

Beginners Guide to Genealogy

Section 1

The information contained in the following pages is intended to offer suggestions to anyone starting out in genealogy. The information is not intended to be an authoritative discussion on the subject. The most important aspect of genealogical research is to enjoy what you are doing.

Where Should I Begin?

It is most helpful if you start with **YOURSELF**.

- Write down all information that you know about yourself (birth, religion, baptismal, schools attended [years and graduation dates], military information, marriage, health, addresses of where you have lived, namesake, and any special stories you have heard about yourself).
- Look for all certificates you may have regarding the above information.
- Write down all information you know about your spouse, children, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, your spouses family, and if your children are married, their spouses, your grandchildren, etc. Again, look for as many certificates available in the home to fill in the blanks.
- Interview family members for stories, dates, and events within their lifetime. Many family members love to reminisce about the past and this is a perfect time to question them further about their memories. You should also ask specific questions of each person. The interviews may be conducted in person, by telephone, e-mail/postal mail but whenever possible, the best results are in person. If possible, record the interview. Ask very basic questions if you do not have birth dates, marriage dates, etc. Some pertinent questions are:
 - Ask where events happened to get an understanding of “place” when a relative is reminiscing!
(Location is key in genealogical research)-Who were you named for?
 - Who were you named for?
 - Are their family photo albums?
 - Are their any family papers of any kind? (Birth, death, marriage certificates, insurance policies, deeds, etc)
 - Is there a family bible?
 - Has the family ever been mentioned in a book?
 - Are there any famous persons to whom you are supposed to be related?
 - Are there any old letters?

- Has the family ever donated information to an organization such as a Historical Society?
- Were you in the military?
- Have you done any traveling? Where did you go? With whom?
- What and where was your first home/apartment?
- What was your relationship like with your mother/father/sisters/brothers/grandparents?
- How did your family earn money? Who worked?
- What are some family characteristics? Was there a black sheep?

Immediately after the interview, transcribe your notes while they are fresh in your memory. Anything you forgot to ask, write down for the next interview. You will now have some of the basic information so you may begin recording your information on a computer program or on forms.

Which Forms Should I Use?

Although there are no standardized forms, most genealogical forms contain similar information. The following forms are very useful but not always necessary. Once you begin accessing repositories and libraries, you will know which forms are most beneficial to you as a researcher. It is helpful to have several copies of each form when you are researching at any repository. You may download forms from several Internet sites such as www.Ancestry.com and www.familysearch.org.

Pedigree Work Sheet With the information you already know about yourself and your family, start filling out this form. This form will provide you with an outline of who is who in you family. Some forms will allow you to enter vital statistics of each person listed. Start with yourself.

Family Group Sheet This form is used to record information for one married couple. The form usually allows you to enter all vital statistics about the husband and wife. The form should also have room for children's name, birth date, and place of birth. Some forms will also have the death date and place for the children, as well as the sex of each child. A good Family Group Sheet should allow an area for documentation of sources.

Census Forms Blank copies of the census forms from 1790 to 1930 are available. Census records may be difficult to read due to the writing of the enumerator and the transferring of the records to microfilm and /or computer. A blank copy will enable you to read the headings on each column. Once you have deciphered the record, it is often helpful to transfer the information to the blank form. Do obtain a copy of the original page. Blank forms of the census may be downloaded from www.Ancestry.com

Census Checklist This form allows you to enter the name of the person you are researching and check off each census year that you have researched for this person. This will aid you (the researcher) from having to double check records.

Military Records Checklist This form allows the researcher to enter the ancestors name and check off each war that you have researched.

Correspondence Record This form allows the researcher to record all correspondence with family, organizations, and repositories. The benefit of this form enables the researcher to have a continual record with dates of all information requested. Sometimes when requesting information from state and federal agencies, the requested material may take anywhere from 2 weeks to 8 months to process. The form also allows the researcher to record all replies to these requests.

Research Log This is a very generic form. The researcher enters information they need to research. The form may be used for multiple ancestors. In the objective column, the researcher need only list what they are looking for, whether it is a deed, will, birth certificate, or census record. The rest of the form is completed upon receiving the information. This form is good to use at anytime when the researcher needs to notate what information is missing about a particular ancestor.

