

# Getting Started in Genealogy

Ann G. Lawthers, Genealogist

**Rule #1 – Work from the known to the unknown**

**Rule #2 – Write it down**

## Methodology

Step #1- Identify what you know

Step#2- Decide what you want to learn (research goal)

Step#3- Identify and locate your sources

Step#4- Research!

Step#5- Analyze

Repeat steps as needed.

## Step #1- Identify what you know

Starting your genealogical documentation is as simple as purchasing a spiral bound notebook for your notes, but several standard forms greatly simplify the task of recording important genealogical information. Most genealogical software programs will generate reports in these basic formats. Plan to make liberal use of these forms.

## Tools

- Pedigree Chart: Road map of your ancestors and includes basic information about each person such as full name, date and place of birth, death, and marriage. Each person on the chart receives a number.
- Family Group Sheet: The family group sheet provides a snapshot of each nuclear family and records pertinent information about each family member.
- Research Plan: Your roadmap for research – your hypotheses, research objectives and where you will search.
- Research Log: Research logs are an excellent way to keep track of the research you have already completed. They contain a list of every source you consulted—and whether your search was successful or not.

## Techniques

- Interview Questions: Interviewing your relatives may seem like a daunting task.
- Genealogical Recording Standards:

## Getting Started in Genealogy

- ✓ Dates: Dates are usually captured as day – month – year, e.g. 21 May 1852.
- ✓ Maiden names: List a woman under her maiden name. If her maiden name is unknown, leave blank space (e.g. Mary (\_\_\_\_) or Mary \_\_\_\_).
- ✓ Surnames: Many genealogists capture surnames in capital letters to highlight the name in a text field.
- ✓ States: Either spell out states or use standard abbreviations. Do NOT use the two letter postal codes.

### Step #2- Decide what you want to learn

Take a look at your charts and your notes. Where are you missing key pieces of information such as a date or a name or a place? Make a list of the information you need to find. Decide which questions interest you the most. Pick a handful of questions to begin.

#### *Tips*

1. **Typical genealogical questions** include:
  - Who are the parents?
  - What is the date or place of birth?
  - What is the date or place of marriage?
  - What is the date or place of death?
  - What is the spouse's name, or maiden name?
  - Who are the siblings?
2. **Start slowly.** Don't rush to answer all your questions at once.
3. **Don't skip generations** in planning your research; it only leads to misattributed people.

### Step #3- Identify and Locate Your Sources

#### *Tools*

For the majority of beginners, the internet and the library provide the most accessible sources of information about family history, although not everything is online or in a book. An efficient use of the internet or the library rests on understanding where the information you seek may be found.

See Table 1 for an overview of different types of genealogical records and Table 2 for other sources of genealogical information such as compiled genealogies and histories.

See Table 3 for the records that are most likely to have the specific pieces of information you seek such as birth, marriage, or death dates.

# Getting Started in Genealogy

**Table 1: Records with Genealogical Information**

Type of Record	Description	Information in Record
Vital Records – Created by Governments	This includes the recording of births, marriages and death by towns or states. Not until the twentieth century in the U.S. did government record keeping of vital events become universal.	Name, date, place and sometimes parent’s names, including mother’s maiden name
Records of Vital Events– Created by Religious Institutions	Records kept by religious institutions of parishioners, including marriage certificates, baptisms, confirmations, burials, birth records, Hebrew School attendance, and other materials.	Same as above, plus witnesses to the event
Records of Vital Events – Created by Families	Bible records	Name and date and sometimes place
Census	US Census: Every ten years beginning in 1790. Until 1850, the census only listed the head of household and tabulated the ages of household members by age categories. From 1850 onward, the census became a much more useful source of genealogical information. State Census: Some states conducted their own censuses in between federal census years.	Name, age, and gender of each family member, occupation, birthplace and other information, depending on year
Cemeteries	Tombstones vary in the amount of information captured. Online websites such as Findagrave.com may include transcriptions of obituaries or biographical information in addition to a photo of the tombstone.	Name, date of birth, date of death. Sometimes the maiden name and the place of birth are included.
Immigration and Emigration Records	Records generated in tracking individuals arriving or departing a country. Includes ship passenger lists, border	Few lists pre-1820. From 1820-1893 – just the name, age, gender and country of origin were recorded. Beginning in 1893

