

## Getting Started in Genealogy

I have found, even though starting this pretty late in life, genealogy work is truly a lifetime pursuit. But it is one that can be put aside and picked up again as time permits. All that is required is a natural curiosity, continuing interest, and some kind of filing system to permit the safe storing and rapid retrieval of the large amounts of piecemeal records that will come into your possession over time. Most people already have some of these records laying around that just need to be organized.

You can each decide for yourself just how deeply you want to get into genealogy work. Most people only want to find out more about and record their own direct ancestral lines. Some will want to expand it to the lines of their aunts and uncles and the families of their spouses. A few will find themselves drawn into being the "family historian", as I did. In any case, go into it with an open mind. Try not to be judgmental. Most will find a few scoundrels lurking in their family trees. Accept them as you find them, not what you wish they were. It's rare that you will find any "prince" among the paupers. Don't try to over glamorize your ancestors - most will be found to have been just hard working farmers, merchants, or craftsmen. But a few will be seen as pioneers who took chances in relocating to other parts of the country to find a better life, or avoid hardships and restrictions in their old surroundings. From these tid-bits one can sometimes see how their family participated in the expanding Westward and the building of early America. Try to deduce and honestly record the stories of these ancestors, along with the sometimes bland names and dates. Such may become treasured stories that without your records may be soon lost to the ages.

Be patient. Overcome disappointment with dead end searches. Learn to accept uncertainty. Far too many missing and conflicting dates and names will be encountered. But the exhilaration from a diligently searched for link will soon more than make up for these negatives. After all, if genealogy was all that easy, there would be no sense of accomplishment, and you would already know all you wanted to about your family history, and not even be here today.

Nothing happens quickly, although internet communications have greatly shortened response times, and vastly broadened the area of contacts. A downside is the ready availability of vast amounts of suspect records, and outright incorrect information. Particularly suspect are the so called "World Family Tree" discs put out by some software companies, and uncertain tree postings on private web sites. It disturbs me to see so many casually spread so much unchecked data. I believe that if records are worth saving, it's worth the time to check and see that they are as accurate as possible. Always try to seek some supporting documentation for a name or date from a believable source.

As to getting started, some orderly filing system for the paper records, and a computer program makes it all so much easier. I got started just by asking some of my older relatives about their parents, etc. and recording what they told me on forms like the ones I am showing here for you folks to complete. Then I started making a numerical list - #1 for the first record sheet, and who gave me the information. After a while I had a 3-ring binder of sheets and other records like obituary clippings, each with a number marked on it, and a numbered line listing for each document on my index page.

What to record and how: Use full names of all individuals where you know them. I also show unusual nicknames in "Quotes" and possible alternative names in (Parentheses). Females should be listed by their birth last names. Show birth dates, death dates, marriage dates. Convention is to

show handwritten dates as: "04 Jun 1898". When unsure, preface dates as "About", "Before", "Between", etc. Record birth, death and marriage locations as "Taylors, Greenville Co., SC" - just "SC" if that is all that is certain. If known, record burial location similarly, with church or city cemetery name first, followed by town and State. Conventions exist to document divorces, multiple marriages, adoptions, children born to un-wed parents, and other non-traditional relationships. More on that at a later time if needed. Following established conventions is important in order to make the family records you are making more easily shared and understood by other researchers. All this can be done on paper forms, like those I am passing out, but a computer program makes the record keeping far easier to organize and retrieve. In any case, keep the paper records as back-up for your electronic data base.

I entered these basic facts - name, birth date, death date, marriage date, etc. in the "fill in the blanks" part of the computer program. Some program is essential as the number of individuals grows, and the relationships get more involved. There are many out there, but the one most serious researchers use is "Family Tree Maker". Like most modern programs, it contains far more than most need, and can be a little intimidating. However it is kind of the "Windows"- like standard that can be used to send and receive records kept by almost everybody. Get just the cheapest version you can find - no need for all the extra discs of family records and junk. It's in all the Best Buy or office supply type stores, or on the web priced at about \$30.

Along with each person entered into the program, in the supplied space for "Notes" or "Comments", I record the index reference # for the paper record source of the data. After a while, some individuals get several reference numbers, as data on them comes from multiple sources. Then, later when I want to know where I obtained the records, I can look up the back up material as filed numerically in my notebooks. This way I don't have to retype long messages for every individual describing the source - just a number from which the index allows locating the real paper record.

This may all seem like overkill, but believe me, it can quickly get overwhelming if there is not some way to easily keep track of all you will quickly accumulate. Even with all this I still misplace some records too often. I also keep a "pending" file - just a manila folder or additional loose leaf book with correspondence from which I have not had prompt replies, or records I have not yet entered into my computer data base and filed.

