

UNESCO: Memory of the World Programme

Diane L. Richard looks at a unique online resource for preserving our archives

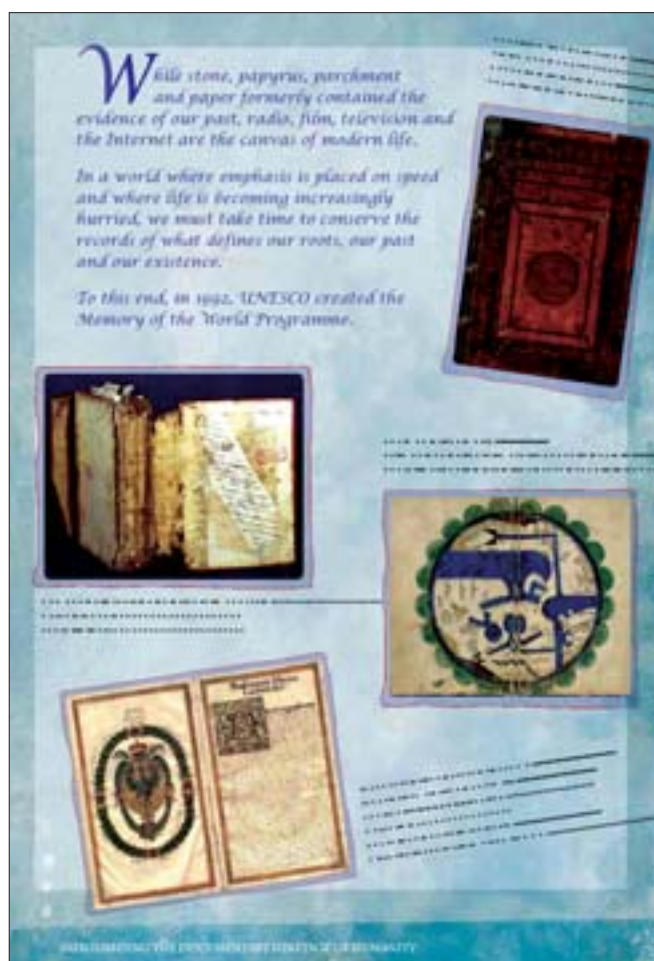
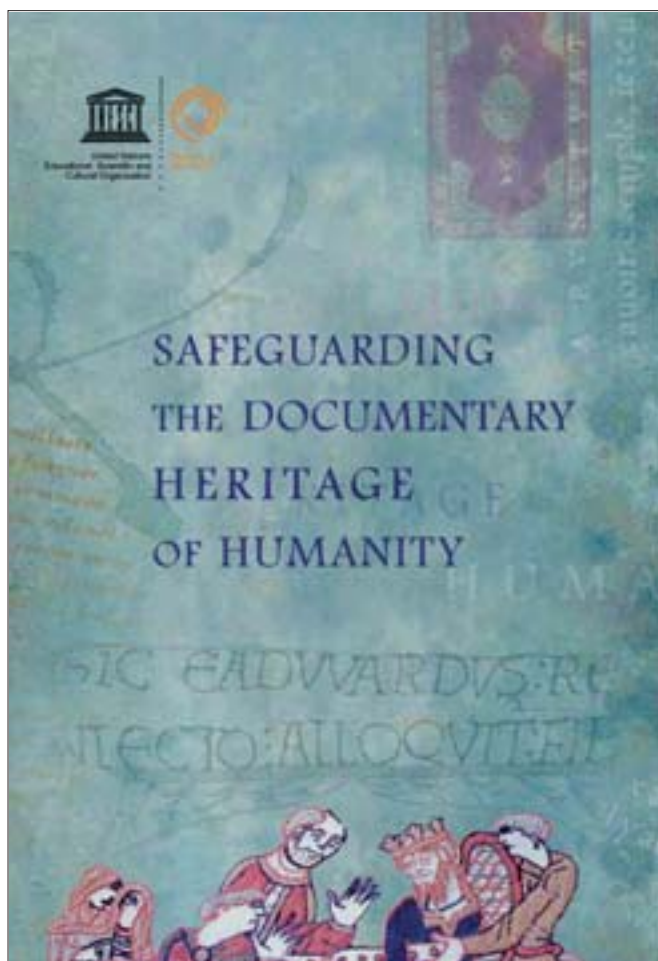
UNESCO launched the Memory of the World Programme, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/homepage>, in 1997 to “guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world ensuring their wide dissemination.” The register lists documentary heritage identified by the International Advisory Committee as being of world significance. It now holds 238 items from 84 countries, three interna-

