

11 December 2023

Honors Thesis Proposal

Working Title:

A Wee Bit of Cleanup: Updating Scottish Locality Pages on the FamilySearch Wiki

Project Purpose:

To review and update the Scottish Locality Pages on the FamilySearch Research Wiki to bring the pages up to date and in harmony with professional standards in digital history.

Project Importance:

Field: The FamilySearch Research Wiki is a free online encyclopedia of family history resources, including general methodology and location-specific guides. It is the primary resource for free information regarding what records exist in a certain time and place, and how they can be accessed and researched. The foremost method in which the FS Wiki achieves this is through Locality Pages. Locality Pages are unique pages on the Wiki devoted to outlining important historical context and record availability for states, counties, parishes, or other local units, depending on the country.

In personal research projects, I have noticed that Locality Pages for Scotland fall beneath even basic standards for content publishing. Many pages have grammatical or formatting errors, including dead links and empty subsections. No Locality Page I have accessed has been updated to reflect the release of the 1921 Scotland Census in 2022, and some do not reflect even the release of the 1911 Scotland Census in 2011. Most others do not accurately reflect FamilySearch's holdings about a location, much less other sites such as Ancestry or Findmypast, and for historical context only provide the summary paragraph from the 1846 *A Topographical*

Dictionary of Scotland by Samuel Lewis. No page I have checked has seen substantive updates more recently than 2015. For these reasons, the Locality Pages for Scotland warrant substantial revision, with updates that range from basic copyediting to additions of relevant historical background sections.

This is a major issue as the FamilySearch Research Wiki is the primary encyclopedic source for genealogic information. Within the Family History program at BYU, we are taught that when we have questions about record access or want to discover the basics of a location, the FS Wiki is the first place we should check. The FS Wiki exists as a living reference document for hobbyists, students, and professional researchers alike, and provides individuals with concise information about locations. If this reference source is out of date or incorrect, some individuals may think the collection they are looking for does not exist and give up. Professional researchers may spend avoidable time searching to see if a specific collection exists. By keeping the FS Wiki up to date and providing information that is directly useful to professional genealogists and everyday users, the field will benefit as less research frustration occurs and records can be located quicker.

Personal: I firmly believe that free and easy access to information is in the best interest of society, and I desire to help facilitate this access in my profession. While editing wikis like the FamilySearch Research Wiki is an easier way to do this that can be directly seen by anyone who searches, many other elements go into providing information online.

Post graduation, I am planning on eventually pursuing a degree in Library or Archival Sciences. While a key part of archives is the act of preservation, another is deciding what information to present within legal and logistical confines. An archive cannot instantly digitize everything and make it freely available online, just as a wiki cannot present all of the information

for a certain location or thing. A determination must be made on what is currently important and necessary to present for the users of the service at hand. This project will allow me to reconcile what I think is important with the thoughts of the FS Wiki's leadership and other users to hopefully create a product that addresses needs within reason. This is an element that will be largely touched upon within the reflective essay I will produce after completing the research and publishing the updates.

While research is an obvious element in updating a wiki, and is core to genealogy, another is producing the work in a way that can be easily consumed. To do this on a wiki such as the FS Wiki, built on the Wikimedia Foundation's MediaWiki base, a user must learn a language called WikiText. WikiText is a computer markup language, just like HTML that powers websites, which allows an editor to write and format text in a way presentable to computers, as well as create links in the backend databases that make up wikis. In honesty, this is not as complex as a full computer programming language like Java or C++, but it still will require me to learn this language in order to present the information I find correctly and not break the website. The FS Wiki can be edited without knowledge of WikiText to an extent, but I believe previous edits done in this way are the source of some of the major formatting errors I have seen on the site.

While I have been experimenting with WikiText in preparation for this project, the project itself will give me the ability to become more well-versed in the language beyond basic text editing. Elements such as infoboxes and tables, as well as the database-focused templates and categories that help build pages, will require me to build a much deeper understanding of the language and the database it interacts with to fulfill the project goals. This will be of immense benefit to me as more and more information becomes online, and I desire to be a part of

facilitating access to it. Learning WikiText and the wiki database structure will allow me to better understand databases and how I can manage and interact with them, as well as give me the tools to use the various sites supported by the Wikimedia Foundation or other entities like the Internet Archive to preserve digital information, as is done by various entities at BYU.

Cumulatively, I believe this thesis project will allow me to research in my geographic area of interest, determine how to best publicly display the results of my research, and go beyond the standard genealogical scope by also learning and working on database management and basic computer programming through markup languages. This will give me more of the skills I need to pursue my desires in Archival Science in terms of preserving information digitally and making it available to more people.

Project Overview:

Background and Present Status: I first noticed an issue with the Scottish Locality Pages on the FS Wiki while completing my research project for the British Family History Research class with Dr. Amy Harris. While occasionally the information provided was useful, they generally provided little information beyond a link to some records in the FS Catalog, which sometimes was a dead link anyway. On top of this, the pages were fraught with formatting and grammatical errors, obvious non-uniformity throughout the article, and outright incorrect information on occasion.

A current parish-level article is typically organized as follows. First, History, which is generally copied and pasted from the summary paragraph of *A Topographical Dictionary of Scotland* from 1846, with occasional links to later statistical accounts of Scotland. Second, Census Records, which often include links to the now no longer used microfilm numbers of census images for a parish. Third, Church Records, which outlines Church of Scotland records

for the parish with copy-paste accounts of missing data via *Key to the Parochial Registers of Scotland* by V. Ben Bloxham, and then potential mentions of Kirk Session Records and non-Church of Scotland Records. Fourth, Civil Registration Records, which only gives a standardized paragraph about Civil Registration records and a link to the Scotland-wide page, but never localized information about them. Fifth, and last, Probate Records, which gives a copy-paste paragraph on which courts the parish fell under the jurisdiction of and links to access some general probate collections, however I have encountered situations where the stated jurisdictions were incorrect and illogical based upon location. County/shire level pages include similar sections with similar issues, although elements like a parish list with links to individual pages, and sections on local libraries and archives, local family history societies, maps, poorhouses, newspapers, and voter records are present depending on the county.

