

Getting Started with Family History Research

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(revised for Wisconsin by Michael Jindra)

Project for Writing and Recording Family History (<https://cisa.asu.edu/family-history>)

First Steps

1. Begin with what you already “know.” Write it down.
2. For your descendants, keep a daily journal in which you record family events.
3. Document everything that you find via research.
4. To verify information, use primary sources—e.g., firsthand testimony or original documents, but even they can have errors.
5. Once you are ready to enter data, acquire genealogy software to keep records organized. There are dozens of software packages, including Family Tree Maker, Family Tree (FamilySearch.org), Legacy, Famtree, Ancestry.com, Ancestral Quest, Geni, My Great Big Family, MyHeritage. Some are online; some are loaded onto your computer. Some are free.
6. Interview living relatives to find out what they “know.” Use a digital recorder and also take detailed notes. Because there are lots of family myths, verify stories by searching primary records.
7. Ask family members for copies of informal records—e.g., names and dates inside family bibles, letters, journals, newspaper clippings.
8. Visit cemeteries where ancestors are buried to get information from headstones. See “Cemetery Record Locator Sites” below.
9. Visit brick-and-mortar LDS FamilySearch Libraries. Search for locations online (familysearch.org). On site, you can work with experts and access (for free) external resources that require paid subscriptions.
10. Join a local genealogical society e.g. <https://manitowocountygenealogicalsociety.wordpress.com/>
11. Visit local historical societies where your ancestors lived to search for official records, newspaper stories, and other archival information.
12. Visit state historical societies where your ancestors lived.
13. Search United States Census records, 1790 to 1950.
 - a. Ancestry.Com (need a paid subscription)
 - b. FamilySearch.org (some available for free)
 - c. National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/research/census>)
 - d. U.S. Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/decennial_census_records/census_records_2.html)
14. Search state census records. See “State Censuses”: https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html Do a Google search on “state census records” (include year and name of state) to see what’s available. The states often collected census records midway between the times when the federal census records have been collected. Most states stopped collecting information in the early 1900s.
15. Contact/visit county and state offices that have vital records—births, deaths, marriages—as well as wills and probate records. Also, National Center for Health Statistics has links to vital records in every state (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fnchs%2Fw2w.htm).
16. National Archives
 - a. Immigration records (<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration>)

- b. Military personnel records (<https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/military-personnel>)
 - c. Naturalization records (<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization>)
17. Search historical newspapers. (Do a Google search on “historical newspapers.”)
 - a. Library of Congress: Chronicling America (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)
 - b. Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com/>)
 - c. Google News Archive Search (<https://news.google.com/newspapers>)
 - d. Newspaper Archive (<https://newspaperarchive.com>)
 - e. FamilySearch, Research Wiki (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page)
 - f. GenealogyBank.com (<https://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/>)
 - g. New York Times (searchable database, 1851 to the present) (<http://www.nytimes.com/>) Search term: “New York Times Archives”
 - h. Newspapers.com (by Ancestry) (<https://www.newspapers.com/>)
 18. Get a DNA test (e.g., Ancestry, MyHeritage, and others)

General Search/Digital Tools

1. Google (<https://www.google.com/>): Plug in names of ancestors and see what happens. For example, conduct advanced searches to look for obituaries, which usually include burial information. Also search on the terms “cemetery records,” “cemetery locations,” and “burial records.”
2. ChatGPT, (<https://openai.com/>): Use this free natural-language processing tool to search the web and generate reports in seconds.
3. Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>) has millions of free books, movies, music, podcast, and websites. A search on the term “genealogy” yielded 323,284 results. “Family history” yielded 80,385 results.
4. Bing (<https://www.bing.com/>): See Google description.
5. Yahoo! (<https://www.yahoo.com/>): See Google description.
6. ThoughtCo (<https://www.thoughtco.com/>): For example, see the section “Vital Record Around the World” (<https://www.thoughtco.com/vital-records-around-the-world-4133304>).
7. Ask Custom Search (<https://www.ask.com>): See Google description.
8. Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/>): Has specific groups that are very helpful such as “Czech Genealogy.” Also, family members in other parts of the country can post photos of ancestors, their homes, their tombstones, etc.

General Family History Sites

1. Cyndi’s List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet (<https://www.cyndislist.com/>) includes more than 300,000 links to other helpful sites in almost 200 categories.
2. Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/>): The new free subscription version includes many search tools, including name, location, and subject searches. The Research Wiki (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page) is especially helpful.
3. RootsTech (<https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/home>), “the world’s largest family history conference,” has an amazing array of helpful sessions on how to do family history research.
4. Ancestry.Com (<https://www.ancestry.com/>): This requires a subscription. The site bills itself as “the world’s largest online family history resource.”
5. MyHeritage (<https://www.myheritage.com>): There is a very basic free subscription. With a paid subscription, the site is comparable to Ancestry or FamilySearch. It has a photo enhancement tool.

