

Past Pursuits

A Newsletter of the Special Collections Division
Akron-Summit County Public Library

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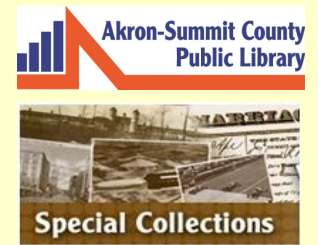
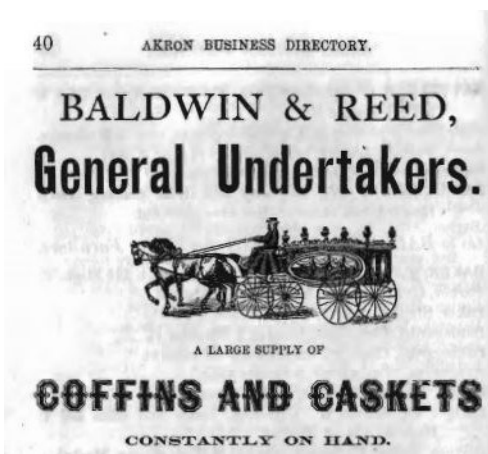


Image of Adams Funeral Home from Adams Home Goodwill Hour Souvenir Booklet, 1931. The booklet includes information about “Adams Goodwill Hour,” a radio program produced by the funeral home in the late 1920s and 30s. Broadcast on Sundays, the program featured local pastors and musical groups.

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Advertisement from Hall's General Directory and Business Guide of the City of Akron for 1868-69.

Funeral Homes in Akron

by Mary Plazo, Division Manager

“At an early day there were those among our citizens who had a fine sense of appreciation of what was due from the living to the dead, as well as to the better nature of the survivors themselves.”

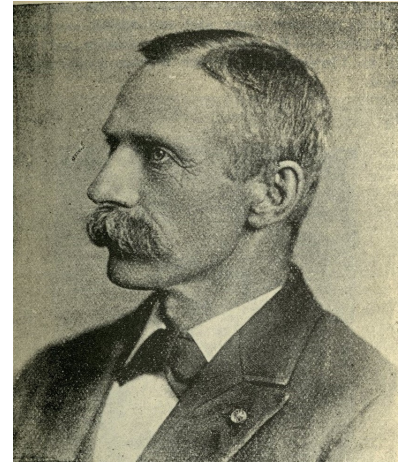
- Samuel Lane, *Fifty Years and Over of Akron and Summit County*, 1892.

It wasn't until decades after Akron's earliest cemeteries were established that the profession of “undertaker” began to appear in the business section of Akron city directories. Before undertaking was pursued as a viable trade, there was usually a local woodworker, furniture maker, or upholsterer that would make coffins ordered to size when needed. According to Samuel Lane's history, “a cabinet maker would take a measurement of the subject and make a coffin often of whitewood, pine, cherry, black walnut, or other type of wood at a total cost of around \$2.00 to \$3.00. There was also included a fee for taking the remains by wagon which was around \$1.50 to \$2.00, making the total expense of burying a deceased friend, including lot, being less than \$10.00.” Coffins were often made at no cost by the craftsman when family, friends, or neighbors could not contribute. A local example of this was a man named Alfred Baldwin, who died the age of 100 in 1923. He was recognized in his obituary as “Akron's oldest citizen” and a “pioneer cabinet maker.” Baldwin's name appears in ads for furniture and coffins in some of the earliest Akron city directories in our collections.

Through 1875, there were several independent undertakers in Akron, but many did not last. One of these included Emmet Dodge, the son of William Dodge, Akron's first prosecuting attorney. Dodge went into the livery and undertaking business in the mid-1860s but did not have the best of luck. The livery located on East Market Street burned down in 1869, so he left the undertaking business and went to work as a traveling salesman for Taplin, Rice & Company. He died of a coronary at age 41 in 1882 while on a business trip for the company in Indiana.

Probably the most familiar name in the Akron funeral business is Billow. Founded by Captain George Billow in 1875, Billow Funeral Homes & Crematory remains one of the most thriving funeral home businesses today and is the longest-running funeral home business in Akron.