Beyond general errors, the History and Civil Registration sections are particularly lacking. The History section does not provide ample background about the parish, such as geographic and political changes over time. The Civil Registration section, while it cannot provide much as all records fall into one collection on ScotlandsPeople, fails to note what registration district the parish was placed under after the implementation of Civil Registration.

In terms of accessibility, as many of the Locality Pages are for unique parishes with unique names, a Google search for the parish name will likely result in the FS Wiki page appearing on the first page of results. Despite this, no Locality Pages have their Search Engine Optimization (SEO) metadata set up properly, most only including the parish archival number as a description, with no title or keywords for search engines to parse.

Scope: Based on the number of listed parishes, there should be around 1,100 Locality Pages for Scotland. This comprises 33 county-level pages, one for each of the historical shires of

Scotland, and the rest being parish-level pages. While the numbering system set up by the National Records of Scotland goes to 901, in cities such as Edinburgh or Glasgow, the city is subdivided into smaller parishes, but all use the same number with either a letter or a second number listed after, making the exact total count unknown before an initial survey of records is complete.

As updating over one thousand pages is not feasible, in conjunction with the FamilySearch Wiki team, I have identified 5 counties to focus on. These are Argyllshire, Midlothian, Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, and Fife, and in total, this is slightly less than 200 parishes. Argyllshire was chosen as some parishes there have yet to have their page created. Midlothian and Lanarkshire are the counties of Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively, and are major population centers that will likely see more traffic to the pages from all kinds of users. Lanarkshire and Fife are two counties where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had particular success in converting individuals, and as FamilySearch is a Church-owned and utilized platform, updating these counties will better serve one of the primary demographics of the site.

Once I am done with updating for my thesis, the counties and parishes that are left will be listed as part of a WikiProject, where approved wiki contributors and FamilySearch Missionaries will be able to update those pages in accordance with instructions left by me and the FamilySearch Wiki team.

Process: The first part of my project will be to work with the FamilySearch Wiki team to make sure any changes fall in line with wiki-wide standardization plans. I will communicate with them to ensure all changes I plan to make are within desired guidelines and formulate a template to organize each locality page. The created template will address all necessary faults, such as

revamping the History and Civil Registration sections, updating the other sections with current and relevant data, and updating all relevant page metadata, such as SEO and article nesting.

Secondly, I will begin by creating pages for the parishes that do not already have them, which are a handful of parishes in Argyllshire. These first few pages will test the water and give me a chance to run things by faculty advisors and the FamilySearch Wiki team to confirm this is going on the right track without any risk of deleting important information that already exists.

Thirdly, I will begin to edit pages that already exist for parishes, beginning with Argyllshire, then moving on to the other four counties.

Fourth, I will edit the county-level pages for the five counties.

Fifth, I will work with the FamilySearch Wiki team to create WikiProject instructions so that others can continue the work for other counties.

Lastly, I will reflect on and analyze my work via an essay and poster. The essay will be at least 15 pages long and focus on a few elements, such as why certain choices were made concerning the content of these pages and a reflection on problems encountered throughout the project and how they were addressed.

Thesis Committee:

Prof. Jill Crandell

Dr. Sarah Guerrero

Dr. Daren Ray

Qualifications of Thesis Committee:

Professor Jill Crandell is an Associate Professor of Family History at BYU and Director of the BYU Center for Family History and Genealogy. She holds an MA in History from BYU and is an Accredited Genealogist under the International Commission for the Accreditation of

Professional Genealogists. In her capacity as the Director of the CFHG, Prof. Crandell has led various projects that culminate in online databases that require the establishment of clear standards of publication. She is currently my supervisor in my job as a student project supervisor on the Nauvoo Community Project at the CFHG. I will also be taking two family history courses from her in the Winter 2024 semester.

Dr. Sarah Guerrero is an Assistant Professor of History at BYU. She holds an MA in History from BYU and a PhD in History from the University of Toronto. Dr. Guerrero is the instructor of the Digital History course at BYU and has published on various digital projects in history and the humanities.

Dr. Daren Ray is an Assistant Professor of History at BYU. He holds an MA and PhD in African History from the University of Virginia. Dr. Ray is currently the Honors Coordinator for the History Department.

Project Timeline:

Late Fall 2023: Get the Proposal approved.

Start of Winter 2024: Begin working on the project and talk to the FamilySearch Wiki team about the necessary elements to begin editing.

1st or 2nd Week of June 2024: Be completely finished with editing, move on to poster and reflection.

3rd or 4th Week of July 2024: Thesis defense.

5th Week of July 2024: Submit essay and poster with final edits.

Funding:

No funding is needed.

Culminating Experience:

A likely culminating experience for a project of this nature could be RootsTech 2025 in late February or early March 2025. Based on information for the 2024 conference, presentation submissions were due in late July 2023. If I were able to create an outline for an hour-long presentation/class relating to my project, I could submit that for consideration. I also could speak with BYU professors or the FamilySearch team to potentially do multiple, smaller presentations at BYU's or FamilySearch booths on the vendor floor throughout the conference, assuming the conference runs similarly to the 2023 conference.