

Yellow Fever: A nineteenth-century scourge

In early June of 1855, Caroline Morris (née Myers) was newly pregnant. It was far from the first time; she had with her husband, William Henry, seven sons and one daughter. The family lived in Portsmouth, Virginia, where Caroline was born to Charles and Ardilsey Myers. William, a merchant from ship-building Mathews County, established in 1847 the firm of William Morris & Sons, wholesale grocers and commission merchants (Fig. 1), and the family was prospering. Their friends, Samuel Brewer, a grocer,¹ and his wife, Mary, were only weeks away from welcoming an infant of their own. But new babies weren't the only passengers destined for Portsmouth homes that year.

Portsmouth, along with the nearby Norfolk, developed as harbor towns in Virginia's Hampton Roads region (Fig. 2). Their ports were busy with activity and brought all things good and bad from around the world. On June 7, the steamship Benjamin Franklin set anchor at Portsmouth, having come from the island of Saint Thomas in the West Indies. The health inspector ordered the ship to quarantine. Not long after, a body washed up on shore with hands "as yellow as lemons," and

men began to jump ship, taking their chances in the waves.² The Benjamin Franklin was a merchant ship that was no doubt capable of carrying exotic goods, but also yellow fever.

Yellow fever is a virus transmitted through bites of infected female mosquitoes. In the United States, it popped up in bouts throughout the 19th century and retreated with the insects in

late autumn or early winter after a good frost or two. While coastal cities were the most frequent sufferers, the virus

needed only opportunity to make it farther inland. In 1878, an outbreak in the Mississippi River Valley reached as far north as St. Louis, striking Memphis particularly hard, while scares and close encounters continued in the area throughout the rest of the century. The disease remains endemic to certain subtropical regions of South and Central America and Africa, where mosquitoes are a year-round nuisance. People who are infected may experience non-specific

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FOR THE RECORDS

Fig. 1 | (Top of page) A newspaper ad placed by the Morris family. *The Norfolk Virginian*, 28 March 1886, p2 Col E. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

The History & Genealogy Virtual Expo



Saturday, Nov. 7

Session 1: 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
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Fig. 2 | Panoramic view, Norfolk and Portsmouth water fronts and harbor. Photo by F. J. Conway, 1915. Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/pan.6a15739/>.

symptoms including headache, fever, fatigue, aches, and nausea. More serious symptoms include the characteristic yellow hue to the skin, indicating liver damage, and so-called “black vomit.”

In 1855, people did not know exactly how yellow fever spread. Some blundered into effective solutions for the still-mysterious causes. They recognized safety at higher elevations (where mosquitoes don’t fly), or advocated building fences against the virus (mosquitoes tend to not bother flying over obstacles).³ While miasma was considered a favorite invisible culprit, Josiah C. Nott postulated an insect origin for the yellow fever scourge in an 1848 paper, although his use of “insects” may have referred to microorganisms rather than mosquitoes.⁴ During the 1855 outbreak, newspapers printed extracts of a reassuring text written by a doctor who reasoned, “If [yellow fever] cannot be propagated by inoculation or swallowing the black vomit, we think that the apprehensions of the most timid may be quieted, as far as contagion is concerned.”⁵ Given the uncertainty concerning both the source and means of transmission, responses ranged from quarantine, closures, and isolation, to denial and panic.

For a while, the virus was confined to what is now the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. By late July, however, spread was becoming evident throughout the Hampton Roads region, afflicting Portsmouth and Norfolk in particular. A third of residents may have fled by early August, and newspaper reports claimed that half were gone by the middle of the month.⁶ Mary Brewer gave birth to a daughter at some point during this turmoil, likely in early August.

Antebellum case trackers

Richmond’s *Daily Dispatch* reported on the epidemic in Hampton Roads, including who died and who had fallen ill.

