

Writing for a Journal

What the Editors Want

by Peggy Baldwin, *MLS*

If you have always dreamed of seeing your name on a major peer-reviewed genealogical journal article, consider talking to the people who edit the journals. The 104 APG attendees at this year's APG Roundtable, moderated by Beverly Rice and sponsored by the Oregon Chapter, at the Boston Federation of Genealogical Societies Annual Conference, had just that chance. The spirited question and answer session following the panel presentation given by five esteemed journal editors—Patricia Law Hatcher, *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (NYGBR) and the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine* (PGM); Barbara Vines Little, *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy* (MVG); Thomas W. Jones, *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (NGSQ); and Henry Hoff, editor, and Helen Ullmann, associate editor, *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (NEHGR)—showed APG members have great interest in the publishing topic. So if you couldn't make it to Boston, here's a recap of what we learned.

This power house of genealogical editors demystified the process of successfully submitting articles to their publications. "What our [publishing] decision is based on is strictly the merit of the paper you submit to us," encourages Tom Jones, editor of the *NGSQ*, "not your background, your education, your credentials, or wherever else you have been published." There is room for those of us who have never published, as long as what we write meets the publishing criteria for a specific journal. "We expect imperfect manuscripts," Jones explains further. Every article that you see in *NGSQ* has gone through a process that involves two, three, or even more field reviewers; two editors; and an editorial staff of five. What we see in print is not what an author submits, but the work of many people. Don't wait until you can write an article like the ones you see in the published journal. Everyone needs the help of an editor.

Collaborative Relationship between Writer and Editor

Each editor stresses the importance of communication between writer and editor. Such com-

munication can start before an article is submitted, when an author submits an outline or a draft to a journal's editor asking if the journal has interest in the article or topic. Editors might be willing to offer some direction for article development. They might suggest another journal or magazine to submit the article to, if it doesn't fit their publishing goals. Henry Hoff, editor of *NEHGR*, points out that contacting a journal early in the development of your article and asking if they have received anything on your topic, might stake your claim if they are not planning on publishing something similar already.

The communication continues, of course, after the article has been accepted. According to Jones, a rapport develops between the author and editor during the months of back and forth communication that goes into the final published article. Without exception, the panel participants talked about how much authors will learn during this process. "The editor is like a mentor," says Helen Ullmann, associate editor of *NEHGR*, "and if you work with an editor it is a tremendous learning experience. Go through the changes that the editor makes and compare it with what you had."



Patricia Law Hatcher (speaking), Barbara Vines Little, and Thomas Jones.

In General, What Do Editors Look For?

Although each journal has its own character, audience, and focus, each of the panel editors echoes certain selection criteria. If your article meets these criteria, its chance of being published improves considerably. Additionally, the editors encourage submission of an article to only one journal at a time. An article has a higher likelihood of being published if it

- conforms to the type of article that typically is published in a particular journal;
- focuses on the geographic locations or topics published in the journal;
- covers a topic that the editors don't often receive, but would like to publish more of;
- is not a clone of another article recently published;
- follows the author guidelines as stated by the editors, including style and format;
- contains careful arguments and good methodology;
- shows very thorough research;
- is well documented, with every statement of fact supported by reliable evidence;
- shows that the author has performed a careful literature search to insure research is not being duplicated;
- conforms to the style of a journal; and
- is short in length.

Shorter Is Better

The panel of editors stresses the importance of sending editors *short* articles. Why the emphasis on short pieces? Upon becoming editor of the *PGM*, explains Pat Hatcher, she was

“charged to increase the number of entry points on the table of contents page.” A typical reader scans the table of contents, looking for surnames, counties, ethnicity, and record groups of interest. The shorter the pieces, the more articles an issue can include. The more articles in the table of contents, the more likely readers will find something they want to read. Jones says that the goals for *NGSQ*, as a national journal, include offering something for everyone and insuring that no issue is a “throw away.” According to Ullmann, shorter articles offer more flexibility for filling out the issue. And finally, Hoff says, “We want [shorter articles] because we don't get them.”

Hatcher defines a “short” article as six to twelve pages, or 2,500 to 5,000 words, including footnotes. “It doesn't count if you print it in 8-point type and say it's only a three-page article,” she says. Barbara Vines Little, editor of the *MVG*, explains that the shorter the article, the more quickly it will be published. In the *MVG*, a one-page article might be published in the next issue, a two-page article two issues later, and the twenty- to forty-page article in a year.

Why Would You Write an Article for a Peer-Reviewed Journal?

One panel attendee challenged the editors: “You are all from peer-reviewed journals that don't pay authors. Can you give us some motivation for why we should write for you rather than *Ancestry* or *Everton* or someone who gives us money?” This may have been a puzzling question for people who edit, because they love or even need to write. “I do it because I can't *not* do it,” explains Hatcher. Once she has been compelled to share a research experience with three colleagues, she knows it needs to be an article. Ullmann and Jones both point to the importance of making our research available to others, including our descendants. Publishing research also allows others to challenge or validate our findings. Hoff explains the value of taking research from rough draft to even a rough article, a process that points out the missing pieces and work yet to be done. Publishing an article allows authors to work with an editor, and as Hatcher states, “It's that interaction between you and the editor that adds to the greater genealogical scholarship that wouldn't happen if you did it yourself.” And even if we think about it only in dollars and cents, says Vines Little, being published in a journal can be the best advertising a professional genealogist can get.



The Roundtable crowd, with one person asking the editors a question.

Why Do Articles Get Rejected? And How Often Does It Happen?