As to sources: Your family members can give you data on your parents and grandparents - maybe aunts and uncles. But, write it down, give the document a number, and file it. Enter these first records about yourself, your spouse, your children, your parents, etc. It will amaze you what you can collect just this way, and what you find that is uncertain. If you don't find it too morbid, visit some old family cemeteries. Gravestones, and locations often preserve forgotten dates and spouses, and sometimes deceased infants. Ask about the existence of any old family bibles, they may have some dates recorded for the older folks. But even here, and occasionally with gravestones, you may find errors or missing records. A lot of older folks used to save obituary clippings of their deceased relatives. You may be able to find some of these. Tape them to a full size sheet that can be conveniently filed, pencil in a record number, and enter any listed brothers, sisters that are listed. Don't be surprised if the undertaker who sent the piece in to the newspaper, or the newspaper itself got some names or relationships wrong, but go ahead and enter the data - you can correct it later if you learn better. You may already know that pencil records survive

longer than ink writing. Keep in mind that you are starting something which may far outlive you, and be picked up and added to by a future researcher.

Death certificates and other public records: They did not exist until about 1920, so you won't find much there. These records for recent years are not publicly available in all states. The Social Security System has lists of those who died in the last 50 years or so, but they do not have relationships shown, always show females by married name, and only cover people who started social security after 1936. Birth certificates did not exist until the early 1900's either. Marriage licenses go back a bit further, and something known as marriage bonds go back into the late 1700's. Lists of these by State and County are available in large libraries. Quaker and some other church records occasionally offer valuable records of births, marriages, and deaths. Some libraries have copies of transcripts of these old church records. After the late 1800's immigration records can be helpful, like Ellis Island transients. Before that, it's very hit or miss from handwritten ship's logs.

And for the best source of older records: Find a good library - a State or major regional facility. The Carolina First Historical Room at our Greenville Co. Library has an excellent collection of reference materials. Get to know about their historical records. Feel free to ask the librarians on duty there to assist you. One of the best sources available there is a collection on microfilm reels of US census records. It takes some training and experience to get much from these cumbersome photo reels of the original census documents. The microfilm readers require some real dexterity to master, and seem to never work properly. But census records are still my best source of names, dates, and family relationships. With practice, and a curious mind, sometimes valuable information can be gleaned just by the positioning of nearby families. Back then, census takers usually went from house to adjacent house. Often neighboring families intermarried, occasionally giving clues to unknown spouse's maiden names - often a particularly bothersome task to determine. It may take a long time, but eventually anyone can find amazing things here - not only names of children who belonged to a given family and their rough ages, but by inference from location, likely relatives who lived close to others. By tracing a family from one census to the next, you see children added, others leave for likely marriage, spouses die, old parents move in with their children, and even migrations to other parts of the country. Some census records list how many years a couple have been married, how many children a wife had, and how many are still living. From this, one can infer that some other unnamed children were born and died young between 10 year census intervals. Get your local librarian to help you with these.

The Latter Day Saints Church can also furnish you with census records, on loan for a small charge, from their huge data bank in Salt Lake City. It takes a few weeks though, to get anything from them, and you have to know by reel number what to order - I prefer our library, which has reels for most census dates for many Southern and Midwestern States, along with essential indexes. Census records exist, by State and county, beginning in 1790 and continuing every 10 years up through 1920 - the last one presently available for public use (they are kept secret, by law for 72 years). Look for the 1930 census release later this year. Almost nothing exists for 1890 - about all the records for that year burned in a 1921 fire in Washington, DC. Before 1850, no wife's or children's names were recorded - just names of heads of households and numbers of others in the house by age ranges and gender. But even from these sparse entries, sometimes one can deduce from these early records who the numbers of males and females represented from names shown in later records. Truly, these documents handwritten in flourished script and often poorly photographed, magically speak out to us over the ages with priceless information. But even they contain errors,

and frequently only approximated ages and nicknames and abbreviations for the people. You also have to learn to distinguish between the often creative capital script letters for "F", "L", "S", etc.

There are other more advanced records like court files of land transfers and wills. This usually means a trip to a remote State archive centers, or county court houses, and long hours of lifting and paging through heavy dusty old books. Don't attempt this yet.

Then, there's always those like myself, who have already collected a lot of stuff from others who are glad to share with a new friend. A caution though, we usually have only part of what you are looking for, mostly just information on the older generations, or on collateral families only. But there are a lot of us out there. If you are patient, and use the web repeatedly, it is amazing what you can come up with.

Which brings us to the subject of courtesy: Like any pursuit performed by ladies and gentlemen, common courtesy should always be observed. Be responsible stewards of your family records. Always ask permission to incorporate someone else's work into your data base. Offer to share your information with them, and openly identify yourself. Be very cautious about sharing data on living individuals. Never share vital facts like Social Security numbers. Be discrete about sharing uncomplimentary facts about family members. Some seek to hide old family skeletons years after they have passed from the scene. Try to learn about and respect their wishes in these instances. Avoid passing on incorrect information. Be sure to note when some records are only approximations or inferences. Constructively point out differences between what you show and what others submit. In such instances, politely ask about their sources. Even the most experienced researchers' data may contain simple errors, and most will appreciate your proofreading efforts. Some may be just passing data based only on long held, but since discovered to be erroneous, family traditions. Be willing to admit errors in your data and offer to correct them, but only when believable sources can be quoted.

I hope this hasn't turned you off - I'm sure others use different methods, but I'll bet they all have some system for organized record keeping - it's a must! Happy hunting as you begin this lifetime hobby filled with many rewards and newfound friends.

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