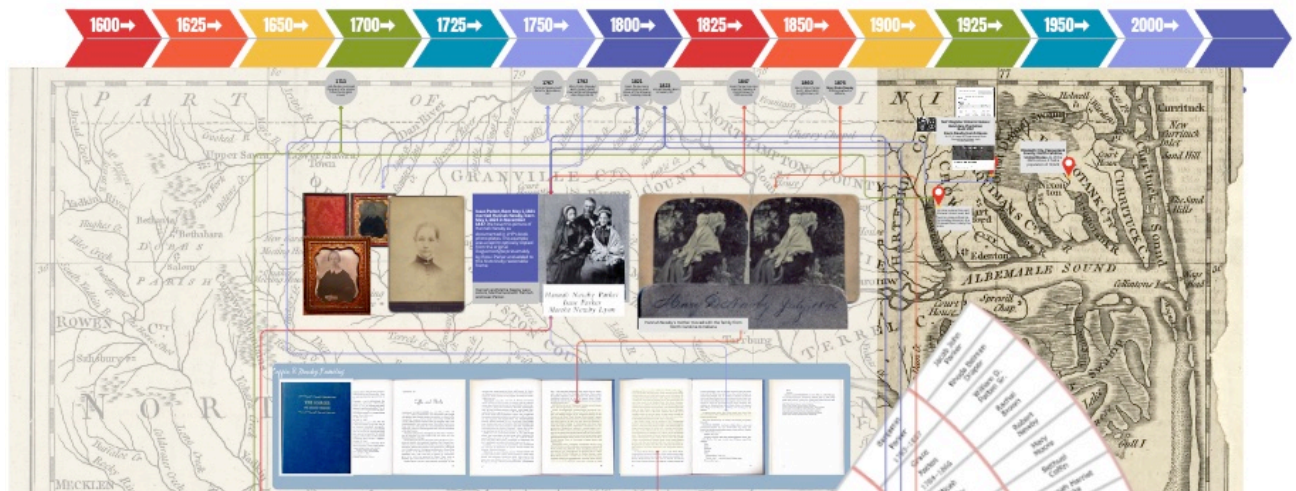**FAMILY HISTORY PROJECT RECIPE:**

A Map, Timeline, & Story: Two Ways

Family gems collected in the swamps of Albemarle Sound, North Carolina, organized into a framed collage and an interactive site

September 14, 2023, by Barbara Tien

OVERVIEW

I've had the luck to inherit an extraordinary recitation of our family history from my grandmother who passed away in the 1960s — I never had a chance to get to know her. Her legacy included a limited-edition, self-published book of family history. The book formed a fascinating trail of clues for her heirs to follow in our own family history research.

This particular project came about on the occasion of my first visit to see my brother and his family at his vacation home in North Carolina's Outer Banks in the summer of 2023.

On a hunch, I started searching my grandmother's book for clues about ancestors of ours who lived in the Albemarle Sound area. I knew we had Quaker ancestors, but I didn't know about how important the area was in Quaker history in North America. I decided to use what I'd learned to assemble a gift for my brother and his family.

I hope these instructions inspire you to build on what I started to create something like it for your own family.

Goals

I wanted to use the digital artifacts I'd discovered to create a collage that could be framed and presented as a gift. To make the gift accessible to younger generations, I also wanted to create a digital component. This would have the added benefit of creating something that I could continue to add content to.

I had a few simple goals.

1. The image had to be of the highest possible quality so that its aesthetic qualities could be appreciated.

2. The digital link had to be accessible to anyone on a smartphone of reasonably modern vintage (iOS or Android).

3. I had an existing 11" x 14" frame I liked and wanted to reuse. That specific constraint forced several other decisions, as it turned out.

Solution

I created a collage of the core digital artifacts and links found in my research. I arranged them in a way that was aesthetically pleasing. I then made a photographic print of the collage and framed it. The collage included a dynamic QR code that allows me to invite a viewer to explore and comment on the image in electronic form from any mobile device.

Research

I wanted my gift to be relevant to my brother's vacation home, so I wanted the story to center on maps of the area. As I dug into my research, I also realized that that the collage should include a timeline of both historical and important family events.

Curiosity led me to use the facts I'd learned to connect several family photographs passed down to me and suddenly understand them in context. The resulting collage included pointers between:

- An important map of the North Carolina area from the Library of Congress
- A portion of our family tree shown as a fan chart from FamilySearch.org
- A timeline I assembled from data included in my grandmother's book
- Family photographs
- Scans from the family history book with portions highlighted
- An embed from the Registry of Historic Places I found detailing our family connection to a home in the area.

Technology

I used the digital whiteboard features on the Canva design platform to not only create my digital collage but also make it accessible to anyone as a link from a QR code.

- Canva's whiteboard makes it fun to combine components with drag-n-drop ease.
- Created a QR code and added it to the piece as an image.
- Exported an image file of the collage into a high-resolution image file.
- Had the image file printed by a photo processor.
- Framed the resulting photo print with a matboard frame.
- By pointing to the QR code, the digital version opens on any smartphone.

