leading up to your event, but it can get people excited about attending in the future.



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