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# Searching Strategies for Budding Genealogists

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# Searching Strategies for Budding Genealogists

## **Shaking the Family Tree – Where to Start Your Genealogy Search**

Genealogy, or researching the history of your family, can be a fun and valuable hobby. You will get the opportunity to learn where you come from, what your family history is all about, and if anyone in your family was involved in historical events. The hardest part of getting into genealogy for a lot of people is getting started. They just don't seem to have direction or an idea of how to get going with the search. The best way to get started is actually by getting four things set so that the process is easier. Make sure you have a plan, keep track of a goal, have wide goals, and develop a set of methods that suits you best.

The best first step to take in genealogy is to make sure you have some sort of idea where you want to go. You will have to set a goal so that no matter what you do online or in the library you are always focused on an end. If you constantly review your information and goals, you will be able to make sure you are always headed in a direction that will aid you in reaching your genealogy goals. The goal doesn't have to be complex, just make sure you have something in mind that will help you find your way through your family tree and will keep you focused.

Once you have come up with the specific genealogy goal you want to pursue, make sure you have it in front of you all the time. Keep a hard copy of your goal or your list of goals in front of you as you research. Handwritten or even printed index cards, a notebook, or notes on a desk top calendar all work well to keep your goals right in front of you. By having goals in front of you at all times, you will be able to stay more focused on what exactly it is that you want. With all of the information available on the Internet it can be easy to get distracted or sidetracked by other information. This way, you can keep your focus and achieve goals and reach milestones with more frequency.

Third in genealogy research, is to make sure that you pursue your stated goal with a broad stroke. Meaning that you should avoid the temptation to focus your search on a certain site or a certain library and instead go broad to allow yourself a better chance of success. For instance, if there is a very specific relative you want to learn about, but about whom you only know a name and a place of death, your temptation might be just search for his name or on a website with information on the city or town where he died.

Instead, brush with a broader stroke and begin your search on someone in the family you know more about. Perhaps you know a lot more about his son. Begin by searching for more information on the son and his family to focus you on that section of the family. You will be surprised at how often you will stumble on clues to what your original focus was anyway, by using this method.

Finally, be prepared to learn your own little way of doing things. That seems simple, but not everyone is so prepared. What you should do is put together strategies that have worked for you in your search so that you can use them for other genealogy searches. For instance, many people like to run all of their family members' names through all available search engines. You

can use this method and even add other keywords or search terms that might pull genealogy or legal record websites to the top of your results. No matter what method you use, try to remember which methods have worked best for you in the past and add them to your process so that you become more efficient the more you work on genealogy.

Tracing back through your family can be a lot of fun. With the increasing popularity and broadening of the internet, many more people are beginning to take up genealogy as a hobby. If you want to get started in this fun hobby, there are four things you should keep in mind. Make sure you have a plan, set and keep track of your goals, brush broad strokes in your searches, and continually develop your own process for success. Once you are ready, the process itself will be much more enjoyable.

### **The Magic of Internet Message Boards**

The increasing popularity of the Internet has offered many new chances for people to exchange information from all over the world. Message boards are one way this information is exchanged in everything from sports to medicine. However, it can also be a way you can increase your genealogy research. They allow you to communicate freely with people from all over in a public forum so that you can have the maximum number of people possible looking at the information you are requesting. This is a great way for you to be able to make contact with others that are interested in genealogy like you.

First of all, if you are going to post on a message board for any reason you should understand the consequences of what you post. Remember that information on a message board, no matter what kind, is essentially public. What you print there can be read by anyone and can be quoted then to anyone. So make sure that everything you write in any message you are going to post only has information in it that you are comfortable having anyone read or share with anyone else. In addition, keep in mind that with most message boards, the post is permanent once you hit the submit button. So you want to make sure you have no embarrassing typos or information you think you might regret. It is always worth your while to add that extra few minutes so you can review the message before you hit submit.

So once you know you want to post to a genealogy message board for information exchange, you need to make sure your posts are effective. It is important not to make your posts long and bogged down with a ton of information. When it comes to a message board post, more is less and less is more. Make sure that your post is detailed and concise rather than rambling and general. With a more specific and concise message you are more likely to get specific and helpful responses from others.