The paper reported this data in various ways, such as categorizing cases as dead, new, recovering, and “hopeless” (Fig. 3). Many of the articles are reports of articles originally published in local Portsmouth and Norfolk papers that are not available online. In addition, travelers started rumors that were not up to date and not always true. Consequently, the *Daily Dispatch*’s information could be several days behind or be corrected later. Donna Bluemink transcribed the relevant articles, which are available [online](http://www.usg-warchives.net/va/yellow-fever/yftoc.html) <<http://www.usg-warchives.net/va/yellow-fever/yftoc.html>>. The landing page includes links to indexes of general names as well as separate lists of doctors, nurses, African Americans, and others. Checking the indexes reveals several articles related to the Morris and Brewer families.

Both families likely remained in Portsmouth, at least at first. A newspaper announced the death of a member of the Morris family on August 9: a “Mrs. Morris, mother of Mr. W. H. Morris, merchant.”⁷ This was Ann Morris, William’s widowed mother. The spread only increased from there, as more mosquitoes and humans picked up the virus. With other care facilities overwhelmed, the Naval Hospital treated hundreds of civilians over the epidemic’s duration (Fig. 4).

On Aug. 26, a simple, already rote-like article announced the death of Caroline’s father, Charles Myers, and fifteen others: “August 26.—Chas. Meyers, John Myers, Miss Margaret Manning, Mrs. Tatem, Miss Williams, child of W. Dobbs, negro man at Jas. White’s, negro woman at Avery Williams’, Dick Gordon, col’d, Morning Larence, col’d, F. Fowler, black child at Dr. Maupin’s, Mrs. Atkinson, Mr. Spratt, Mrs. Buchanon, none at hospital.—Total 16.”⁸ On Aug. 29, the daily list reported that “Samuel Brewer’s child, Alice and Mr. Brewer, are also down with the fever.”⁹ A rare piece of good news made the rounds two days later: “Mr. Samuel Brewer, a most prominent and useful member of one of the Baptist

churches, is improving and great hopes are entertained that he will recover.”¹⁰ It is not uncommon for the sick to briefly recover only to be struck by organ failure and other serious symptoms. On September 5th, Samuel’s name was only part of the unadorned list of the dead.¹¹

The *Daily Dispatch* (under the title *Richmond Dispatch*), along with many other newspapers, is available on Newspapers.com. [St. Louis County Library cardholders can access the paper remotely](https://www.newspapers.com) <<https://bit.ly/35LtqtC>>. Researchers may be most successful using Bluemink’s transcriptions and index in conjunction with the digitized paper.

Mortal records

There is no single source that lists all yellow fever deaths, and some may have gone unreported entirely. Looking at the death register may reveal more deaths than can be found in newspapers alone. The virus was so often fatal that people registered multiple deaths at one time, such as on the day William Henry Morris reported four deaths, namely those of his friend Samuel Brewer (died Aug. 30); seven-year-old Alice Brewer (died Aug. 25) and her days-old sister (died Aug. 7); and Charles S. Myers, Caroline’s father (died Aug. 26) (Figs. 5 & 6).¹² The death register shows that both Alice Brewer, reported as sick in the *Daily Dispatch*, went on to die along with the baby, who had not been mentioned at all.

Both birth and death registers were maintained in Portsmouth, then part of Norfolk County. The Portsmouth death register is available digitally at FamilySearch.org by logging in with a free account (search the catalog for Family History Library film no. 32913). While some early Norfolk County records pertaining to Portsmouth appear under the Portsmouth (Independent City) designation in the FamilySearch catalog when searching record sets by place, more may be found under Norfolk (Independent City) and Chesapeake (Independent City). Once again, Donna Bluemink has produced a helpful [abstract](http://www.usgwarchives.net/va/yellow-fever/yfndr.html) <<http://www.usgwarchives.net/va/yellow-fever/yfndr.html>> covering those whose cause of death was yellow fever. It can serve as an index by using your computer’s “find text” feature (ctrl + f on Windows, command + f on Mac) and noting the line number to the left, which corresponds to the order found on the FHL film.