So how many manuscripts does a genealogical journal reject? Fifty percent to almost *everything*, is the editors' seemingly discouraging reply. But knowing the reasons for such high rejection might save your articles from falling easily into the "reject" category. Hoff, who says about 50 to 60 percent of all manuscripts are rejected at *NEHGR*, qualifies that rejection is rarely a quality issue. The manuscripts are too long, not subjects *NEHGR* publishes, do not have enough reliable secondary sources, and/or require too much editing. Hatcher, who rejects almost everything that is sent to her, observes that most authors who submit articles to her journals have never bothered to look at the journals, do not have enough sources, or don't ask her for guidelines. The inside cover of the *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy* states that all compiled genealogies should use an unusual record group, solve a problem, or correct a lineage. Because 50 to 75 percent of articles submitted do not conform to these standards, Vines Little rejects them.

NGSQ editor Tom Jones rejects more than 50 percent of all articles submitted but offers that most of the rejected articles are written by people who never read the journal and don't have a clue how to write for it. Jones said the *NGSQ* editorial staff wants to work with authors, will point out the holes and problems in a piece, and will encourage reworking. They want to engage authors by working with them.

Character of Peer-reviewed Journals

One attendee asked, "How about 'how to' articles, as opposed to case studies and compiled genealogies? Do you publish them?" All of the editors say they don't publish purely "how to" articles. Vines Little explains that an article could prove a lineage, a migration, or show an unusual record group and case studies would show "how to" by example. Articles should be more illustrative, says Hatcher. For example, an article to appear in a coming issue of *NYGBR* about abstracts of indentures of poor children from the 1830s in a particular New York county would have a broadened reader appeal by including information about the state-wide statute that mandated these records. About two or three times a year, the *NGSQ* publishes notes and document pieces that highlight underused or unknown records groups. Hoff recommends sending the typical "how to" article to *New England Ancestors*. In fact, the "how to" article may be the piece that typifies the difference between scholarly peer-reviewed journals, like the ones considered at this panel, and genealogy magazines, like *New England Ancestors*. The two types of periodical serve different audiences and different needs.

The four genealogy journals represented by the five editors on the panel have many commonalities in what they look for in submitted articles. The journals differ in the types of articles they publish, geographic focuses of interest, and how they work with authors.

Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine

(Patricia Law Hatcher, FASG, editor):

- Is the third oldest genealogical scholarly publication still in existence;
- Has long published abstracts of materials, which accounts for a significant portion of the publication's page count;
- Likes short articles, i.e., abstracts, sets of Justice of the Peace records, unpublished tax lists;
- Used to do Bible records and Pat has reinstated those, having made a breakthrough herself with a Bible record published in *PGM*;
- Interested in articles that solve genealogical problems, not just a compiled genealogy—for example, linking two different portions of a family in two different counties, showing how a family in Greene County in Southwest Pennsylvania is related to a family in Armstrong County;
- Has previously focused on the Southeast counties of Pennsylvania, around Philadelphia, having published many articles about Germans and Quakers from that area, but is now focusing on becoming a statewide journal and is especially interested in articles outside of Southeast Pennsylvania;
- Doesn't publish biographical material.

New York Genealogical and Biographical Record

(Patricia Law Hatcher, FASG, editor):

- Publishes biographical material;
- Publishes compiled genealogies;
- Seeks short articles—do not submit long articles with a lot of historical context, because such articles are primarily of interest to their authors and their family, not *NYGBR* readers.

Magazine of Virginia Genealogy

(Barbara Vines Little, CG, editor):

- Is the youngest genealogical journal in Virginia;
- Has primarily focused on abstracts, especially of manuscript records in institutions that have to be visited in order to consult the material and material that people are not familiar with;
- Publishes short things, i.e., tax lists, Bible records;
- Usually publishes only one article per issue with a problem, i.e., solving a relationship, make a determination based upon the law, new or different records, etc.;
- Does serialize.

National Genealogical Society Quarterly

(Thomas W. Jones, Ph.D., CG, CGL, co-editor):

- Covers all geographic areas, is mostly American in focus, but does include some European;
- Covers all time periods from colonial to twentieth century
- Does not serialize;
- Is not interested in compiled genealogies;

- Publishes articles that solve a problem, so if you have a compiled genealogy where some problem solving was necessary in the research process, they will help you find a way to write an article with a methodological focus;
- Publishes original source material;
- Publishes guides to research in specific states.

***New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Henry Hoff, CG, FASG, editor, and Helen Ullmann, CG, FASG, associate editor):**

- Covers the six states of New England, but majority of articles focus on Massachusetts;
- Likes short articles, but are willing to serialize;
- Prefers articles that do not need a lot of editing, but authors can contact the editors to find out what the requirements are, to avoid rejection;
- Publishes compiled genealogies, problem-solving articles, source materials, and miscellaneous articles;
- Uses a "Register style" template for Microsoft Word that is available on the New England Ancestors website <www.newenglandancestors.org/about/main/download_reg_temp.asp>.

Conclusion

A discussion like this is very enlightening, helping us understand how to write not only for the four publications represented by the panelists but also for any peer-reviewed publication. Perhaps the number one lesson is to read any journal that you want to write for, to determine what the editors might be interested in publishing. Likewise, it is difficult to understate the value of using a journal's publishing guidelines to prepare a manuscript.

Next year the Oregon Chapter will present a panel of editors from the non-peer-reviewed genealogy magazines. Plan to attend that session at the Fort Wayne, Indiana, FGS 2007 Conference, to find even more avenues for your writing.

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