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## Who was Jon Stedman, Patron of Jewish Genealogy?

Karen S. Franklin

### Introduction

Genealogical research brings to light the lives of some extraordinary characters! On March 28, 1925, a headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* read, a “Soldier of Fortune Succumbs to Anthrax Contracted in Siberia.” Numerous newspapers carried the exotic story of that soldier of fortune, Benjamin Lagrange. A fur buyer, he was said to have been wounded in the Boxer Rebellion in China (1898-1900). He had been purchasing agent for Russia during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Mar 27, 1925) reported that he “traveled through China, Japan, Siberia, India, the Malay Peninsula and the Near East.” *The New York Herald Tribune* article concluded, “Mr. Lagrange made his last trip to the East in 1922, when furs he had purchased were stolen in Peking. He went to Vladivostok in pursuit of the thieves. Bandits captured him just outside that city and held him prisoner for two months.” Lagrange contracted an anthrax infection during this imprisonment (which one newspaper reported as lasting three years). Lagrange died after his return to New York. It’s difficult to determine how much of the newspaper reporting is accurate, but the tale was sure to have captured the public imagination of the day.

Lagrange was a cousin of Jon Stedman, who stumbled upon this unlikely story while researching his own family history. Jon, who was not a typical Jewish genealogist, began his quest in 1958 when he was 25 years old, didn’t know he had Jewish ancestry until he was an adult, and never considered himself Jewish. Jon did not attend an IAJGS conference and, as far as we know, he did not belong to a Jewish Genealogical Society.

Although he was self-taught, Jon became a knowledgeable and indefatigable researcher, pursuing family research about his own relatives as well as those of others who interested him for over five decades. He visited libraries almost daily to do his research, traveling to them by bus rather than car, to save money, and he corresponded copiously. He refused to pay subscription fees to Ancestry and other genealogy sites. He sent for records, and then he sent for more.

Jon lived with his mother in Denton, Texas, never marrying or having children--genealogy was his life. When he died in 2009 at the age of 76, he left sizable gifts to genealogical and historical organizations so that others could continue the kind of work that was so dear to him. Almost \$150,000 was directed to institutions that support Jewish genealogical research, a gift that is among the largest, if not the largest, ever to support Jewish family history. We may never know the entire story behind the Jon’s financial decisions but we will long benefit from his largesse.

### Karen Franklin’s role

I first learned about Jon’s work because, at the behest of his executrix Holly Hervey, I took on the task of organizing his research papers for their donation to the American Jewish Archives. This responsibility also included writing a book about the family.

The project was reminiscent of one I worked on from 2005 to 2007 for the family of Elizabeth Plaut. Though Elizabeth, the industrious and enthusiastic genealogist and wife of the distinguished rabbi and scholar Dr. W. Gunther Plaut, had written books about several branches of her family, she died

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before publishing on the Plauts. The family hired me to work with them to prepare a book. The trees and a brief history were published in *The Plaut Family: Tracing the Legacy* by Elizabeth Plaut, in 2007 by Avotaynu. Elizabeth's papers and research notes were sent to the Leo Baeck Institute. They have been digitized and are available at [www.lbi.org](http://www.lbi.org).

The papers of both Elizabeth and Jon reflect the way that genealogical research was conducted forty years ago. In both cases their records include boxes of correspondence with family members in pursuit of family information. Their communication resulted in meaningful, lasting relationships with distant cousins. Unfortunately the files are peppered with copious notes in pencil, often barely legible, on small scraps of acidic notebook paper. An archivist's nightmare!

Reading through Jon's papers was fascinating. Letters were interspersed with newspaper articles that must have taken years to locate. I could almost visualize Jon sitting in a cubby, turning the crank of microfilm reels to discover pertinent bits of information. Today one could easily find much of the information he sought on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and newspaper databases; however, Jon's dogged research and inexhaustible letter writing also turned up information that an impatient researcher today might miss. What follows are highlights of his story.

### Personal history

Jon Stedman, born in 1933 in Shawnee, Oklahoma, was always interested in family history, a passion that he shared with his mother, Sallie Ardath Tolson. His father, John Stedman, was absent for much of Jon's life, having divorced Sallie and remarried when Jon was just a child. It was only as a young adult in the 1950s that Jon discovered that his father's name at birth was Jesse Oppenheimer, and that John/Jesse had been married prior to his marriage with Sallie. Jon also learned that he was the sixth son of John Stedman. Five sons had been borne from John's first marriage (two by the name of Jesse died in infancy). Jon learned that his father had moved from New York to Oklahoma, and that his father had been born Jewish.