## Getting Started in Genealogy

Type of Record	Description	Information in Record
	crossing records, and passport applications.	more extensive information such as last residence and marital status were captured. Passport applications typically include name, date and place of birth.
Naturalization and Citizenship Records	Records generated through the process of an individual applying for and becoming a citizen of a country. Beginning in 1790 the US naturalization process required two steps. After living in the U.S. for at least two years a person could file a declaration of intent to become a citizen, followed three years later by a petition for naturalization. The final certificate was issued based on the petition.	Name, nationality, date and place of birth, port and date of arrival. After 1907, may find spouses name, date and place of birth as well as information about children.
Land and Property	Records generated by the purchase and sale of land, such as warrants, deeds and mortgages. In the colonial period, most rural heads of house owned land.	Name, name of wife, names of family members, names of neighbors. Some states, such as Maryland, gave parcels of land names such as "Peace," or "Dorsey's Folly," which makes tracing ownership across generations somewhat easier.
Probate	Records generated by the process of settling an estate after death. If a person made a will, they are said to have died "testate;" without a will, "intestate."	Wills mention relationships: husband, wife, children.
Taxation	Records generated to track receipt of taxes paid to government.	Name, property. In colonial periods, the presence of a name on a list signified the person was of legal age (16, 18 or 21 depending on the colony).
Military	Records generated as a result of an individual's involvement in the armed forces, including draft registration cards, service records, pension	Draft: Name, age, place of birth, occupation, residence. Service: Name, age, dates of service Pension: Name, date of birth,

## Getting Started in Genealogy

Type of Record	Description	Information in Record
	records, and bounty land records	death, family members.
Newspapers	Birth, marriage and death notices are the principle uses of newspapers by genealogists although some ancestors generate news articles.	Names, dates of events, location, family members.

**Table 2: Other sources of Genealogical Information**

Source	Description	Information
Compiled genealogies	Published family histories	Descendants, lineage. Some compiled genealogies have been carefully documented, others present data without source citations and must be treated as finding aids.
Local Histories	Histories of towns, counties, and states provide a wealth of useful information for genealogists. They describe the early settlement of an area and describe the founding of churches, schools, and businesses. Many histories include lists of pioneers, soldiers, and civil officials. Prominent citizens receive a biographical write-up.	Names, relationships, places, occupations. These histories may place your ancestor in an area before the ancestor left a record.
Biographies	Life histories of prominent people	Names, relationships, migration patterns, occupations, residences.

**Table 3: Suggested Records by Information Needed**

Information Needed	Search These Records First	Then Search These Records
Age	Census, Vital Records, Church Records, Cemeteries	Military Records, Taxation, Bible Records, Town Records, Emigration and Immigration
Birth date and place	Vital Records, Church Records, Census (for place), Town Records	Cemeteries, Bible Records, Newspapers
Country of foreign	Naturalization Records, Census,	Cemeteries, Military Records,

## Getting Started in Genealogy

Information Needed	Search These Records First	Then Search These Records
birth	Church Records, Vital Records, Emigration and Immigration	Newspapers, Local Histories
Death date and place	Vital Records, Church Records, Cemeteries, Probate Records	Newspapers, Bible Records, Military Records, City Directories
Foreign birth location	Vital Records, Emigration and Immigration, Census, Published Genealogies, Local Histories, Naturalization	Newspapers, Church Records, Military Records
Immigration date	Census (year only), Immigration, Naturalization	Newspapers, Biographies
Maiden name	Vital Records, Church Records, Newspapers, Bible Records	Cemeteries, Military Records, Probate Records, Town Records
Marriage date and place	Vital Records, Church Records, Census, Newspapers, Bible Records	Military Records, Probate Records, Naturalization
Parent's names	Vital Records, Census, Probate Records, Newspapers, Published Genealogies, Local Histories	Emigration and Immigration, Bible Records
Places family has lived	Census, Land, Local Histories, City Directories, Vital Records	Newspapers, Taxation, Military Records, Probate Records

### *Tips*

1. **Start your research with the U.S. Federal census.** The census will anchor your ancestor to a place and time and give you clues about family relationships.