If you are general with your post you will either get no responses or a ton of responses that may or may not have anything to do with the information you are after. If you are looking for a specific family member in your post, make sure you put in full names, birth dates, marriage dates, and death dates. Put down specific locations that you may have and even the names of parents or children. The more of this you have, the more likely you are to get actual meaningful information.

It may seem either obvious or silly, but good grammar and spelling are going to be important. People are much more likely to respond to a post that seems to have been put up by someone who is serious. In addition, if you use good grammar and punctuation, you are less likely to be misunderstood. You always want information to be precise and that is just one way to make sure that your information is indeed clear. Also, check for typos before you hit submit. Again, a typo, a misplaced comma, or just bad spelling can cause a real problem with your post if you are not careful. So just take a little extra time to make sure you are saying what you want to say.

Lastly, make sure you always write how you would want to be written to, which is sort of the golden rule of message boards no matter what the topic is. Make sure you always check your post regularly for replies. If someone does reply to you, acknowledge them in a timely fashion. If you don't have time to write back in detail right away at least drop them an email "thank you" to acknowledge receipt of their information. Courtesy is generally appreciated very much in any message board environment.

If you enjoy genealogy, then you probably already know that the Internet is an invaluable resource. However, you can also use the Internet to get in touch with people who may be sources for you as well. A good genealogy message board is a great way to get in touch with people that may be able to help you find information you are missing or to simply form a support system. Just make sure you are courteous and concise with your information and polite to your fellow message board members so that you will have a positive experience with genealogical message boards.

### **Search Engine Savvy – Tips for your Genealogy Search**

You will find soon enough that search engines on the Internet can be powerful tools in your search for family history. Because most of them have such an enormous index of information, searches for surnames and family names can result in useful information. You see, search engines get their indexes from "spiders" that explore websites and index words that are in the pages. They are doing this constantly and thus will be able to help you find the information about your family you are looking for, hopefully.

There are drawbacks to using a search engine for your search. The same thing that makes them great can also make them a source of a lot of frustration for you as you trace your family's genealogy. There are so many results that are possible when using a search engine that there is no way you can figure out which sites are good ones for what you need and which are not. So unless you enjoy having to search on hundreds of thousands of links yourself, you can find search engines to be as frustrating as anything. Here are a few tips, though, to making your search engine search a positive experience as you put together a family tree.

The first step in using a search engine to its fullest potential with your genealogical search is to know your search engine math. The math refers to the use of two operators: add (+) and subtract (-). Proper use of these symbols in a search engine can make your search much easier. Most search engines support them and they are much easier for most people to learn or keep track of than the traditional "Boolean" operators, like AND, NOT, and OR. When you use the +

symbol you are telling the search engine to find sites or pages that include each word connected by the symbol. If you use the – symbol, you will be telling the engine to look for sites with the first word, but not for sites with any words following the symbol.

Another valuable search engine technique is the use of wild card searches. Wild card searches are those that allow you to enter a certain character (can be a % or \* in many cases) in order to expand your search to plurals and spelling variations of the word. Many names are spelled a number of ways, and in fact many families were very loose with how they spelled their names if you go back a few generations. If you are able to effectively use wild card searches then you will be able to include these variations and find everything you need. You will also save yourself time by not having to search each and every spelling of every surname for which you are searching.

Once you have wild card and search engine math down pat, then you can start to narrow your searches other ways. First, consider including given names with surnames in order to get more specific hits. Looking up Fred Murray is bound to get you more pertinent sites than just searching Murray. Also, try searching for names in your family that are not as common. This will help you to narrow your search even further.

In addition to using given names with surnames, try including place names. If you look for your family name, a given name, and then where that person was born you are much more likely to have a return on your search that will help you than you are if you do not specify. You may find a number of returns that are not of the person you are looking for, whereas if you use a place you are much more likely to find out what that person did in that area and thus have more information.