George Billow was born in Germany in 1833 and came to the United States in 1843, settling with his family on a farm in Sandusky, Ohio. As a very young man, Billow had started his own carriage building business until he was called off to war in 1862. He enlisted with the 107th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, which was composed of Americans of German descent. He rose to the rank of Captain during his service and mustered out in 1865. Like many skilled workers and entrepreneurs, Billow tried his talents at different trades when he returned from the war. He worked in the grocery business, started his own cooperative grocery, and traveled around the country selling stoneware. He even spent time in Alabama where he took up cotton planting but found it unprofitable. He then returned to Akron and founded the Billow Undertaking Company in 1875 located at the foot of Ash Hill not far from Glendale Cemetery.



Portrait of Captain George Billow from *Illustrated Summit County, Ohio*, 1891.

By 1875, the population of Akron was already around 17,000. When George Billow went into business as an undertaker, funerals were usually a home affair and often quite a hardship on the family. George Billow chose to offer his services at a time when the growing number of citizens needed alternatives for honoring their loved ones and a way to transport the bodies. At this time, a traffic problem was also becoming more intense and a five mile-per-hour speed limit was imposed on the horse-drawn street trolleys. Billow's funeral coaches, splendidly carved in the taste of the period, moved more slowly, and generally the family followed the hearse on foot. By the 1890s, the styles of the funeral coaches were more decorative, reflecting the importance of one's passing and the sentiments of a time when society frowned on a mourning period of less than a year.

Eventually, George's sons George W., Edwin, and Charles joined him in the business. Practices and procedures for funeral homes were becoming more modern and legally standardized. For example, the procedure of embalming, which started during the Civil War as a way for grieving families to have their loved one's body preserved after death, had been crudely practiced until more sophisticated chemicals were created. In 1895, Edwin Billow obtained his degree from a prominent embalming school in Indianapolis, and in 1902, George Billow, Sr. was appointed to a State Association of Embalmers that required embalmers in the state of Ohio to be licensed.

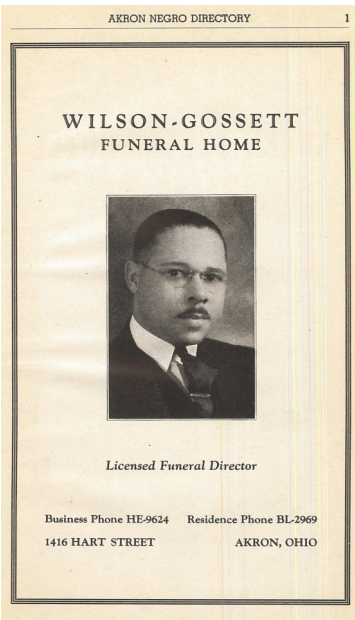
Other funeral directors in the city also provided embalming services and would offer "lady attendants" in their advertising as a way to persuade potential customers. An article from the *Akron Beacon Journal* in 1893 reported, "the business of embalming seems like a queer occupation for the gentler sex, but it is an interesting fact that there are now nearly 300 ladies in the United States engaged in the business of undertaking, and several of these are skilled embalmers."

Funeral homes also started the first ambulance services for transporting bodies from place to place. After the establishment of City Hospital in 1892, Billow started providing an ambulance service from the hospital. By 1911, the company operated a motor ambulance as well as its funeral vehicles. Other funeral homes would follow this model as well. In 1915, Billow's Ash Street location was enlarged to provide family rooms where visitors could be met and sympathy shared. Since those early days, the family business has greatly expanded their operations with several branches. They opened a chapel in Cuyahoga Falls in 1954 and another in Portage Lakes in 1963, and the original Ash Street location moved to Fairlawn to make way for the Akron Expressway in 1967. Under the fifth-generation leadership of brother and sister Chip and Ann Billow, they were the first funeral home to install their own crematory in 1984. Now, a sixth generation continues this family business legacy.

Several other funeral directors also began operation in Akron in the late 1800s. Harvey A. Kasson, who also

served in the Civil War, started in the funeral business in 1889. Charles T. Parks, another Civil War veteran who served in the 16th Ohio Volunteer Infantry and was wounded at Vicksburg, started his funeral business around 1890.

Many of the early undertakers and funeral directors did not survive in the business long, but one other establishment that exists today is Hummel Funeral Home. In 1896, a man named James T. Enright came to Akron to engage in the funeral business on the site where the Akron armory later stood (now the location of the Oliver R. Ocasek Building). In 1898, he was joined by John B. Hummel and they started a partnership that lasted until 1920 when Enright decided to retire from the funeral business and go into real estate. John Hummel died in 1945, but he had three sons who continued the business and now, several generations later, they are still one of the most well-known funeral homes in Akron.



