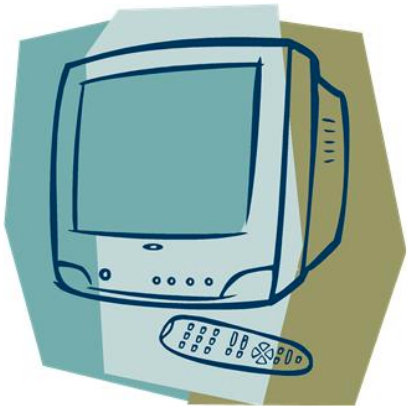
Why I Watch C-Span

by Beth Watson Foulk (www.genealogydecoded.com)



You know C-Span—the free channel provided by the cable companies as a public service; the one that does live streaming coverage of painfully boring Congressional meetings and floor speeches. The channel no one watches, but those who do watch must be policy wonks, technocrats, or people who really, really need a life. Well, I confess to not fitting into any of those categories, save a healthy interest in current events. But I do watch C-Span.

I started watching C-Span for the droning background noise to fall asleep by. Seriously, it wasn't hard to find the right program that sounded like the teacher on the Peanuts® cartoons: "blah, blah, blah." There's nothing like a dull, monotone voice to put you to sleep. (Maybe you've heard a speech that this image recalls?) Then, occasionally, there would be an interesting topic that would catch my interest.

But now I'm hooked, and let me tell you why.

1. Great Speakers It happened slowly, so slowly that I didn't realize it at first. I would find myself flipping channels, and I would get sucked into a lecture on a seemingly dry, quintessentially C-Span subject I didn't have a particular interest in. An hour would go by, and I'd wonder why I watched a presentation on "US Naval History." Then it hit me. The presenter was excellent. He could be talking about, well, US Naval History, and it was interesting. He liked his subject, he knew it cold, he engaged the audience, he wanted me to care about the subject, and he told a great story—from bait to background to climax to the final moral of the story. I followed him. I **wanted** to follow him throughout the journey. Here's a perfect example: I will stand barefoot in the rain to listen to Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Director of the Hayden Planetarium. I'm not particularly into space exploration or astrophysics, but he could talk at length about it, and I'd eagerly listen. He'd tell me about the science of this or the story behind that discovery. I'd be on the edge of my seat. He is confident. Knowledgeable. Passionate. Engaging. When I grow up I want to be like him.

2. American History Weekend Did you know that every weekend "for 48 hours" C-Span presents lectures and events on all things American History? Amazing. There are classroom lectures with student participation. There are book authors presenting to a book fair or academic forum. There are history-related conferences, where panels are convened, one-on-one Q&As are conducted, and preeminent historians are called upon to present papers. Recently C-Span did a series of highlights on small-to-mid-sized towns, where the mobile C-Span van and producers visited regional historic sites, museums, and archives. I was surprised at some of the history they culled out of my hometown of Wichita, Kansas. They interviewed the chief archivist at The American Antiquarian in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she conducted the coolest show and tell of American artifacts I've ever seen. C-Span also does tours of historic landmarks like Monticello. Since we're celebrating the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, there is wall-to-wall coverage of every Civil War event happening now. If you like American History, as I suspect many genealogists do, this is the free candy story you can go nuts in.

C-Span, unfortunately, gets the bad rap as the red-headed step-child of cable TV. I, for one, think it is undeserved. As genealogists and genealogy speakers there's a lot we can learn from historic tidbits to presentation techniques from this wealth of programming that is free and as close as our remote.

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