6. Heritage Quest: Developed by ProQuest and “powered” by Ancestry.com, this site is available through intuitions such as public libraries.
7. Progenealogists [“official Ancestry.Com research firm”] (<https://www.progenealogists.com/>)
8. Archives (<https://www.archives.com/>): Subscription required; seven days for free.
9. European Records
 - a. Various countries: <https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/>
 - b. Bavarian and Czech: <https://www.portafontium.eu/>
 - c. Norway: Digitalarkivet (<https://www.digitalarkivet.no/en/>): Norwegian civil and church records, including scanned parish records and searchable census records. Some basic Norwegian vocabulary is needed.
 - d. Sweden: ArkivDigital (<https://www.arkivdigital.net>).
 - e. Denmark: For Danish church records: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Denmark_Church_Records#Indexed_Collections
10. Geni (<https://www.geni.com>): People upload GEDCOM files to the site, and the system finds connections. I’ve connected with hundreds of relatives in Europe in the last two years. Folks are very helpful, even willing to visit cemeteries in their areas. They can post photos on the site.
11. Genealogy.Com (<https://www.genealogy.com>): Some information is free, but a paid annual subscription is required for complete access.
12. WikiTree (<https://www.wikitree.com>): This is a free site that encourages collaboration.
13. MyHeritage (<https://www.myheritage.com>): First 30 days for free. Build a tree. Get DNA tests.
14. Webtrees (<https://www.webtrees.net>): Free. Works with online collaborative GEDCOM files.

Cemetery Record Locator Sites

1. Interment.net: Cemetery Records Online (<http://www.interment.net/Default.htm>): The site has records from dozens of countries, but it focuses on the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany. Search by individual’s name, place name, death date, birth date. Other cemetery search sites lead to this one.
2. Find a Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/>): The site includes 60 million records. Users are encouraged to add records. Search by person’s name, birth year, death year. Search by location and cemetery name.
3. Billion Graves (<https://billiongraves.com/>): The site has a goal of that many graves.
4. Online Searchable Death Indexes and Records (<https://www.deathindexes.com/>): The site includes death records, death certificate indexes, death notices & registers, obituaries, probate indexes, and cemetery and burial records. (I found Pierce County, Wisconsin, cemetery records here!)
5. Do Google searches on cemeteries in specific locations—e.g., a county, township, city.

A Few Helpful Print Resources for Researching and Writing about Family History

- Carmack, Sharon. *You Can Write Your Family History*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2003.
- Conklin, Nancy Faires, and Margaret A. Lourie. *A Host of Tongues: Language Communities in the United States*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.
- Cox, Meg. *The Book of New Family Traditions*. Philadelphia: Running Press Books, 2003.
- Goldrup, Lawrence P. *Writing the Family Narrative*. Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 1987.
- Haakenstad, Liv Marit. *A Guide to Norwegian Genealogy, Emigration, and Transmigration*. Amazon, 2022.
- Hatcher, Patricia Law. *Producing a Quality Family History*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1996.

- Kane, William. *Journeys Taken: The Search for a Better Life: New France to New England, 1600-2000*. Tempe, AZ: Crowsnest Press, 2002.
- Kempthorne, Charley. *For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History*. Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1996.
- Kyle, Nicole. *Writing Family History Made Easy: A Beginner's Guide*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007.
- Martinson, Floyd M. *Growing Up in Norway, 800 to 1990*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.
- McCarty, Terry M., with Margaret Ann Chatfield McCarty. *The Chatfield Story: Civil War Letters and Diaries of Private Edward L. Chatfield of the 113th Illinois Volunteers*. Georgetown, TX: BookSurge, 2010.
- Mencken, H. L. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937.
- Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Perl, Sondra, and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Polking, Kirk. *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs*. Cincinnati, Betterway Books, 1995.
- Rainer, Tristine. *Your Life as Story: Discovering the "New Autobiography" and Writing Memoir as Literature*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997.
- Semningsen, Ingrid. *Norway to America: A History of Migration*. Translated by Einar Haugen. University of Minnesota Press, 1978.
- Simpson, Bland. *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey: A Nonfiction Novel*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Spence, Linda. *Legacy: A Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Personal History*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997.
- Stillman, Peter R. *Families Writing*. Cincinnati: Writers' Digest Books, 1989.
- Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. Cincinnati: *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*. Betterway Books, 2000.
- Zempel, Solveig, ed. and trans. *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.