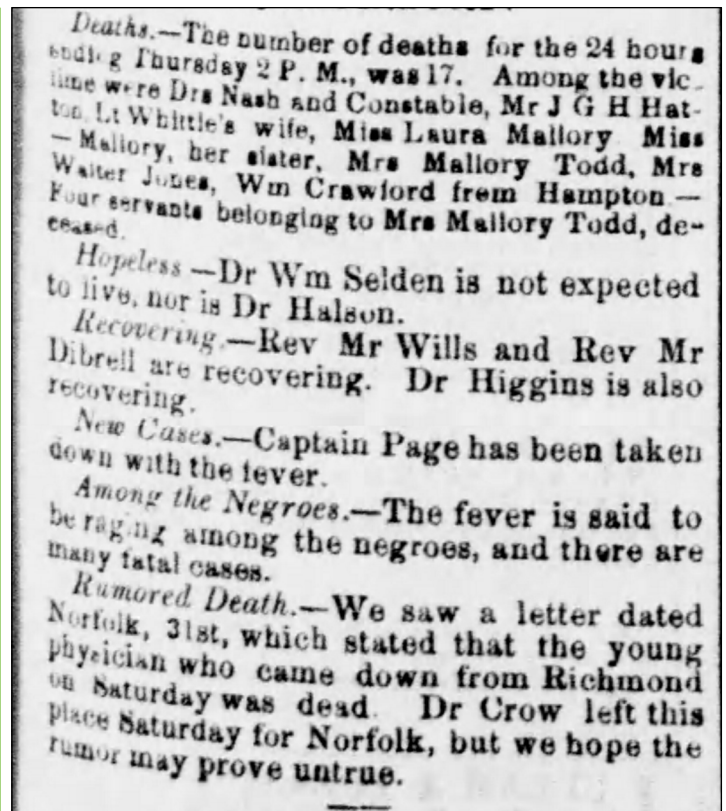


Fig. 3 | Yellow fever cases in Norfolk as reported in Richmond. *Daily Dispatch*, 1 September 1855, p. 3 Col A. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

Many deaths reported by newspapers are absent from the death register. For example, searching for “Mathews” in Bluemink’s abstract will reveal two siblings of William H. Morris who were born in that county and died of yellow fever in September: Edmond Morris and Catherine Iverson. Deaths of free and enslaved African Americans are found in the same register. The form has spaces for both slave owner’s and parents’ names, but in cases of the enslaved, the mother’s first name was usually—though not always—the only parental information given.

A lingering number of fever cases persevered into late October or early November. Still unaware that mosquitoes transmitted the virus, people in Hampton Roads nevertheless scorned a marshy area as being a boon to the illness, advocated for the use of smoke to clear infected air, and hoped for a frosty day.¹³ They even got close to the truth when they looked with suspicion on the unusual swarms of blowflies that emerged from untended corpses.¹⁴ The miraculous sur-

vival of Caroline and William Morris's nuclear family may suggest that they fled at some point, perhaps after William's mother or Caroline's father and the Brewers died, or they might have lived in a drier section of the city. In the end, no one ever knew how many people died of yellow fever in Portsmouth. A common estimate is that as many as one third of residents who remained in the city died.¹⁵ The Norfolk Public Library provides a [research guide](https://bit.ly/37TMb0y) <<https://bit.ly/37TMb0y>> to additional sources for researching the 1855 outbreak in Virginia.

Recovery

Before the end of winter, on Feb. 23, 1856, Caroline Morris gave birth to a boy. Having faced months of horror and tragedy that deeply affected and forever altered their relationships, the Morris family, along with the rest of the community, found ways to move on and remember those who did not survive. Caroline and William named their baby Samuel Brewer Morris, after the family friend who died. He became Deputy Commissioner of Revenue in Norfolk and named one of his own sons Samuel Brewer Morris Jr., continuing the name. Samuel Brewer Morris Sr. would live until 1942.¹⁶

Caroline Morris died on Oct. 2, 1883 in Norfolk. William Henry outlived his wife by over a decade. After her death, he made a donation in her honor to Richmond College, which dedicated a wing of their library to her.¹⁷ Mary Brewer, whose family was devastated, eventually remarried in 1859 to William B. Minter, a carpenter. In 1860, she and her remaining daughter with Samuel Brewer, also named Mary, lived with her new husband, as listed in the 1860 census.¹⁸

