

Family History Month: Dickenson Genealogy Room a hidden gem

- By Josh Sabo, Special to The Item
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The Johnnie Jo Sowell Dickenson Genealogy Room at Huntsville Public Library is a hidden gem among genealogical research collections in Texas, especially those outside a major metropolitan area. This special collection includes more than 12,000 items such as Bible records, census records, confederate records, family surname records, prison records, microfilm, and many back-issues of The Huntsville Item dating back to 1859. The focus of the collection is Texas and the deep South.

The now extensive genealogy collection at Huntsville Public Library began in 1967 with a small number of books and genealogical records donated by library patrons and the Walker County Genealogical Society (WCGS). WCGS was founded by a group of local ladies who had a mutual interest in genealogy at the home of Mrs. Thomas E. Humphrey, Jr. in 1965. The Society's membership has grown continuously over the years and the group has also helped the library's genealogical collection grow as well. In 2004, the genealogical/local history room was dedicated to and named in honor of then WCGS President Johnnie Jo Sowell Dickenson, who continued to serve as the Society's President until summer 2022. During Johnnie Jo's tenure, the genealogy room was renovated and enlarged along with the entire library and was formally dedicated on February 27, 2012. Library Genealogy Room staff member Toni Herrington, who has been with the library since 1982, has overseen the transformation of this special collection from a single shelf of materials to the amazing 2,200 square foot facility with over 12,000 items the community currently enjoys.

In addition to the vast array of books, microfilm, and archive materials, the Genealogy Room also boasts a computer lab with access to several genealogy databases, including Ancestry Library Edition and Family Search, as well as document scanning and printing and a microfilm scanner. While the library continues to receive donations from the Society, patrons, and family estates in surrounding regions, we now have a budget for purchasing additional genealogical materials too.

The WCGS provides several opportunities for genealogical research, education, and networking through a set of annual events hosted at Huntsville Public Library. A lock-in the third Sunday of each February and a Summer Weekend Workshop each August both include a silent auction of one-of-a-kind books. A Genealogical Network of Texas event in celebration of Family History Month takes place the third Friday each October and the WCGS Annual Luncheon is held the third Saturday of each December.

For more about WCGS, please visit www.wcgstx.org or email wgensoc@yahoo.com. To learn more about the Johnnie Jo Sowell Dickenson Genealogy Room, please call Toni Herrington at 936.291.5473 or email her at therrington@huntsvilletx.gov.