

Church Records Preservation Committee Rochester Genealogical Society, Inc.

Mission

Safeguard the church records of the Rochester area and make them available to genealogists and other researchers.

History

The Rochester Genealogical Society (RGS) was formed in 1938 and one of our principle objectives is to engage in projects to promote and preserve genealogical knowledge. Because Rochester was an early settlement for pioneers moving westward, our membership, while mainly local, extends beyond to many parts of New York State and throughout the United States.

In 2005, RGS initiated a Church Records Preservation Committee (CRPC) for the purpose of assisting churches and their archives with conservation of their non-replaceable records. A digitization process has been developed that is otherwise not available to them, is relatively quick and not harmful to the documents. The churches are given a CD of all their records and the privatized records are posted on the website of the RGS. This is done at no cost to the churches. Work has been expanded to include the records of the Mt. Hope Cemetery since their records are of genealogical interest. If you know of a historically significant church in the Rochester area whose records should be archived and made available through our website, we would be most interested in hearing from you. We keep a list of our next planned projects, which is included later in this document.

Privacy Guidelines

Records posted on this website have been edited to comply with New York State vital records guidelines. Birth records must be older than 75 years and marriage / death records must be older than 50 years.

Active Volunteers

Peter Bush
Bob Coomber
Russell Green
Eila Harkonen-Hart
Roscoe Hastings
Kathryn Heintz

Roger Heintz
Dennis Hogan
Barb Koehler
Larry Lavery
Vince Tollers

Volunteers are all active family history researchers and come from many different backgrounds. Most are retired and all are extremely dedicated and hard-working. The photography sessions are 3 - 4 hours long and several volunteers work an average of 10 additional hours per week doing the post-processing.

Funding

The work of the CRPC is funded through RGS membership dues and donations. Recently an anonymous benefactor made a generous donation to the organization to further the work of the committee. This money has been and will be used to purchase new camera and computer equipment and software. If you feel that this work is beneficial to the community of genealogical researchers and would like to assure that the work will continue, we would be happy to receive donations at:

RGS CRPC
% Larry Lavery
PO Box 10501
Rochester, NY 14610

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OUR STORY

The project began when Larry Lavery visited a Rochester area church to research his ancestors and found 150+ year old paper records in fragile condition - faded, cracking and stained. Larry asked RGS to form a committee to attempt to preserve the records of those Rochester churches that had not been previously microfilmed. With much enthusiasm but little idea where the project would go, the CRPC began its work in 2005.

One of the first tasks was to determine what churches existed or once existed in the Monroe County area. Some churches are absorbed or evolve into other churches, sometimes changing names, locations and even denominations in the process. Two documents were developed which have served as guidelines. These are a list of all the churches in Monroe County and a list of those that had been microfilmed by LDS. There has been a focus on preserving the records of the earliest churches in the area.

We researched the process used by the Western New York Genealogical Society and briefly considered microfilming but decided that digitization was the way of the future. Initially the committee planned to produce a printed version of the church's records as well as a CD. This plan was quickly determined to be cost-prohibitive and was scrapped.

A document of agreement was developed to be signed by RGS and the church detailing our procedure for filming/scanning, and delivering to the church an archival CD of all their records. We also obtain permission from each church to post the records on the RGS website <nyrgs.org>. The church determines which of their records they want filmed; we post only those conforming to the New York State vital records guidelines. The CD contains all the records filmed.

Since we do not remove any material from the church, a filming team of 3 - 8 volunteers travels to the site, usually once a week for 3 - 4 hours. Among the challenges has been to find equipment that is lightweight, easy and quick to assemble/disassemble, able to withstand the rigors of travel and stable once it is set up.

Filming began in 2006 and over 83,000 images have been captured thus far and 20,000 pages have been returned to the churches on CDs. 63,000 pages spanning four projects are being prepared for CDs. It is accurate to say that every facet of the project has evolved over the past 5 years and will continue to do so as we discover more efficient ways to preserve the past.

Process

Actually photographing the images is only a small part of the total time required to post the images on the website and create the CD. Once the images have been captured and securely stored in multiple locations, volunteers do the processing at their homes, using a combination of their own equipment and that of the CRPC. Each image is optimized and then combined with other images into logical sets. Pdfs are created with bookmarks and navigational aids and a CD is prepared for the church. The records are then privatized and uploaded to the website. One of our major goals is to speed up the entire process.

None of our volunteers comes from a photographic or archivist background so each person is trained according to their interests and our needs. Everybody learns something new and contributes in his/her own way. One benefit for our native Rochesterians is that they often find their ancestors in the records we process.