Research Abstract When visiting a repository, you may find information that was not expected. This form allows the researcher to transcribe all information obtained and allows an area for notes. This form may also be filled out in advance of your research trip if you know that the repository you are visiting has certain records, such as state and federal census records, city directories, and private records obtained from your ancestors. This form is very similar to Note Taking Form and the two are interchangeable depending on the researchers preference.

Research Repository Checklist This checklist will help the researcher become familiar with the repository you are visiting. It is very beneficial to learn about the repository in advance. After driving five hours to reach your destination, you do not want to learn that the repository is closed.

Source Documentation This form is a very simple form and may be used in a variety of ways. If you are not using a computer program for compiling family information, this form will aid you in documenting all sources as you research. The form may also be duplicated in the notes section of many computer programs and used in a similar manner.

Deed Research Notes When looking for deeds for your ancestors, this form allows you to transcribe the information. Deeds are often in poor shape having been handed down from one generation to the next. In the 18th and some of the 19th century, law did not require deeds. Deeds were often an agreement between two persons/families and the two persons kept any written agreement. These "deeds" were eventually filed with city clerks once it became mandatory to have a deed of your property on file.

Section II

Now that you have collected the basic information on yourself, your parents, your grandparents, your spouse, and your children, you need to fill in the blanks and document your sources.

What are sources?

All information that you collect needs to be substantiated by a source reference. The person who will most appreciate having source information is **YOU!** Every bit of information collected has a source. The form and content of the source may vary widely.

Some examples of sources are:

- Personal knowledge (I was born on ----)
- Grandma told me this. Interviewing a relative or friend of the family is a valuable tool. Be specific with who, what, where, and when the interview is conducted. (Information gathered from Mrs. Jessie Stedman, my paternal grandmother, at her home on 1000 W. Madison St., Rome, New York on March 10, 1970.)
- Dates from a tombstone in Evergreen Cemetery, Lee Center, Oneida County, New York. Information gathered by myself on June 10, 2003.
- This date was given without a source from World Family Tree, #1234, Volume 12, Freemont, California, published by Broderbund, 1995.
- South Kingstown, Washington County, Rhode Island, Will Book C, will of Samuel Arnholdt, written April 10, 1801 and proved December 14, 1801. In this will, Penelope is called "my daughter Penelope, widow of Thomas Gage, dec'd."

Primary and Secondary Sources

Sources are divided into two categories. The first of these categories is a **Primary Source**. A primary source is a record made at or near the time of the actual event described and recorded with **first hand** knowledge of the event, in short, an **unbiased record of the event**. The main repository for primary events is the county in which the person lived. The exception to this is that in most New England States, vital records are/were often recorded at the town level. In the United Kingdom, the Scottish birth, death, and marriage records are found in Edinburgh. For England and Wales, the records are in London. For Ireland, the records are found in parishes and in Belfast. For the Republic of Ireland, the records are predominately found in Dublin. Primary records include:

- **Deeds and Land Records** Deeds provide an excellent source of relationships, particularly if one or more children inherited the land. When inherited land is sold, it is often necessary to state from which it was inherited and the relationship to the person. Land records provide evidence of where people have lived, for how long, when the person moved into or out of a locality, at least the given name of the wife, and sometimes detailed information about the person.
- **Wills and Probate Records** These records are kept at the Surrogate Courts of each county. A will is simply a legal document in which a person specifies the disposition of property after death. The process of proving a will's authenticity is called probate. These are usually the best evidence of descent. In colonial times, the law of "primogeniture" was in effect. This law simply stated that the eldest son would inherit his father's estate. Keep in mind that not all children may be mentioned. It is common not to find the eldest son listed on the will since he would automatically inherit the estate. In addition, a child may have died prior to the father's death. A daughter's share in the estate was often left to her husband. Women in various stages of history were not allowed to own property. You may also find that an older sibling who will handle their share will provide for unmarried daughters.
- **Court Proceedings** These records are not indexed and require a lot of time to research. Often family feuds regarding lands can be found in the court proceedings as well as paternity and support suits. Court records may be found at the federal, state, county, and local level.
- **Church Records** Birth, deaths, baptisms, and marriages may be available in these records. One way to determine the religious affiliations of your ancestors is a search through obituaries

and cemetery records. Also, pay attention to family traditions, children's names, and translation and language of old family Bibles. Check local histories, newspapers, and deed book entries. Many of our ancestor's names appeared in the local newspaper, and donated land to churches. Only the Puritans held to the tradition that marriage was a civil matter in colonial times. Most other religious affiliations maintained historical data about its parishioners.