From a half-brother, Jon discovered that his father was a bit of a scoundrel. He gambled all of the proceeds from an insurance business, leaving his clients without coverage, and then abandoned his first wife

and children. He speculated that this might have led John to leave his life in New York for the Mid-West.

### Family history & larger contributions

The earlier family history that Jon uncovered makes for good reading: Jon's English ancestors arrived in New York in about 1816, and his great-great-great grandfather is buried in the historic Shearith Israel Cemetery on 21st Street in New York City. Jon identified many famous cousins among early American Jewish families.

Genealogists today benefit from Jon's research in the charts in Rabbi Malcolm Stern's ground-breaking magnum opus, *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies 1654-1988*. He worked with Rabbi Stern from the early 1970s through the completion of the book's third edition. Charts on the Oppenheimer family from Gedern, Goldschmidt family from Dreisen, and Davis II are his contributions; he helped Rabbi Stern on many other trees as well. The charts are available on the American Jewish Archives web site <http://americanjewisharchives.org/publications/fajf/> and some of Jon's charts have been input on [www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com).

Among the hundreds of Jon's files my very favorite story is about Captain Henry Benjamin Davis and his wife Margaret. Davis, born in New York in 1841, was the second oldest of twelve children of Benjamin Michael Davis, a sexton at the Wooster Street Synagogue (Shaaray Tefila) in New York, and his wife Nancy Benjamin. When Captain Davis died at the age of 51 in 1892, his well-attended funeral was held in the Grand Army Hall in Brooklyn, and it is clear from the newspaper descriptions of the day that Davis was no longer a practicing Jew. Although an article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on February 15, 1892, describes the Captain as one of the army post's "most interesting characters", it seems that Davis's wife, the former Margaret Amanda Cabre, a self-described Civil War spy, was the focus of Jon Stedman's interest, for he wrote several inquiries and collected numerous newspaper articles attempting to learn more about her.

A draft of a letter dated 1 February 1970 addressed only to "Dear Sir" sets out the state of Jon's research:

*"In the course of working on a history of my father's family, I have come across some material of Civil War interest..."*

According to the information that I have, Margaret Amanda Cabre was a Union courier behind enemy lines; was married at least four times, and was unable to get a Civil War widow's pension based on the services of my relative Captain Henry Benjamin Davis, her third husband, due to previous marital complications..."

Unfortunately, we don't know if Jon sent this letter, to whom he may have sent it, or whether he received a response.

How had Jon learned about Margaret's activities? Her obituary in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on April 11, 1913, states that she "saw service during the Civil War, and frequently performed duties which carried her into the enemy's lines." The obituary of her daughter, Mary Wright, indicates that her mother "was in the employ of the North during the Civil War as a messenger between the armies." I tried to ascertain just how one would confirm these statements, and wrote to American Jewish historian Professor Jonathan Sarna. He replied that "the story sounds juicy", but had no suggestions as to where one might seek records of Civil War "spies".

Mary Wright's obituary stated that she was a daughter from Margaret's first marriage to James Hart. Upon Hart's death, Margaret claimed his Civil War pension, but the Pension Board awarded it to another of Hart's wives.

An obituary for Margaret falsely listed her second husband as Henry Davis. Actually Margaret was married twice prior to her marriage with Davis. Her second husband was William Cunningham who contracted tuberculosis and died on January 20, 1880, at the House of Rest, a sanatorium in Tremont, New York. It is not clear when William contracted the disease, nor whether his marriage to Margaret Cabre Hart was ever annulled or ended by a divorce, but on November 18, 1877, Margaret A. Cunningham and Henry B. Davis wed, according to an unusual marriage document.

This record is like none I have ever encountered in my research. It would seem that Margaret A. Cunningham was still married to William Cunningham at the time of her marriage to Davis. Jon found the marriage records in a National Archives pension file for Henry Davis. From what I can determine, and I presume this was Jon's assumption as well, Mary was

We the undersigned do hereby certify that on this 18<sup>th</sup> day of November 1877, we did agree to become, and have become man and wife, and to hereafter live together as such, in conformity with the Laws of the State of New York of which we are both residents,

In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seals,

Margaret A. Cunningham  
Henry B. Davis

Witness  
Chas. L. McCann  
103 Marcy Ave  
Brooklyn N.Y.