Advertisement from the Akron Negro Business Directory, 1940.

Unfortunately, there isn't much documentation about funeral homes serving Akron's African Americans, but there were several that existed by the early 1920s and probably earlier. Most were operated out of small residences and did not stay in business very long. In the 1940 *Akron Negro Business Directory*, there are only four African American undertakers listed. Wilson-Gossett Funeral Home (later Wilson Funeral Home), started by Roy R. Wilson and Austin Gossett in 1926, was located at 1416 Hart Street. Gossett died at the young age of 59 in 1940, but Wilson continued with the business. He was born in Arkansas and had been a resident of Akron since 1917. He graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Chicago and operated the Wilson Funeral Home for more than 50 years until it closed not long after his retirement in 1980. Wilson Funeral Home was probably the longest-running African American funeral home in Akron besides the current Stewart & Calhoun Funeral Home. Stewart & Calhoun was started by James Stewart, William Calhoun and Lehman Black in 1963 and is still going strong.

The longest-operating Jewish funeral home began as Gordon Memorial Home, founded in 1952 by Robert L. Gordon. Born in Akron in 1924, he attended the Cleveland College of Mortuary Science before being drafted into the Army in World War II. He served as a medical technician in Europe and received the Silver Star Medal for rescuing a soldier while under enemy fire. Upon returning from the war, he started a family, completed his licensing to be a funeral director, and opened his business in a double store room on Copley Road. Gordon passed away in 2017, but the current Gordon-Flury Memorial Home is still in operation today at 1260 Collier Road.

Between the 1920s and 1950s, funeral homes became abundant in Akron and Summit County. In 1922, there were fifteen funeral homes in the area, a number that doubled by the early 1950s. Since the 1960s, funeral homes have been built specifically for the function and purpose of their operations and not in residential homes like they were in the past. Many cities, including Akron, dealt with zoning challenges from communities that didn't want funeral homes in residential areas.

Several of Akron's early funeral homes were located on East Market Street when it was still considered the "Gold Coast" lined with stately homes. Unfortunately, most of these homes were torn down by the 1980s. One example is the Viall & Kesler Funeral Home (later Kesler) located at 702 East Market, which had originally been built by Dr. Frank C. Reed in 1901. Reed had been a prominent physician in Summit County for 50 years and was a member of the Summit County Medical Society. This house was eventually torn down in 1984 to make room for a Taco Plaza. One of the last remnants of these grand homes is the Adams Mason Funeral Home, which is still in operation at 791 East Market and was originally founded by Charles H. Adams in 1926.

Another grand home was the former Don R. Long Funeral Home, which eventually merged with Cunningham-McCafferty at 682 East Buchtel Avenue but originally operated at 293 East Market Street. It was also the

former residence of famous Akron brewer George J. Renner. It was torn down in 1966 for a Midtown Marathon gas station.

The Cunningham Funeral Home was founded in 1906 by Sylvester T. Cunningham. He had started in the funeral business working for C. T. Parks in 1890, then continued on as an embalmer at Billow Funeral Home for 17 years before opening his own operation. His son William joined, as well as Edward McCafferty, who became a partner in the firm in 1951. Cunningham died in 1944, and the funeral home was closed in 1966. Special Collections was fortunate to acquire their records in 2002.

By the 1980s, funeral directors were not seen merely as tradesman anymore, and they focused increasingly on advertising, sales, and grief counseling services. The impact of new federal regulations on price disclosure, stricter educational requirements for directors, and acquisition of funeral homes by a few big companies gave funeral homes some of their biggest challenges. Since the 1990s, many funeral homes and cemeteries are now owned by large corporations and fewer of them offer the intimate experience of a family-run business the way they did long ago.