## Step Four: Research

### *Tools*

**Research Log:** Whether you use a pre-formatted form, a computer program, or a spiral notebook, it's important to list every resource you have checked and the information you did *and did not* find. Keeping track of your negative searches is critical to avoid duplicating your work.

**Filing System:** Set up and use a simple filing system: either virtual (on your computer) or physical (hardcopy). Many researchers find it helpful to organize by surname and then by the given name of the father. Each person in your tree exists in two families: as child and later as parent. Record pre-marriage facts with the father's family and post-marriage facts with the husband's family.

# Getting Started in Genealogy

## *Techniques*

**Sibling research:** Sometimes a person's siblings hold the key to the information you seek. Your direct ancestor may not have left a record with the names you need but their brother or sister might have. Find out the names of as many siblings as possible.

## *Tips*

1. **Write it down.**
2. **Alternative spellings:** If you don't find the record try an alternative spelling of the name. Spelling tended to be fluid until the twentieth century and even then the possibilities for misspelling are numerous.
3. **Less is often more when searching online:** If you enter too much information, or too much precise information (e.g. exact birth year) into the search engine you may be disappointed. Try date ranges or less precision about place.
4. **Click through to the original record when it exists:** Don't rely on the transcription. First, errors in transcription occur. Second, the original record may have substantially more information than was abstracted for the search engine.
5. **Collect as many records as possible about an individual or family.** This helps you evaluate the "fit" of any new information you find.
6. **Learn the geography and social setting** of your area. This will greatly help your search process.

## Step Five: Analyze

Critically evaluate the information you have found before you decide to add it to your tree (see below – *Techniques*). Once you have completed these steps, you are certain to identify further questions and other missing pieces of information. Start the research process again by locating and identifying sources that might help you answer your next set of questions.

## *Tools*

Several software programs and other resources exist to assist you in tracking and organizing your genealogical information.

## *Techniques*

**Evaluate the Evidence:** Evaluate what you have found.

- Does it confirm or contradict what you already know?
- Does the record tell you straight out the fact you need to know (direct evidence) or do you need to infer something from the information given (indirect evidence). An example of indirect evidence is age on the census from which you may infer a birth year.

## Getting Started in Genealogy

- Who provided the information for the record? Was the informant a participant in the event (e.g. bride and groom for a marriage record) or someone else (e.g. daughter or undertaker for a death record)? Information provided by a participant is more credible than information provided someone else.
- How long after the event was the information provided (e.g. birth date on a death record)? Memory fades over time.
- If you are viewing a compiled genealogy, does the author cite his or her sources?

## Recommended Reading

### Skills

Robert Charles Anderson *Elements of Genealogical Analysis* (Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014).

Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, Va. : National Genealogical Society, 2013).

Penelope L. Stratton and Henry B. Hoff, *Guide to Genealogical Writing* (Boston, New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014).

Drew Smith, *Organize Your Genealogy*, (Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2016).

Blaine T. Bettinger, *Guide to DNA Testing and Genetic Genealogy*, (Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2016).

### Localities

Eichholz, Alice, editor. *Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources* . Revised Edition. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1992.

Loretto Dennis Szucs & Sandra Hargreaves Luebking. *The source : a guidebook to American genealogy* (Provo, UT : Ancestry, 2006).

Michael J. Leclerc, *Genealogist's handbook for New England Research* (Boston : New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2012).

Marie E. Daly and Judith Lucey, *Genealogist's Handbook for Irish Research*, (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2016).

James M. Beidler, *Trace your German roots online* (Cincinnati, Ohio : Family Tree Books, 2016).