State of New York  
County of Kings  
City of Brooklyn

On this 20<sup>th</sup> day of June 1892 before me a Notary Public in and for said County, duly Commissioned, and sworn personally appeared Margaret A. Davis, formerly the wife of Henry B. Davis, of the County of Kings, in the City of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Jon found this "marriage record" in the Civil War Pension File of Captain Henry Benjamin Davis. Though a witness swore he was present at the marriage ceremony, the pension was denied: The pension board requested a copy of Margaret's divorce from William Cunningham. None was forthcoming.

a bigamist, and later used the marriage document to support her request for a pension, which was denied. Jon wrote in his notes that Margaret married a fourth time in 1907 to a man by the name of Metcalfe. Margaret Cabre Hart Cunningham Davis Metcalfe died in 1913.

## DNA

That Jon was a pioneer in his approach to genealogy is clear from his interest in DNA. Today there are over a million records in the Familytree DNA database [www.familytreedna.com](http://www.familytreedna.com). Jon was one of the very first to submit a sample of his DNA in the spring of 2000. In fact, his kit number is 68. Jon followed the progress of scientific discoveries and interpretations in the field. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the

advancements that have been made in recent years.

In order to update Jon's research, I sent for upgrades to his DNA tests. The new results led to a most moving of email exchanges with a person who contacted me with an email reading, "Jon and I have 291.34 shared cM, with the longest block being 62.99." This would be a match of some significance in any case, but what makes this story particularly interesting is that the person who wrote is adopted, seeking the family of her birth parents, about whom she knows little. Imagine her surprise to learn that the match was made to DNA taken 14 years ago! We have not yet figured out her exact connection to Jon, but the research is ongoing.

### **John's Legacy**

Jon's bequest was divided among institutions that were of direct help to him in his years of research, and, as his executrix, Holly Hervey wrote, "This was something Jon was really interested in, projects that would open more doors to research records available to all those addicts looking for one more name, or another date."

With this goal in mind, and through the help of Jan Meisels Allen, Holly established a fund through the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies in memory of Jon's father, John Stedman, to support database projects. The award is given annually in addition to the Malcolm Stern grant (that supports availability of resources for Jewish genealogical research), and is presented at the IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy.

The American Jewish Archives, <http://americanjewisharchives.org>, the repository for all of Jon's papers, received support to properly describe, digitize and care for Jon's collection of trees, photographs and research notes. We hope this will serve as an example to all donors of family papers and collections to remind them to contribute to the institutions that preserve their histories.

[www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org) was a recipient of funds. JewishGen fulfills Jon's wish to "make more research records available", and Jon's notebooks and research papers were full of copies of JewishGen general discussion group postings with information about how to do research, and with copies of correspondence to individual genealogists whose names he found on JewishGen.

The Leo Baeck Institute also benefitted from Jon's gift. Jon was in contact with the Institute early on in his research and throughout the years about his German ancestors. LBI is a pioneer in the online accessibility of its collection, with over 90% of the archival collections digitized and available at [www.lbi.org](http://www.lbi.org). Jon's gift has been directed in part to develop a family history search portal so that records of genealogical interest can be more easily located within its database.

What can we learn from Jon's story? Though Jon's decades of extraordinary work have been almost invisible to the Jewish genealogy community, his legacy reminds us of the opportunities to keep our ancestors' memories alive not only on paper and online, but by contributing generous support to our colleagues through our collaboration and sharing, and to the institutions that facilitate the research, collect documents, and preserve our histories and heritage for future generations.

And we can also learn that everyone has a few colorful characters on the family tree...

*Karen S. Franklin is Director of the Family Research Project at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City. A past president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and past chair of the Council of American Jewish Museums, she is currently co-chair of the Board of Governors of JewishGen and chair of the Memorial Museums Committee of ICOM (International Council of Museums). Karen serves on the Advisory Board of the European Shoah Legacy Institute and was awarded the 2012 ICOM-US Service Citation for her work in Holocaust-era property restitution. She is vice president of the Obermayer German Jewish History Awards.*

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For additional information, contact [info@jgsny.org](mailto:info@jgsny.org) or the author: [karenfranklin@gmail.com](mailto:karenfranklin@gmail.com).