Getting to Know...Vernon Odom

by Rebecca Larson-Troyer, Librarian

Vernon Lane Odom was born in Biscoe, Arkansas, on June 9, 1921, the youngest of eight children born to Dr. and Mrs. Elijah B. Odom. Dr. Odom, who died when Vernon was just two years old, had been born into slavery and put himself through medical school before becoming a successful doctor and business owner. His widow Ada Toone Odom, who had been a teacher when she married, raised the couple's children and managed the family's finances, household and property on her own during the 1920s and 30s. Odom is said to have doted on her youngest son but sent him north to Ohio at the age of 16 to complete high school. There he came to live with his sister Ada Bradshaw and her husband Leroy and graduated from Cleveland Central High in 1939. Like his mother, Ada and Leroy had a lasting impact on Odom's life. Leroy in particular, a progressive and politically minded man, treated Odom as a son and imparted his commitment to community and progress.



Photo of Vernon Odom provided by Akron Community Foundation.

Following high school, Odom worked for two years selling insurance and working as a gas station attendant to save money to further his education, entering Atlanta's Morehouse College in 1941. His studies were interrupted to serve in the 29th Signal Construction Battalion in Europe during World War II, where he rose to the rank of master sergeant. Odom's time in the Army led him to recognize his natural ability to relate to and lead others. After returning to Atlanta, Odom resumed his classes at Morehouse, studying sociology alongside classmate and child prodigy Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1947, Odom married Sadie Harvey, a native Atlantan and college biology teacher who graduated from Morris Brown College at the age of 19 and had worked as a biologist for the U.S. Air Force during World War II. After graduating Morehouse, Odom attended Atlanta University where he earned a master's degree in social work.

Odom's early career was spent as a youth advisor in settlement houses in several cities before he was tapped as program director for Akron's Community Service Center and Urban League in 1953. The Community Service Center, which opened on East Market Street in 1950, provided space for recreation, meetings, and education and was a gathering place for African Americans of the community. His time with the Urban League spanned nearly four decades, most of which was spent as the organization's executive director. During this time, Odom became a well-known and respected community and civil rights leader. In the 1960s, he worked to desegregate Akron's police and fire departments, championed education and equality, worked to promote opportunities and education, and helped lead efforts to combat poverty, racism, and violence in the city. His work was

recognized with several awards throughout his career, including Social Worker of the Year (1968) from the North Central Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the Bert Polsky Humanitarian Award (1983) for “outstanding achievements in easing racial tension and in maintaining harmonious relations among all segments of the community.”

Odom’s commitment to the community was unflinching. He was a member of the Mayor’s Committee on Housing, NAACP, Frontiers International, Community Action Council, Junior Achievement Board, National Association of Social Workers and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, as well as a part-time instructor at University of Akron. He once commented that he intended to stay in Akron for only three years but fell in love with the city. Here he worked alongside his wife Sadie on projects with the Urban League and raised two children, son Vernon Jr. and daughter Maida, both accomplished journalists. Odom was regarded as an inspiration to the youth of the city and known as someone willing to listen and offer counsel to any and all who approached him. Daughter Maida Odom reflected on her father’s life in a piece for the *Akron Beacon Journal* in 1992, writing, “many are awed by my father’s record of public leadership—the jobs he’s created, the people he’s scooped up from the edge, the ones he’s helped send to school. But, believe me, it’s the one-to-one sessions that have won him...adulation and love.”

In 1992, Odom retired from the Urban League after 39 years with the organization. Hundreds attended celebrations and receptions in his honor, including civic leaders, congressmen, corporate leaders, family, friends and peers. On May 22, 1996, less than two years after losing his wife Sadie in October 1994, Vernon Odom died at the age of 74 following a battle with cancer. Headlines in the newspaper read “a leader is lost,” “real power lacks need to show off” and “farewell to a hero,” along with countless memories of who Odom was to those who knew him and what his life and work meant to the people of Akron. In 2001, city council voted unanimously to rename Wooster Avenue, a street southeast of downtown in a predominately African American neighborhood, to Vernon Odom Boulevard, a change that officially took effect in 2006. The Urban League has since relocated, fittingly, to 440 Vernon Odom Boulevard, where a portrait of the organization’s longest-serving director still hangs on the walls. In 2015, a historical marker was erected at the former site of the Community Service Center, a place where Odom spent so much of his time listening, lending a hand, and leading a city that needed him.