A high number of yellow fever deaths during the Spanish-American War prompted a more thorough exploration of the

issue, which would confirm Cuban doctor Carlos Finlay's 1881 theory that held mosquitoes as the vector.¹⁹ The last major epidemic to occur in the US was in 1905, after which large-scale mosquito control and other measures prevented further occurrences. Yellow fever continues to be a threat today, with cases increasing in more recent years and the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito making a return to US cities.²⁰

Ancestors who lived in US cities, especially those on the southern and eastern coasts, as well as the vast number who immigrated during the nineteenth century, may have experienced epidemics, quarantines, or panics related to yellow fever outbreaks. While epidemic crises and other times of societal breakdown deprive genealogists of complete or accurate

death records and proper death announcements, they can also help us learn more about an ancestor's experience and understand their decisions.

Notes

1. 1850 U.S. Census, Norfolk County, Virginia, population schedule, p. 102 (penned), 171b (stamped), 360 (crossed out), dwelling 742, family 805, Saml Brewer household; digital image, Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 16 October 2020); citing National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M432, roll 964.

2. Lon Wagner, "The Fever, Chapter 1: A Killer Sails into Port," *The Virginian-Pilot*, July 10, 2005, <https://www.pilotonline.com/>.
3. S.L. Kotar and J.E. Gessler, *Yellow Fever: A Worldwide History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), p. 3. Call no. R 614.541 K87Y.
4. *Ibid*, 192-3.
5. "Non-Contagiousness of Yellow Fever," *Richmond Dispatch*, 17 August 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 16 October 2020), citing original p. 2.
6. Kotar and Gessler, 207.



Fig. 4 | The Norfolk Naval Hospital, now Naval Medical Center Portsmouth. Photo by William Henry Jackson, 1902. Library of Congress: <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016800357>.

Line No.	Name	White/Free/Slave	Slave Owner	Male/Female	Death Date	Place of Death	Cause of Death	Age Y/M/Days
104	Saml Brewer	"	"	"	Aug 30	"	"	39
105	elice T Brewer	"	"	"	Aug 25	"	"	7
106	Brewer	"	"	"	Aug 7	"	"	"
107	lehas T. Myers	"	"	"	Aug 26	"	"	55

Line No.	Names of Parents	Where Born	Occupation	Marital Status	Informant	Informant Relation
104	Brewer	Nansemond Co.		married	W H Morris	friend
105	Sam & Mary Brewer	Portsmouth			W H Morris	friend
106	Sam & Mary Brewer	"			W H Morris	son in law
107	Thos & Ann Myers	"			W H Morris	father

Figs. 5 & 6 | Portsmouth yellow fever deaths reported by William H. Morris. Evidently there was some confusion when stating his relationship to the deceased, as William is described as being the father of Charles Myers, his father-in-law, as well as the son-in-law of the Brewer baby in the “informant relation” column.

7. “List of the Dead,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 10 August 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 16 October 2020), citing original p. 1.
8. “The Fever in Portsmouth,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 26 August 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 20 October 2020), citing original p. 3.
9. “The Fever at Norfolk and Portsmouth,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 29 August 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 20 October 2020), citing original p. 1.
10. “Death of Dr. Trugien,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 31 August 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 20 October 2020), citing original p. 1.
11. “The Fever in Norfolk and Portsmouth,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 5 September 1855; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 20 October 2020), citing original p. 1.
12. “Death register, 1853–1870,” Norfolk County, Virginia, browsable images, FamilySearch.org (<https://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 21 October 2020), FHL Film 32913, image no. 22; 1855, Portsmouth, line nos. 104–7.
13. Kotar and Gessler, 210-1.
14. Lon Wagner, “The Fever, Chapter 14: Epilogue,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, July 23, 2005, <https://www.pilotonline.com/>.
15. Ibid.
16. “Virginia, Death Records, 1912–2014,” database and digital images, Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 21 October 2020), search for Samuel Brewer Morris, died 2 August 1942; death certificate 17245, Virginia Department of Health, Richmond, Virginia.
17. “Richmond College,” *The Norfolk Virginian*, 8 October 1886; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>: 21 October 2020), citing original p. 1.
18. 1860 U.S. Census, Portsmouth Jackson Ward, Portsmouth (Independent City), Virginia, population schedule, p. 166 (page no. space), 79 (penned), dwelling 1311, family 1301, Wm Minter household; digital image, Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 16 October 2020); citing National Archives and Records Administration microfilm publication M653, roll 1366.
19. Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic That Shaped Our History* (New York: Berkley Books, 2006), 85. Call no. R 614.541 C949A.
20. Ibid, 234.

