

Website Access: An Update

Written by Larry Grinnell

Wednesday, 14 March 2012 23:47 - Last Updated Friday, 11 January 2013 17:56



As most of you know, the computer hosting the previous GFA website (that I maintained at my home), suffered a massive failure in February, 2011, for which there was no current backup. This affected a bunch of things, including the site content, the online genealogy, the membership database, and the newsletter back issues. I was able to recover nearly all of the site content, and already had a backup of the old newsletters. Working with President Kathy Asbury, we were able to cobble together a membership database, using an older copy I still had on one of my other computers. The main loss was the online genealogy database. Much work had been done by Marj Murray, entering genealogy data that she had received from many of you, as well as other online research through Ancestry.com and others. Sadly, anything entered after July, 2009 is lost, and dear Marj is going to have to re-enter a lot of stuff.

The good that came of this is that I moved the membership database to a hosted service that performs regular backups, so I don't have to worry about that anymore. Also, I took advantage of this disaster to move the website to a hosted service, too, and did a complete redesign that makes it easier to add content, and provide new services. Additionally, much new content was added. But, before I can restore the premium content services, a few things have to happen first.

This is the technical part.

The main website software we are using now is something called [Joomla!](#) (the exclamation point is theirs). It's very modular, and has extensive third party support, including, so I had thought, genealogy support.

Joomla! is a special class of software, known as a content management system (CMS). It is open source, meaning we can use it at no cost. It has a fairly open architecture, which means it's pretty easy for other software developers to add modules to Joomla! that extend its functionality (photo galleries, user forums, etc.). Most of these are free, too. The best backgrounds (templates) are usually not free (as is the case with our site template, something from a company called [Joomlashack](#), called Vintage). I also found a module that lets me manage the newsletter collection, and it will be available pretty soon. I just need to rewrite the summaries of each issue. One of the huge advantages of using a CMS is that formatting and content are completely separate things. In other words, when a new article is submitted, the author writes words and doesn't need to worry about how it looks on the page. That's all

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automatic. Submitted graphics are organized and maintained for easy retrieval and re-use when desired.

Here's where I need to digress for a moment. We are using a genealogy database program called [The Next Generation of Genealogy Sitebuilding \(TNG\)](#) . It is a very fine program with lots of display and search options. It's really one of the best out there. It's not free, though it is incredibly cheap at \$27.00.

Here's another digression (trust me, it all comes back together pretty soon). Software is released to the public with version numbers, so folks like me who maintain websites know how current (or not) our software is. Well, Joomla! has gone through a number of updates in the last 9 months or so. We are currently at version 1.5, and Joomla! is now at version 2.5, with version 3 looming. These new versions have a lot of neat features, including the ability to apply more granular membership access permissions. If we so chose, we could split access to the genealogy from access to the newsletters by creating a new member class. More to the point, with this feature, we can begin adding features like blogging for select individuals (president, genealogy chair, etc.). By blogging, if you don't know what it is, basically it's the equivalent of writing a newspaper column.

Well, I can't update the site to the newer version(s) because our site template (remember Vintage a few paragraphs ago?) has not been updated to work with the newer versions of Joomla!

Here's digression number 3 (if you need to keep track). In order to ensure that the site is as uncomplicated (to you) as possible, I have been trying to find software that works together with another special class of software called "bridging" software. What "bridging" software does is to bring two pieces of unrelated software together with a third piece of specialized code. This is what we need for the genealogy software to talk to Joomla! Why? So that you only need to have one user account (login and password) to access everything on the site that isn't available to the general public. For a group with a membership as large as ours, it would also be a royal pain in the you-know-where to have to set up and maintain separate accounts (probably with separate passwords) for the main site's premium content (newsletter back issues) and the online genealogy database. There is a module out there that bridges an older version of TNG with Joomla! version 1.5, but it was extremely buggy, and it doesn't work very well. This software is being "supported" at the msgenealogy.com website. The last update to the site was August, 2011.

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There's another issue with Joomla! version 1.5. It's getting to be so old that the folks who run the Joomla! organization will stop providing support for version 1.5 in a few months. This is the "carrot on the stick" approach developers use to get users to update to newer releases. I can't update to version 2.5 until Joomlashack updates the Vintage template (see how it's all coming together?), which they promise will be very soon.

Then there's the whole TNG bridge to Joomla! problem. This bridge, which received its last bug fix in 2010, has not been updated to support either Joomla! version 2.5, or the latest version of TNG (version 9), and no one has been able to provide a date when this will be made available.

This is the dirty secret of open source (free) software. Unless there's a large team of volunteers who respond to occasional whip-cracking, in order to keep a project moving along, projects can die on the vine. That's at least the hopefully temporary issue with the Joomla! 2.5 to TNG 9 bridge software. No one is being paid to do this, and often these software developers are one-person shops, doing this work in their spare time. Well, as we all know, life happens. I believe the developer who was working on this project is starting a new family and is preoccupied with the trials and tribulations of family life, and at present has no time to work on this much-needed software module. I'm just about ready to get with the board of directors to propose throwing a bunch of money at this software developer to motivate him in the proper way.

So, a perfect storm. No one is really synced up with anyone else (though some of that should resolve in another month or so--Joomla! 2.5 and Vintage, that is).

I am actively looking for alternate solutions, including a similar online genealogy database called [PHPGedView](#) . I'm examining the bridging issues with it at present.

So, there's unfortunately no quick fix, much as I would like to report otherwise. I am actively seeking a solution and have been for the last year. Guess you just can't count on volunteers (both the open source software developers and me). I'm just one person, who also has a very demanding full-time job, active board membership in a local Apple computer user group, writing blogs and doing product reviews for another Apple computer-oriented website, and trying to find a way to monetize my many talents--so far no luck there. After age 70 (only 12 years away), I currently see a future of "you want fries with that?" or "Welcome to Wal-Mart." It's not a pretty picture.