

# MAKING THE MOST OF THE FAMILYSEARCH WEBSITE

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## I. FamilySearch Help Center

FamilySearch has a tremendous support system to help you with any question or difficulty you might have with the FamilySearch website—or with genealogy research in general. You can access FamilySearch Help by clicking on the Get Help link in the top right corner of the home screen. This opens a list of options for researching your questions on your own, or for getting personal help by phone, email, or online chat (as well as a link to help you locate your nearest Family History Center). It is well worth exploring the different options for answering your research questions, including Product Support, which addresses the different tools available on the FamilySearch website; the Getting Started written guides and video tutorials; online genealogy courses at the Learning Center; and live Research Assistance (by chat or phone) on a variety of genealogy topics.

## II. Elements of “Search”

While a previous lesson discussed using the Family Tree and uploading photos to the Tree, today’s lesson focuses on using all the elements accessed through the Search Tab: Records, Genealogies, Catalog, Books, and the Wiki.

### **Record Collections**

You will encounter three types of record sets at FamilySearch:

Indexed document collections (identified by the camera icon next to the collection title and a count of the exact number of records included in the collection) allow computer searches that link you to images of the original documents.

Collection indexes allow you to search databases (which may index a single data set or multiple data sets), but images of the original documents are not available online. Each indexed entry does identify the microfilm containing the full document. Look for the microfilm number (usually labeled as “Film Number” ) listed towards the bottom of the index entry. Search for that film number in the FamilySearch Catalog, and click through the links to read the full description for the microfilm reel to determine where and by whom the original records were created. For a small fee (about the cost of an up-scale burger) you can order a copy of the film to be delivered to your local Family History Center where you can read it on the facility microfilm readers. The microfilmed document often contains much more information than was included in the index—and you’ll want to check that the indexer did not make any transcription errors. (If you have an auto-focusing digital camera, you can photograph images off the microfilm reader; be sure to familiarize yourself with the appropriate camera settings to use for your particular camera.)

Unindexed document collections (identified by the camera icon and the notation “Browse Images”) are images of original documents that have not yet been indexed and so cannot be digitally searched. Documents must be viewed page by page as they were filmed. The records in the collection may be alphabetically arranged or an image of the original written index may be included to assist in finding the particular records you that interest you. In the worst case, the collection may be divided into sub-folders based on the individual microfilm reels from which the digital images were copied. Search for each film number in the FamilySearch Catalog to identify the sub-folder that covers the location and time-period you are researching.

Before turning to the records in a collection, review the Wiki article describing the record collection (click the Learn More link under the short collection description on each collection’s main page). It’s important to know what types of records are included in the collection. Are they reliable official documents or possibly unreliable research notes from collected family history compilations? It’s also important to note whether the collection covers your particular geographic area and period of interest: there is no point searching for a marriage record for a couple married in Walker County, Alabama, in 1865 if the collection of *Alabama County Marriages 1809-1950* that you are using doesn’t include *any* records for Walker County at all.

### **Wiki**

The FamilySearch Wiki isn’t just the go-to resource for learning about specific collections on the FamilySearch website, it is *the* place to start learning about resources available for researching whatever location or time period or record type you are interested in. If you find yourself stumped in your research, it’s probably time to build your skills by doing a bit of exploring and reading in the Wiki. You can make a lot of progress in your genealogy research just sticking with the basic record sets—census, birth, marriage, and death—but you will ultimately need to expand your research, and the Wiki is the place to learn where to start. Can’t find your family in the census? The Wiki’s Spelling Substitution Tables” will give you hints on how the name may have been misspelled or mis-indexed. Don’t know what records to look for next? Check the Wiki’s Record Selection Table for your location, and follow the links to in-depth articles explaining the record history of the region you are researching. In addition to informative articles, the Wiki provides links to additional resources available online—including unique record sets not available at FamilySearch.

### **Catalog**

The Catalog is the gateway to the entire collection of the Family History Library (and more, actually). As noted above, you can use the Catalog to identify the particular microfilm from which an indexed record was transcribed. Even more important, though—considering that only a fraction of all the microfilmed record collections in the Family History Library are available online, either imaged *or* indexed—the Catalog connects you to a huge pool of record collections that are only available on film. For a few dollars you can have a copy of the microfilm sent to your local Family History Center—a substantial savings over a road trip to Salt Lake City.

### **Genealogies**

Standards have changed in the field of genealogical research over the past fifty years. One example of this is the decision by the major lineage societies to recognize only documented

lineages, with the result that many “established” lineages that had once been eligible for membership are no longer accepted. Genealogy without proof is mythology. The “conclusion trees” or pedigrees that make up the FamilySearch Genealogies are *user submitted* genealogies. None of the conclusions in any of the trees come with sources or any form of documentation. Use these genealogies as suggestions for research—they cannot be relied upon in and of themselves. If you would be uncomfortable letting your children spend a vacation with a friend you’d never met, you should be equally uncomfortable with the idea of adopting into your family individuals you know nothing about. That said, one of these genealogies just might hold the clue you need to solve a family mystery, so they’re worth a check. Don’t trust. Do verify.

### Books

FamilySearch provides access to a huge collection of digitized publications from some of the major genealogy libraries in the United States, including local and county histories, compilations of record abstracts, as well as published family histories (some of which may list sources). This is an invaluable resource not to be overlooked. Search for individual names, surnames, locations—any term you are interested in. You can restrict the search to titles, authors, or subjects, or even search the *full text*.

### III. Search Tips

The most important thing to understand about searching for indexed records is that while *you* may know exactly how your ancestor spelled his or her name, the person who created the record may not have, and the person who indexed that record certainly did not. And just because you know exactly when your ancestor was born, married, died, and who his parents, wife, and children were does not mean that the record you are looking for includes that information. Every search term you include is going to restrict the results you get back from your search, which sounds like a great thing—unless your search has excluded the very record you’re looking for. You will need to be creative in choosing your search terms: in addition to trying different variations of the name spelling (check the Spelling Substitution Table in the Wiki) and making judicious use of wildcards, are there any unique characteristics that might set your individual or household apart? Did your grandfather John Smith have a younger sibling named Gertrude, whose unusual name might be easier to locate in the census? A long, complex surname? You might want to search for a female, born 1885-1890 in Poland, living in Boston in 1910, instead of struggling to guess how the census enumerator might have garbled the name in recording it or the indexer in indexing it.

Finally, remember to use the Category tab at the top and the Filters selections in the left sidebar to narrow your search results to the most relevant records. If you’re not sure exactly which county your ancestor lived in, use the Residence filters to narrow your results to the state, and then filter again to see the distribution of results in each county of that state. Not sure when your ancestor was born? Filter by Birth Year. Remember, you don’t need to enter *any* search terms at all—you can simply use Categories and Filters to hone in on the records most likely to include your target ancestor. Be flexible, be creative, and keep an open mind.