PastPorts is published by History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library, located on Tier 5 of Library Headquarters.

[Current and past issues can be downloaded from the web <http://www.slcl.org/pastports>.](http://www.slcl.org/pastports)

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LIBRARY HOLIDAY CLOSING

Thanksgiving Day | Nov. 26
 Friday after Thanksgiving | Nov. 27

History & Genealogy Classes

Classes are free and open to the public. Registration is required. Register at <https://www.slcl.org/events>. Classes will be conducted by Zoom.

Thursday, Nov. 5, 6:30 p.m.

Tracing Your African American Ancestors: Getting Started in Genealogical Research

Do you want to research your African American family but don't know where to start? This class will teach you the basics of genealogical research including resources available in History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library. | [Register](#)

Wednesday, Nov. 11, 6:30 p.m.

Digital Archiving

Learn how to care for and protect digital files and photos. Library staff will share information about saving and preserving your digital memories. | [Register](#)

Thursday, Nov. 12, 6:30 p.m.

Tracing Your African American Ancestors: Digging Deeper

Learn about additional sources and techniques to deepen your research and overcome roadblocks. This course will use specific examples of records available and show you how to use them. *Prerequisite:* "Tracing your African American Ancestors: Getting Started in Genealogical Research" or comparable research experience. | [Register](#)

St. Louis Genealogical Society

Saturday, Nov. 14, 10:00 a.m.

Does That Even Make Sense?

Are online family trees a genealogist's friend or foe? Learn about tools for evaluating whether the information in online trees should be accepted into your own research. Dan Lilienkamp, speaker.

StLGS meetings are free and open to the public. Registration is required. Register by email to programs@stlgs.org no later than Wednesday, Nov. 11.

Online obituary indexes

Obituaries are a basic source of genealogical information and can often provide information that connects generations and notes place of birth.



The following information provides links to online obituary indexes for St. Louis newspapers. Indexes are located on the St. Louis County Library website unless otherwise noted. Some newspapers are available

in databases that can be accessed from home with a valid St. Louis County Library card ([see the list of databases online](https://bit.ly/3kMN3rx) <<https://bit.ly/3kMN3rx>>). Copies of obituaries can be requested from the History & Genealogy Department using the [online lookup request form](https://bit.ly/2TGBxC2) <<https://bit.ly/2TGBxC2>>.

St. Louis major daily newspapers

[St. Louis Obituary Index](https://bit.ly/2HOCwhi) (St. Louis (City) Public Library) <<https://bit.ly/2HOCwhi>>—Includes obituaries and burial permits published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1880–1930, 1942–1945, 1960–1969, and 1992–September 2020.

[St. Louis Post-Dispatch Death Index, 1975–1977](https://bit.ly/34Iv93x) (Rollan-et.org) <<https://bit.ly/34Iv93x>>—An index to funeral notices, burial permits, obituaries, and news articles.

[Index to deaths in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat](https://bit.ly/2HPzfzv) <<https://bit.ly/2HPzfzv>>—Covers 1860–1861, 1880–1881, and 1883.

[Deaths Reported in St. Louis Globe-Democrat](https://bit.ly/31VrDkM) (St. Louis Genealogical Society) <<https://bit.ly/31VrDkM>>—Cover 1881–1891.

