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Kokua Line

June Watanabe

Searching through cathedral's papers takes time

Question: I am a displaced kamaaina living in England. I've been trying to do some research on my ancestry, but hit a stumbling block with my great-grandfather James William Wilkinson. I know that he was an engineer on the Claudine, an interisland steamship, at the end of the 19th century. But I'm trying to track him back to the United Kingdom, and his marriage certificate contains lots of blanks. I know that he was married in St. Andrew's Cathedral on June 2, 1895, and I was hoping that its records would contain more information. I have been in contact with the Cathedral since 2003 and have patiently waited. I know that I am asking them to do me a favor, but I have offered to pay fees for doing so or to make a contribution to the Cathedral. Any chance you can convince someone to look up the marriage records and fax or e-mail me a copy?

Answer: We're glad to hear that you now have the information to, as you say, "connect the dots, and to figure out which James William Wilkinson is my great-grandfather," as well as go deeper into your family's ancestry, with the help of Stuart Ching, volunteer historiographer of the archives of the Episcopal Church in Hawaii.

(For those interested, here is the Web page created by Craig Walsh about Wilkinson: lordoflucies.com/tng/getperson.php?personID=119&tree=Walsh. The main page for his family's genealogical Web site is www.craigwalsh.eu.)

Ching, also the full-time curator of Iolani Palace, provided us with information about the "extremely small" but valuable store of information, including baptismal, confirmation, marriage and burial records, kept by the church.

"Although it sounds like a large and impressive operation, it is not," he explained.

Unlike the Hawaii State Archives, Bishop Museum Archives, Hawaiian Historical Society, or Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, the church's archives has no paid staff or regular public hours, he said.

Researchers must make an appointment, usually for a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. The "reading room" can only accommodate one researcher at a time.

"There is no charge for reference services, but this is done as time permits," Ching said. "Therefore, it is preferable that researchers come in and embark on their own journey of discovery."

Ching also explained that much of the church's collection is

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unprocessed.

After being in storage for many years, the materials are being re-housed in archival containers, while inventory and retrieval systems are being developed. Information would be easier to retrieve if it were all digitized, Ching noted, but it is not.

"The collection is not large by any means, but managing it and providing reference services at the same time is sometimes overwhelming for one volunteer with a full-time job," he said.

After working with the collection for a few years, Ching's also found "many gaps in the archival collections of the church."

That's because many early historical records of the church were destroyed long ago "for one reason or another," he said. "This is a problem when researchers come with high expectations of what they will find in the collection only to be sorely disappointed."

Ching said he knew this might be the case with your great-grandfather. Fortunately, he was able to glean some information to help you in your search.

"As with all historical research, sometimes it's like finding a needle in a haystack. But when that needle is found, there's no greater satisfaction," Ching said.

Meanwhile, as he told you, researchers might have better luck finding information at other records repositories, where everything is already indexed.

The Hawaii State Archives, for example, has an index of births, marriages and obituaries. Armed with basic information, you can then look for a more detailed article in its microfilm files.

"Obituaries, unlike church registers, provide much more personal information about the deceased, his life, and sometimes his ancestry," Ching said.

Got a question or complaint? Call 529-4773, fax 529-4750, or write to Kokua Line, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 500 Ala Moana Blvd., No. 7-210, Honolulu 96813. As many as possible will be answered. E-mail to kokualine@starbulletin.com.
See also: [Useful phone numbers](#)

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