Using search engines can be a great way to get your genealogy search going. The massive amount of information available through websites, though, can make using them somewhat daunting. To make them more useable and focused, try centering your searches with some of the tips above. Learn your search engine math and understand how to narrow a search when you use it. Before you know it, you will be a search engine wiz.

## **Eight Important How-to Tips in Searching Census Records**

Census records may be the single most utilized search tool online for family tree research. From 1930 back to the founding of the country, the records of every census are available online. By using census records you may be able to trace your family tree back to when your ancestors first came to this country, whether they were immigrants who came ashore at Ellis Island, or were here to fight the British during the Revolution, the census records may well show you a piece of their lives.

Census records are available online and have truly aided the search of the genealogist, whether amateur or professional, since their introduction. Using the combined power of the Internet, high-speed computers, and the extensive research of the federal government all at your fingertips can make research a breeze.

When searching census records, there are several things to remember. First, have a good idea of alternative spellings of your family name. Many family names had the spelling changed to make the names seem more American, and help the individuals blend into American society without standing out, with what seemed like foreign sounding names. Other names were changed because the immigration officials made typographical errors, or could not spell or pronounce the names involved. And many names simply had multiple spellings that were all considered correct at the time, especially since so many people didn't read or write.

Also, trying to decipher other people's handwriting can cause anyone problems. A person may make an r that looks like an n or any one of dozens of other mistakes from bad handwriting. With that in mind, know all of the alternative spellings.

Next, make a list of all of the family names you are looking for, and all of the information you have relevant to the ancestors you want to learn about. Keep this information in a notebook handy, or in an online database. And be prepared to write in the notebook or add to the database as you acquire more information. When making a list of names, remember that Smith for instance is sometimes written as Smithe, or Smythe. Johnson can be Johnston or Jonson. Madux can be Maddux or Maddox. Know the combinations and alternatives and you will aid your search.

After that, know what states your ancestors were probably living in. If your ancestor lived in New Jersey that is the census you want to check out, not New York. And know the geography. If you can't find your ancestor in New Jersey, but believe he was in the area at the time, then New York as an adjoining state is the next place to check, followed by Pennsylvania and all of the other states in the area where the ancestor could have lived.

Know something about the spouses and the spousal families. If you can't find your great, great, great grandfather, but you know whom he married, then you can check out the spouse's family and perhaps find some information there. The more information you have to start with in your research, the better for you, the more extensive the research will be, and the less time it will take.

Then have a good idea of the time period in which the ancestor lived. If your ancestor lived in New York in 1900, then that is the first census to check. Then checking the 1890 and 1910 census records will help determine when he moved there and when he left. But, there is no need to check the 1920 census or the 1880 census if the time periods don't match.

There has never been a better time in history to do genealogical research for many reasons, one of the main ones being census records availability online. Other things that help the genealogical researcher these days include the popularity of the hobby, the abundance of good software to help in the research, and the Internet itself. With the Internet it is possible to find online chat rooms, groups, message forums and other places to meet like-minded people researching their own families. And as these things go, many people start their research on one branch of their own family and then tie into other branches, tying into other people's research, and helping everyone along the way.

## **Record of Death – How This Can Help in Filling the Blanks of your Family Tree**

The key to most genealogists' success is the location of marriage, birth, and death records. They are sources that are created on the local or town level, but can give you an abundance of information as well as confirmation. For the most part, you probably know that such records are found through the county. However, many death records and the like in New England are found through the town clerks. You should be able to find death records dating back through the middle of the 1600's.

In fact, that information is important on another level as well. Before probate districts were put in place in parts of New England, the town clerk kept other records as well. Often the town clerks at these times were responsible for the recording of wills, land records, and deeds. All of these can be very important records when it comes to the search for genealogical records, and so it is important that you keep that in mind as you work on it.

If you are into genealogy, you should know that death records are some of the most important in your being able to fill in gaps that you may have in the family tree you are researching. For instance, if you have a relative for whom you do not know very much to continue back, their death record can be a huge help. A proper death certificate will likely have the date and place of birth on it as well as the names of both parents of the decedent. In that way, death records are a fantastic source and can thus at times be the holy grail of a given genealogical search.