[St. Louis Sun Obituary Index](https://bit.ly/35MqPQ8) <<https://bit.ly/35MqPQ8>>—The *St. Louis Sun* was published from Sept. 25, 1989 to April 25, 1990.

The library edition of Newspapers.com offers digital access to the Post-Dispatch through 1922 and the Globe-Democrat through 1963. The Publishers Plus edition, available to paid subscribers extends coverage for the Post-Dispatch to 2020.

Other databases provide further coverage of the *Post-Dispatch*:

- The ProQuest Historical Post-Dispatch Database covers 1872–2003.
- The ProQuest Digital Microfilm-St. Louis Post-Dispatch covers 2008 to recent.
- The Newsbank St. Louis Post-Dispatch Database, provides text-only coverage, 1988 to recent.

Daily newspapers in German

[Anzeiger des Westens Death Notice Transcriptions](https://bit.ly/3mzFDZh) <<https://bit.ly/3mzFDZh>>—*Anzeiger des Westens* published beginning 1835, was absorbed by the *Westliche Post* in 1898. This web page provides an index to transcriptions of death notices, 1876–1878, 1881–1883, published in the Missouri State Genealogical Association Journal, which is available [online](https://bit.ly/37R99FM) <<https://bit.ly/37R99FM>>.

[Westliche Post Index to Death Notices](https://bit.ly/3oH4lsm) <<https://bit.ly/3oH4lsm>>—The *Westliche Post* was published 1857–1938. This index covers 1876–1895

Both the library and subscriber versions of Newspapers.com includes full runs of the *Anzeiger des Westens* and *Westliche Post*.

Every name newspaper indexes that include death information

[Index to the Carondelet News, 1903–1907](https://bit.ly/2TBzHIY) <<https://bit.ly/2TBzHIY>>

[Index to the St. Louis County Watchman-Advocate Newspaper](https://bit.ly/3kEjWql) <<https://bit.ly/3kEjWql>>—Covers 1881–1893.

[Name Index to St. Louis French Newspapers](https://bit.ly/2TBzHIY) <<https://bit.ly/2TBzHIY>>—An every-name index to the surviving issues of *Le Patriote*, 1878, 1884, 1886, 1887, and *La Revue de l'Ouest*, 1854.

History & Genealogy services

St. Louis County Library buildings are currently closed to the public because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following H&G services are available.:

Photocopies

H&G can provide photocopies, prints, or digital scans of many library materials, including:

- Books and periodicals—up to 30 pages from one book or one article from a single journal issue. Staff can also photocopy or scan tables of contents and index pages.
- Microfilmed records—A list of microfilm available in the H&G collection can be [viewed online](https://bit.ly/3jrqw3j) <<https://bit.ly/3jrqw3j>>.
- Databases—H&G staff will print out database records if patrons cannot access the database at home.

Please use the [online lookup request form](https://bit.ly/2UQXJKE) <<https://bit.ly/2UQXJKE>> and be as specific as possible when submitting requests.

Print collection

One-third of the books in H&G's collection—more than 27,000—can be checked out. The entire collection is included in the library's [online catalog](http://webpac.slcl.org) <<http://webpac.slcl.org>>. Books with call numbers that do not begin with "R" are available to check out. Patrons can request books online or by calling 314-994-3300.

Research guidance

H&G staff members can provide research assistance over the phone or by email. Researchers whose information needs cannot be met in this way may schedule an appointment for a face-to-face meeting with an H&G librarian.

Book-a-Genealogist

Researchers who would like in-depth assistance can schedule a phone consultation with an H&G staff member. Requests can be made using the online [Book-a-Genealogist form](https://bit.ly/3fQbB0r) <<https://bit.ly/3fQbB0r>>.

Database access

Most library databases can be used at home by St. Louis County Library card holders living in the metropolitan area. The Ancestry Library Edition database, normally restricted to in-library use, can be accessed remotely on a temporary basis. [View the list of genealogical databases on the library's website](https://bit.ly/37GRBtF) <<https://bit.ly/37GRBtF>>.

For more information, please contact the History & Genealogy Department at 314-994-3300 or genealogy@slcl.org.