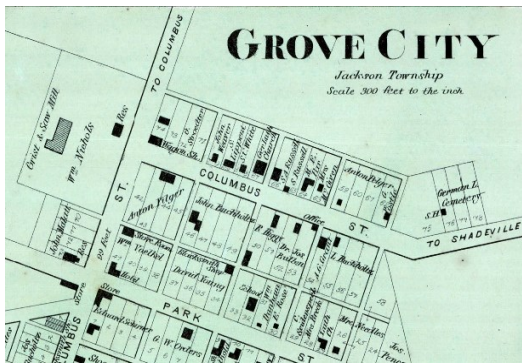
African American Genealogy Program on March 30

Join us for “African American Genealogy” with Deborah A. Abbott, Ph.D. on Saturday, March 30, 10:30 am – 1:00 pm at Main Library in Meeting Room 2AB.

Deborah Abbott is a professional genealogist specializing in African American research, manuscript collections, and genealogy methodology. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, she presents lectures and workshops at variety of national, state, and local genealogy conferences. She is a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists and an instructor at the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy.

The program includes two sessions. “African American Genealogy: Leaving No Stone Unturned” focuses on underutilized records such as taxes, manuscripts, newspapers, and passports. “It’s a Needle in a Haystack: Slave Research” focuses on finding and identifying slave ancestors and their owners. The session analyzes a case study and reviews clues and resources needed to recreate an African American family’s journey from freedom back to slavery and a potential slave owner.

Co-sponsored by Special Collections and the Summit County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society, the program is free and open to the public, and parking is free in the High-Market Parking Deck. For more information or to register for this program, please contact us at speccollections@akronlibrary.org or 330-643-9030.



Online Resources for Franklin County

by Iris Bolar, Librarian

Established in 1803, Franklin County includes the city of Columbus—the state capital, county seat, and most populated city in Ohio. This article looks at the free online tools available for genealogy research in Franklin County.

Map of Grove City from the 1872 atlas Franklin County and Columbus, J. A. Caldwell and H. T. Gould, publishers.

[My History](#), a digital collection of [Columbus Metropolitan Library](#), is loaded with historical and genealogical documents of Franklin and surrounding counties. Researchers can search or browse photographs, records, newspapers, maps, yearbooks, directories, and other items on a wide range of topics from the library and area organizations. An alternate method of viewing the content on My History is to access

each digital collection [individually](#). A few of these collections are the [Columbus News Index and Obituary Index](#), [MLS Real Estate Cards](#) (which contain photographs of thousands of Central Ohio homes and businesses), [Columbus Memory](#) (a collaboration with the Columbus Historical Society), and much more.

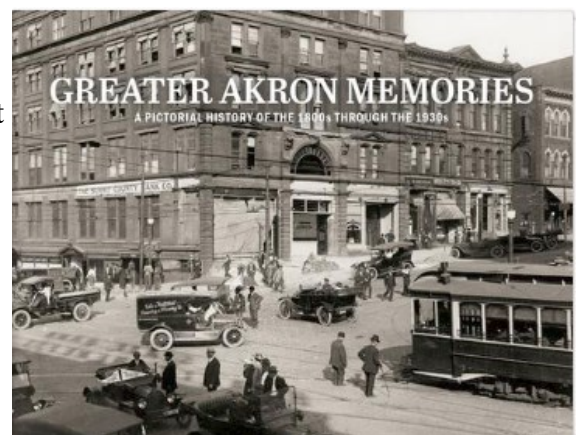
The Franklin County Genealogical & Historical Society's [Newspaper Tidbits](#) is an index to some names that appeared in various old Columbus area newspapers. Scattered dates range from 1813 to 1982 and articles can be requested from the Columbus Metropolitan Library. The society lists some names appearing in [Ohio State Journal](#) from 1880 to 1883 that were taken from naturalization and immigration records.

The Columbus Jewish Historical Society has transcribed [oral history interviews](#) available to read online, and there are a good number of old political and ethnic Columbus newspapers on [Ohio Memory](#). The Franklin County [Recorder's Office](#) provides online access to deeds (back to 1914) and mortgages (back to 1970). There is also an index to Franklin County deeds for 1804-1913. [Franklin County Gravestone Photos](#) is a site created by Leona Gustafson that provides cemetery burial listings, gravestone, and aerial photographs, and articles for Franklin and its bordering counties. Leona and David Gustafson also compiled the [Combined Index for Franklin County, Ohio Cemeteries](#) for burials included in the 11-volume set of books by the Franklin County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society. Did your ancestor own a restaurant in Columbus? [Columbus Restaurant History](#) provides a database of about 2800 Columbus restaurants' addresses and years of operation (if known).