tional organizations and one private foundation.

The mission of this project includes: 1. Facilitate preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the world’s documentary heritage; 2. Assist universal access to documentary heritage; and 3. Increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage. Its guiding tenet is that “Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable

parts of this memory disappear forever.”

To learn more about this program and see a list of those projects currently included in the Memory of the World Register, read the document “Safeguarding the Documentary Heritage of Humanity”, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001877/187733e.pdf> (this is the English version and there is also one in French — you will find that Adobe Reader and Adobe Acrobat will want to install a Japanese Language Support Packet — you do need to do this to view the document in its entirety).



Cover, left, and inside page of UNESCO's "Safeguarding the Documentary Heritage of Humanity" document, which explains the programme and lists the projects currently included.

The Memory of the World Register, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register>, is where you, as a genealogist, family historian or just a historian, will want to head. Note that how much is online for any particular included collection varies dramatically. For example, under Namibia, you have the "Letter Journals of Hendrik Witbooi", as well as photos and other images associated with Witbooi and this collection. While, at this time, no online images are available for the Royal Archives (1824-97) of Madagascar. Or, you can access medieval manuscripts on medicine and pharmacy from Azerbaijan or see 1989 photos of the Human Chain that linked Estonian, Latvia and Lithuania as they celebrated the 50th anniversary of the German-Soviet pact of non-aggression of 1939. Or, perhaps your ancestor was a civil servant during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in China? If so, their name might be on a golden list (read more here, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-3/golden-lists-of-the-qing-dynasty-imperial-examination>).

Every year, new "documentary heritage" is nominated for inclusion. The entries for 2011 can be viewed at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-year/2011>. For many of these, there is a link to photos available. I found myself repeatedly mesmerized by some of the documentary riches submitted for inclusion.

Though most of the collections are of a historic nature and will not directly assist in your genealogy research, some have the potential to help you. Even if your ancestor is not listed in the available photos, you may now be aware of a set of documents previously unknown to you. For example, Fiji, Guyana, Suriname,

Trinidad and Tobago submitted records of Indian indentured laborers. The examples include a woman's emigration pass from 1892 (with details of name, father's name, caste, where she lived, identifying marks, etc.), a man's 1870 emigration pass (similar details) and an example of an 1871 general register of emigrants. These records are of indentured laborers who traveled from Calcutta, India and possibly elsewhere in India to Trinidad and other Caribbean islands, starting in the 1830s and for a period of roughly 100 years. During that period, 1,194,957 Indians were relocated to 19 colonies. These records are the only documents for ancestral and lineage research for the numerous descendants of those Indian laborers.

Since not all nominees become part of the Memory of the World Register, there is also a collection of photos from nominations submitted earlier, 1997-2007. There are not a lot of images available for these earlier years, but what is available still could be worth checking out.

To actually see any of the photos included in this website, you will need to register. There is no cost to do so and you are asked to provide basic information. You will then receive a verification e-mail and once you click the provided link, you will be able to see, and browse, all of the photo collections.

The nature of this resource is such that you are unlikely to learn anything about your ancestors directly. However, what a fascinating glimpse it gives into some of the world's documentary treasures!

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Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for over 23 years. She is currently a professional genealogist and can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy



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