The most difficult task facing a researcher is determining the denominational preference of a relative and the name of church (es) to which the person belonged.

- **Birth Certificates** Birth certificates are generally very reliable. Keep in mind that while they are never proof positive of whom the father was, they will in many cases be the only official statements of such. The availability of birth records varies between jurisdictions. Laws providing that a record be kept of birth were not required until the beginning of the twentieth century. Births in New England were recorded in the towns, while in colonial Virginia and elsewhere in the south; these records were maintained at the church parish level. To receive the best results for a birth certificate, it is sometimes best to research vital records in reverse order (death certificate, marriage certificate, and lastly birth certificate).

The more information that you have about your ancestor, the easier it will be to obtain a birth certificate. Birth certificates in New York State are available at the town in which your ancestor was born and through;

***New York State Department of Health
Vital Records Section
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12237***

Genealogical requests for an uncertified copy of a record are \$22.00 and may take from 9 to 10 months to process. This includes a copy of the certificate, a three-year search of the index, the retrieval and re-filing of the microfilm/microfiche and either a copy of the record or a no record report. When more than a three-year search is requested, the fee is higher.

- **Marriage Certificates** Marriage bonds were prevalent until the latter part of the nineteenth century and usually contain only the name of the bride and groom. If the father or parents of either are given, this is an indication that the person was not yet 21 years of age. There may also be a parents' consent on file. More modern marriage certificates may contain detailed information such as the age, date of birth, and names of the parents. One problem that does exist is that a person shy of their 21st birthday, could go to another county where they were unknown and use a false birth date.
- **Death Certificates** These are primary sources only with respect to date, place, and cause of death (if certificate is signed by a doctor, coroner or medical examiner).
- **Applications for Social Security Cards** You may request a copy of the Social Security Application for a fee. Keep in mind, that the Social Security Administration was established in 1932. The Social Security Death Index is available at <http://www.ancestry.com>. The index covers deaths from the middle of the 1960's to approximately three months prior to the current date.
- **Guardianship and Administrator's Bonds** These records are kept in separate books and are usually not indexed but are more easily searched than some county records. A good source for the names of minor children and the date of the death of an ancestor.

Secondary Sources

- Almost all published works are considered secondary sources. These will include family histories, collected genealogies, source materials, local histories, newspapers, reference works and directories, websites, mailing lists, message boards and e-mail messages.
- Manuscripts commonly refers to handwritten or typed, not professionally printed, and works that are not documented.

Filling in the Blanks

Now that you know what are sources, you may begin to research these sources. Genealogical records are available at the local, county, state, and federal level. The best results are usually obtained at the local level however not all records are available through town clerks and municipal halls. Keep in mind that law did not require a vital statistic record for individuals until late 1800's. In New York State, records were required as of 1881 (1880 for death certificates). The following records are available at the town level.

Birth certificates – If you know what village/town/city your ancestor was born in, you may check with the local registrar or town clerk. Depending on which state you are researching, there are time frames you must observe. In New York State, for genealogical purposes, the record of your ancestor has to be on file for at least 75 years and the person whose name is on the birth certificate is known to be dead. There are some exceptions to this time period requirement. The periods are waived for direct-line ancestors. (i.e. the child, grandchild, or great-grandchild of the ancestor) The direct-line descendant must provide the following proof:

- Proof of their relationship to the person whose record they are requesting
- Proof of the death of the person whose birth certificate they are requesting

If you only know that your ancestor was born in a particular state, you may contact the Department of Health at the State capital. One more option available to anyone with Internet access is www.vitalrec.com. This site offers links to each state and provides you with an opportunity to obtain addresses, download copies of the forms required, and even order the information on-line with a credit card.

