

# GETTING STARTED RESEARCHING FAMILY HISTORY ONLINE

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## I. Remember the **First Rule of Computers**: Garbage In = Garbage Out

Before you sit down to the computer, you need to collect every scrap of information you can *from people*. The more information you have collected about your family *before* you start searching the databases, the more successful your computer research will be.

Two reasons:

1. Targeting your search to the right person in the right place at the right time means you don't get lost in a mountain of data about people who have nothing to do with your family. You need to know something about your ancestors in order to recognize the records that are related to them.
2. Having more clues to follow gives you a better chance of locating your target. Lots of important information about your ancestors lies hidden in records of their neighbors and distant relatives. Don't miss out on those jewels!

## II. What do you need to collect?

Start with names, dates and places of births, marriages, deaths of direct ancestors: these are the vital statistics that are a first step in identifying *your* John Smith from the 5,000,000 other John Smiths out there.

But don't stop with just your direct ancestors. Collect data about their siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews and in-laws. Not only do relationships help you identify your target (John Smith whose sister was named Gertrude and she married George Rumpelstiltskin), but they and their descendants may have collected valuable information about your common ancestors.

Keep going: details about your ancestors' occupations, businesses, and employers; early addresses where the family lived; names of neighbors, schools, and childhood friends. Collect all the family facts, traditions, stories, and legends—they all hold clues that will help you pick your ancestors out of the crowd. Even ridiculous stories sometimes turn out to be true!

## III. How do you find this stuff?

Don't be shy: phone, email, visit, write everyone you can think of.

Give and ye shall receive. If you're uncomfortable "tackling" a distant relative you haven't talked to in years, send them a copy of a photograph of a common ancestor, or summary of research you've gathered, and ask if they would have time to talk with you.

If you ask someone point blank "What can you tell me about our family?" more often than not you'll get a "deer in the headlights" stare in return. Don't put them on the spot; prime the pump with photographs, family stories, and memorabilia to start the memories flowing.

Take your older family members on "virtual tours" of their childhood homes. How to do it: Look up the old family addresses on Zillow.com and check whether the current building at the address is old enough to be the one your family lived in. If so, then take a virtual tour of the neighborhood online. Google Maps includes satellite images as well as street-level view. Bing Maps often have low-altitude images from all four compass points, letting you view a house from all sides. Be aware, though, that sometimes cities and towns change street names or street numbering; in that case, it may be necessary to "walk" around a bit to find the house or neighborhood you're looking for.

For more tips on interviewing family, go to <http://genealogy.about.com/> and do a site search for "interview."

#### IV. Go on a scavenger hunt.

Gather every scrap of paper you can find:

- Family Bible
- old letters (that mention Aunt Trudy's birthday or list the family address)
- photographs (check the backside for written notes)
- scrapbooks
- diaries
- school yearbooks
- newspaper clippings
- birth/marriage/death certificates
- old deeds, wills, and other fancy certificates

#### V. Organize your data.

Record your data in Family Group Sheets, so you can find the information when you need it.

- Create one Family Group Sheet for each nuclear family
  - If Grandad married twice and had children with each wife, that's TWO Family Group Sheets. Ditto for Grandma.
- Record all the facts as you discover them:
  - Names (including later spouses of children), Dates, Place names
  - Occupations, military service
  - Burial, Baptism, Bar Mitzvah ...

For longer, more detailed stories, school-type Composition Books make great record books. The stitched binding ensures no pages fall out. Use these to record the legends and tall tales that don't fit on a Family Group Sheet.

## VI. Note your sources. Genealogy without documentation is mythology!

Get ready to learn A LOT—more than you'll ever be able to remember. So start NOW noting the sources of the data you collect, so you'll *always* know *how* you know *what* you know about your family.

Two really important reasons:

1. You are going to run into cases where you uncover pieces of information that directly contradict each other, and you'll have to decide which "fact" is right. Was Grandad born in Cleveland or Cincinnati? How can you evaluate your facts to decide which is right if you don't know where your facts came from?
2. You aren't going to finish the job. You have 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great-grandparents ... Go back 8 generations and you'll be searching for 256 fifth-great-grandparents. And that's only some two hundred years ago! (OK, at some point, some of your cousins probably married, so you may only have *two hundred fifty* unique fifth-great-grandparents...). Let me repeat: you aren't going to finish the job. Do your descendants a favor and let them know where you got your facts so they don't decide they have to do the whole family tree over again because they don't know if they can trust your research.

## Basic rule for citing your sources:

Record enough information about the source to identify what the source is and where to find it again.

Examples:

### *Newspaper clipping*

- Name of the newspaper
- City and State
- Date
- Article title
- Page and column

### *Document found on a website*

- Name of the website
- Title of the page or database on the website
- Name of the ancestor exactly as listed
- Date you viewed the item (critical if the website ever changes!)

### *Official certificate*

- Type of certificate
- Name of the agency that issued the certificate
- Date and location issued
- Certificate number

### *Tombstone*

- Name and location of the cemetery (or directions, if it was an unnamed rural cemetery)
- Name on the tombstone
- Date you viewed the tombstone OR date it was photographed and name of photographer (unfortunately, tombstones sometimes disappear)

### *Personal letter*

- Who wrote the letter
- When and where it was written
- When you saw it
- Who has the letter (or had it last, as far as you know) and their address (city, state at least)

### *Verbal information*

- Who told you
- When and where they told you
- Who has the notes or transcripts (if made) of the interview