Following the same procedures we use for churches, we have filmed many documents (plot maps, day books, etc.) belonging to the Mt. Hope Cemetery. This historic cemetery, which opened in 1838 and contains more than 350,000 graves, is a treasure trove of genealogical data.

Ongoing Issues

- Shortening the time lapse between image capture and the final CD and upload to the website - more volunteers would clearly speed up this process
- Maximizing control at image capture to minimize post-processing
 - keeping the target flat

- lighting the image without shadows
- consistency in positioning documents under the camera

- Training of volunteers for the tasks necessary for the project

- Shortening and simplifying each step of the process while maintaining the high standards we have set

- Storing huge volumes of records at the homes of volunteers

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TECHNOLOGICAL HISTORY

The following timeline traces the evolution of the technology used from the beginning of the project to the plans for 2011.

2006



Kodak 5 megapixel camera (DX 7590) on tripod, images stored on camera card for later downloading to a computer; book on floor lighted by sunlight, room lights and flash which produced shadows and hot spots; switching to flood lights later helped to solve the lighting problem; use of a flatbed scanner (Epson 3170) connected to a computer for suitable materials.



2007

Introduced LDS fixture - tripod and table. No doubt this was the most important factor in our continuing success.

Purchased Canon A640 cameras (replacing earlier cameras) and Canon image capture software allowing cameras to be directly connected with computers; initially computers and cameras belonged to volunteers; experimentation with various lighting schemes, including hanging lights from the ceiling, finally settling on CFL floodlights using the tripod sockets; experimentation with top-mounted and bottom-mounted cameras on the tripod.





2008 -10

Changes in techniques, table background and lighting; purchased compact desktop computers and image capture software; training for volunteers in post-processing.

Coming in 2011 Canon T2i DSLR camera with a new tripod mount.



Planning meeting at Wegman's cafe.

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DONATION FROM LDS

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City donated four surplus tripod fixtures and two tables that they had used for holding their microfilm cameras. These have been modified and retrofitted several times for our use. This donation was a tremendous boost to the project and has helped us to continue moving forward with new innovations.



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WORK IN PROGRESS

Work in Process (as of August 2011)

Mt. Hope plot maps and plot purchase records
Salem United Church of Christ and St. Paul's Lutheran
Incarnate Word Lutheran with Concordia and Zion
Immanuel Lutheran Church (Webster, NY)
Third Presbyterian Church

Planned work

Lakeside Presbyterian Church
Riverside Cemetery
Webster Baptist Church

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FGS RECOGNITION

(From the Federation of Genealogical Societies Forum, Volume 22 Number 4, Winter 2010)

Archives Award

The **Church Record Preservation Committee of the Rochester Genealogical Society** (RGS) of Rochester, New York, was nominated for their efforts in preserving local church records.

The project was proposed by RGS member Larry Lavery who became concerned about the fragility of many local church records dating back as far as 190 years, some of which exist nowhere else and some of which have not been microfilmed or duplicated previously.

The Church Records Preservation Committee was authorized by the board of directors of the Rochester Genealogy Society in 2005 with Larry Lavery as chairman. The churches, which have limited space and/or resources to properly archive their records, are generally receptive to the project. In return for allowing their records to be digitized and selected records placed on the RGS website, each church receives an archival CD of all their records. This gives the churches the ability to look at their records without using the originals or have the need of a microfilm reader. Some of the records have been completed and are available on the Rochester Genealogical Society website at www.NYRGS.org. Initially the committee approached churches and requested their participation in the project. Now there is a waiting list. The churches that have seen the final product are enthusiastic about the project.

A small but intrepid group (initially numbering only six people), they began by using their own computers, software, and cameras. They begged two cast-off microfilming fixtures from the LDS church in SLC and modified them to their purposes. They developed procedures for processing images of extremely high quality and continually improve their operation to increase efficiency.

Records for over twenty churches and/or missions involving over 50,000 images have been completed. Some of these churches are no longer in existence. Last year RGS was able to support this work with the purchase of two computers and software. This year the committee has received an extremely generous anonymous donation. This will enable the purchase of cameras and additional equipment that can be dedicated to the project so that more members will be able to assist in the image processing.

[Nominated by: Robert Coomber, Rochester Genealogy Society]



THE FEDERATION OF GENEALOGICAL SOCIETIES

is pleased to present its

Archives Award

To

Church Records Preservation Committee
Rochester Genealogical Society

Presented in recognition of exceptional contributions in the area of archival access, preservation, and services regarding the preservation of Rochester and Monroe County (NY) church records

Patricia Oxley, President FGS

Date

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