Lessons Learned

While simple in concept, there turned out to be a few unexpected twists. You should be aware of these should you try to create one of these yourself.

1. **Start with the goal:** Since the size of my physical frame was fixed, that aspect determined the layout for the digital version.
   - Using an existing 11x14" frame set my first variable.
   - Not having access to a matt cutter, I had to rely on pre-cut matboard at my local art store.
   - Since they didn't have what I wanted in stock so I had to redesign my artwork to fit the available 8x10" matboard opening. Aspect ratios are important.

2. **Keep the design simple** AND go for the highest resolution possible. Always a good rule, but in this case it was especially important.
   - Printing photographically gave me a much higher resolution than I would have had from my own printer.
   - I'm very glad I paid the extra to have the processing done by a high-end processor that works with ad agencies and artists. The print cost $8.
   - **Note**: The fine lines I used in my illustration were hard to see in the printed version. If I could do it again, I'd have made those lines thicker and darker.
     - Even better would have been to do test prints and have time to adjust.

3. **Give yourself guides in the design for mating the print to the matboard**.
   - I originally planned to do a bleed print which takes the image all way way to the edges of the photo printed page.
   - At the last minute, I decided to take advantage of an offer they included for a white border. I thought it might compliment the matboard.
   - While that worked for the design, I didn't have the skills or tools to perfectly align the print to the matboard. It had a bit more whitespace than I'd wanted and was hard to align while framing.

Surprises

- Probably the single biggest surprise was that I wouldn't ACTUALLY share the same version I'd printed as the digital version.
  - It turns out that the QR code on the printed version is very confusing when you look at it on the digital version so:
    - I created the master copy first, then…
    - Made a copy where I removed the QR code. Simple solution.

- I've saved both versions one as "PRINT" and the other as "ONLINE." I can make duplicates any time.

- Since I can modify the online version any time, I can also ruin it in a click. To ensure that it's protected I've done two things:
  - Archived the print version as a final project.
  - Created duplicate copies I'm using here to share with you labeled (prominently as "DEMO")

Milestones

I.   Start with the goal

Once you have a clear idea of the end deliverable, it's much easier to understand the steps to achieve it. If you aren't really sure of the end goal, give yourself some time to experiment, make mistakes, then plan the real thing. (You'll thank me.)

II.   Design the collage

Using Canva's Whiteboard feature made it fun to pull a variety of original sources together into a collage. It was almost hard to know when to stop and declare this project ready for production. These were some of the milestones in the collage:

- Scanned chapters of my grandmother's book, highlighting relevant passages (added a nearly transparent yellow box in Canva to simulate a highlighter.)

- Selected a map. A 1779 map titled "A new and accurate map of North Carolina in North America" from the US Library of Congress was perfect because it was both beautiful and an important artifact. (I discovered it referenced at the Albemarle Museum during our visit.)

- Old family photographs I was able to identify based on various clues. Now I could annotate them without risk to the originals.

- A screenshot of a fan-style family tree for a few of the family members referenced in the documents. This turned out to be key in giving some context to who, where, and when.

III.   Plan the printing of the collage

Yep, plan again. Learn from the Carpenters' rule: Measure twice, print once. This is especially important if you're short on time. Test prints can be invaluable.

IV.   Print and assemble

With a little planning, this should be easy. Don't forget the frame backing (ideally acid-free/conservation quality board) for your frame+glass+matboard... Add the backing, and then the hooks so it's ready to for your recipient to hang.

V.   Final review of the digital version & gift

This final review was essential as I kept finding little gotchas on the digital version. The good news is that you can continually futz with the digital version (though see my note about copies.)

- TIP: If you use Canva for the digital version, consider sharing with the "Comment" version and not the "Edit" version.
    - In **Edit mode** your guests can accidentally make major changes to your original. Not good.
    - In **View-only mode**, they can only see your piece at a distance. They don't get any controls to zoom in.
    - **Comment-mode** seems to be ideal because they can navigate around without making changes, plus they can add comments.

Project Recipe

PROJECT RECIPE	
TITLE	**A Map, Timeline, & Story: Two Ways**
TYPE	A framed piece, plus a QR code on a printed version that takes a "commenter" to an online variation
TIME (est.)	2-5 days (not continuous)
TOOLS & MATERIALS	• Computer, online access for research and testing • Photographic printer (do not try to print at home) • Photo frame and archival matboard • I used a Canva pro account though I don't think any of these features required the pro-level.
PREPARATION	1. Plan the final deliverable 2. Design the collage 3. Plan the printing of the collage 4. Print and assemble 5. Final review of the digital version & gift
NOTES	This was my first attempt at this project. It would have taken me almost the same amount of time to create 15 copies of it as the one. This could make a nice gift to make for a group of people. My only out-of-pocket costs were the photo processing, frame, and matboard. You could also combine these with a vendor like Shutterfly, Framebridge, MPix, or a similar vendor to produce these at scale. Sometimes their pricing will include shipping.
COPYRIGHT & SHARING Learn more	 This recipe is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License.
AUTHOR	Barbara Tien
REVIEWS & COMMENTS	See the discussion in the ProjectKin Community Forum. Join us at projectkin.org