Death Certificates - These records are also available at the local level. Follow the same procedure as birth certificates. Death certificates have to be on file for at least 50 years. A direct-line descendant may obtain a time waiver.

Marriage Certificates – The marriage license may sometimes be obtained from the town or city clerk who issued the license. The fee is only \$10.00 if obtained from the town/city clerk.

If your ancestor lived in the same area from the time of their marriage until their death, this would be a good indicator to check your local town/city clerks for the record. The marriage certificate has to be on file for 50 years and both the bride and groom are known to be deceased. A time waiver may be obtained for a direct-line descendant. Proof of the death of the bride and groom is required. An obituary from the local newspaper or information from church records will help you establish these criteria.

Divorce Certificates - Only husbands, wives, and court orders are allowed to request a copy of these records. There are two types of divorce records. The divorce decree is the document prepared by the court, setting forth the terms and conditions of the divorce. It is signed by the judge and filed with the County Clerk of the county where the decree was issued. This is usually where the plaintiff resided. If the divorce was granted prior to January 1, 1963, the divorce decree is the only type of document available. The Divorce certificate is filed with NY State Department of Health for divorces granted on or after January 1, 1963. The divorce certificate contains basic information about the husband and wife, and the date and place the marriage ended.

Military Records - All military records are available through the National Archives (NARA). Military records are divided into two categories.

1. Any military service or wars prior to World War I are considered **Old Military Records**. To request these records, use NAFT Form 86. Check their website at <http://www.nara.gov> for an updated form. Some forms may even be completed on-line. You may also request information by writing to:

NWCTB – Military
Textual Archives Services Division
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20408-0001

To obtain Old Military Records, you must provide the following minimum information;

- a. Veteran's Name
- b. State from which he served
- c. War in which he served
- d. If war was Civil War, was he Union or Confederate
- e. If you have additional information, it will make the search easier but is not necessary.

2. Any military service or wars including World War I to Desert Storm is classified as **Modern Military Records**. To request these records write to the following: (Do Not use NAFT Form 86)

National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
9700 Page Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63132-5100

The website for Modern Military Information is:

<http://www.nara.gov/regional/mpr.html>

3. The National Archives does not have compiled records for the Navy or Marine Corps. You may obtain information by contacting the address for **Old Military Records**.

Census Records - Census records are one of the most valuable resources for the genealogical researcher. The **Federal Census** began in 1790. Privacy laws protect census records. The record must be 72 years old before it becomes public record. The last census released was the 1930 census. The earliest census records contain only the name of the head of household. All other persons living with the head of household were listed in groups by their age and gender. In addition, "other free persons" and "slaves" were listed in separate categories. The 1840 census includes pensioners for the Revolutionary War and other military service. The 1850 census was the first census to include the names of all family members and marriage year. There is also an 1850 Slave Schedule. This lists only the name of the slave owner and the number of slaves, their age, sex, color, fugitives, etc. The 1860 census is the first census to ask for the place of birth. The 1870 census adds questions about the birthplace of each member's mother and father. The 1890 census was destroyed by fire. The **New York State census** was completed on years ending in 5.

The best places to search for census records are at libraries, some historical societies, and large repositories such as the Later Day Saints research center, and the New York State Historical Society Library located in Cooperstown, New York.

The basic information you will need to begin your search of census records is the locality your ancestor resided. If you know that an ancestor was born in Dolgeville, Herkimer County, NY in 1868, start with the 1870 federal census index for New York State, Herkimer County, and town of Dolgeville. Once you find the name, the number of the microfilm and entry number will be given.

If you are unsure about the microfilm system, ask for assistance. A good source for census records on the Internet is: <http://www.ancestry.com>. This site requires a subscription to search the transcribed copies of the original census. You may also access <http://www.familysearch.org> to obtain census record information. This site does not have images of the original form and does not have all census records. The information has been transcribed to give you all the information contained in the original form.

These are just a few ideas of how to research your ancestors. Have fun with your research. You never know what you might find.