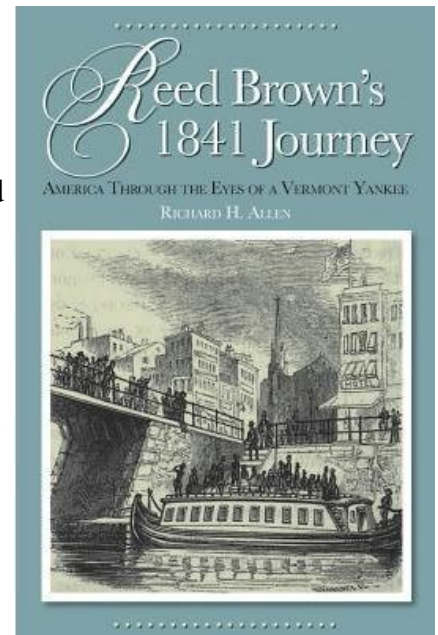
There are several websites for researching genealogy in the city of Worthington. Researchers can search letters, portraits, a newspaper index, cemeteries, documents, and objects on [Worthington Memory](#). The Worthington Historical Society provides [estate case numbers](#) for 88 people who died in the period of 1803 to 1850. The society also provides a timeline of [Worthington schools](#), 1804-2008, and an [inventory of oral history interviews](#) available from the historical society.

New Books

The Akron Beacon Journal, in partnership with the Akron-Summit County Public Library and Summit County Historical Society, presents [Greater Akron Memories: A Pictorial History of the 1800s through the 1930s](#). This heirloom book is filled with rare images of the Akron area, many of which have been published for the first time. Included are photos of street scenes, transportation and commerce, recreation and celebration, and many more subjects that are sure to jog memories and instill pride in our historic community.



In 1841, Vermont native Reed Brown travelled west to help his brother Nathaniel, who was in jail in Ravenna, Ohio on charges of burglary of an Akron grocery store. Along the way, Brown wrote a diary detailing his experiences. Over 200 years later, his descendant donated the diary to the Williston Historical Society in Vermont. It caught the eye of historian and author Richard H. Allen, who recognized its research value and felt compelled to bring the story to a wider audience. The result is his newly published book *Reed Brown's 1841 Journey: America Through the Eyes of a Vermont Yankee*, a transcription of the diary with added descriptions putting Brown's travels in a larger historical context. The diary contains unique snippets about Akron in 1841 that may not exist in any other records, making it an important resource for early Akron history. As part of his research for the book, Allen walked in Brown's footsteps by visiting the same places Brown did, including Akron. Special Collections was pleased to work with him as he brought Brown's time here to new life. Check out "[History Space: 1841 journey of a Vermonter](#)" in the *Burlington Free Press* for more information.



To view a complete list of recently added genealogy and local history titles, see the [New Books](#) page on our website.

Thank
You

We would like to thank the following for their generous contributions:

Richard H. Allen for *Reed Brown's 1841 Journey: America Through the Eyes of a Vermont Yankee* by Richard H. Allen

DuWayne Hansen for *There Were Giants in the Earth in Those Days: Fourteen Generations of the William Cole Family in America* by DuWayne Hansen

Connie Hartley for five historic postcards of the YWCA building exterior and interior

Rita Jubin for 75 slide photographs of Akron from 1959-1980

Betty Kleiber for scanned images from Kenneth Kleiber's scrapbook of the U.S. Naval Air Station, Akron

Kramb Consulting for *The East Reservoir Dam and Portage Lakes: A Historical Context Report*

Sara Liva for *The Prisoner* by Sara Liva

Evan Ramstad for copies of notes and papers related to the founding of West Congregational Church

Karen Carmack Stadler for North High School Class of 1942 memorabilia and scrapbook

Prakash Trivedi for *Scion of Immortality* by Prakash Trivedi

Special Collections Main Library Class Schedule

Four genealogy classes will be offered March-June 2019, including a **NEW** class on FamilySearch. For a flyer with the complete Main Library class lineup, visit the [Classes & Programs](#) page on our website.



Sledding at Portage Lakes, 1945. Photo from the Portage Lakes Community Photographs Project, Summit Memory.

The Akron-Summit County Public Library
Special Collections Division
is located on the third floor
of the Main Library.

Special Collections
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www.akronlibrary.org/specialcollections



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