Here is one tip to keep in mind when looking for those death certificates and or records. Around the start of the twentieth century, most of the states began to require that copies of all marriage, birth, and death records be filed with the state office of vital statistics. So, if you are looking for a record after that time, you actually can check for this information at the state level. That can make things much easier for you if you are having trouble pinning down a town or local area to check. However, if at any point the state's vital records were destroyed by fire or some other act of nature; you can look back at the local level. On a similar note, if the county courthouse of a locality was destroyed after the turn of the twentieth century then check the state records.

What if you are having trouble finding the death date for a particular relative from your tree? First, try determining whether or not the local county clerk's office kept records of probate or land during the time period the person in question died. You may, like many people, be under the impression that probate records are made only if a person leaves a will. Even if your relative did not, like many in the past, leave a will, the judge of the local city or county was required to identify heirs and creditors, which leaves a probate record. The probate packages usually include not only a list of property and debts, but also a date of death. I

f you can find a property record, look for when the property was transferred to an heir to get a death date. So as you can see, though death records can be incredibly vital to genealogists, there are ways to get information even in the absence of one. Get creative and be thorough and you will be able to find more information than you might initially think you can.

To find the actual addresses of town and county clerks offices, your best resources are online. There are also a number of genealogy how-to books that will help you with finding the records and clerks offices of many cities and counties throughout the country. Getting in contact with

these offices is the first step in filling in those gaps in your family tree.

Genealogy is a great hobby and to be successful at it there are certain resources you need to enjoy access to. Death records are one example of these resources. By finding death records or knowing who to contact about death, birth, and marriage information can be a great asset in filling in those annoying gaps in your family tree.

## **The Best Sources for Researching Ancestors Who Fought in the Wars**

Did your ancestors ever serve in the war? If they did, you could be overlooking a valuable resource leading to vital statistics about them and their family members that exist as a result of their military service. By figuring out what conflicts, if any, that your ancestor served in, you can proceed in researching the variety of military records at your fingertips.

Military pensions are one avenue of research. Not only veterans but also their widows or minor children may have received benefits. Information from family and friends may also be available in the file, making it a source for genealogical information on the family as a whole, not just the veteran himself. Due to the information supplied by family members and acquaintances in pension files, you should seek them for not only direct ancestors but their relatives and friends as well who were veterans.

When searching for your male ancestors who were veterans don't forget to look for female relatives who may have somehow been involved in the military. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) provides information on female patriots who assisted soldiers during the Revolution. Also look for both ancestors you know are veterans and ancestors who could possibly be veterans. If you believe an ancestor went to a military academy, get a copy of his school records even if he did not graduate and go into the military. School records provide interesting familial information. Finally, don't forget to look for ancestors who served in the military but not during a war. These people still have valuable records that you can access.

Approximately eleven armed conflicts occurred in American History between 1775 and 1975. Each conflict can be researched using different resources. The census, however, particularly the 1930 census, is a good place to start. In 1930, your ancestor would have indicated he was a veteran if he had served in the Boxer Rebellion, Civil War, Mexican Expedition, Philippine Insurrection, Spanish-American war, or World War.

Veterans of the Colonial Wars, which included various battles fought before 1775, may be listed in state or county records. The Society of Colonial Wars also provides information in the form of books and other documents relating to the battles. Many men, young and old, participated in the American Revolution, which lasted from 1775 to 1783. The D.A.R. and the S.A.R., the Sons of the American Revolution, possess a large amount of information on veterans of the Revolution. Veterans with pensions are also listed on microfilm in numerous libraries. Soldiers, who served their individual states, rather than the federal government, would be included in state or county records, and soldiers who fought in single battles may be listed in battle records that could be available on the Internet.

The nineteenth century was a turbulent time for Americans, consisting of numerous conflicts beginning with the War of 1812. Veterans of the War of 1812, which lasted until 1815, can be found in indexed records in the National Archives. They may also be listed in county or state records, in pension records, or in land records after receiving land grants. The Indian Wars lasted between 1817 and 1898 and included a variety of conflicts, such as the Seminole Wars and the Black Hawk War, which can be researched in local and federal archives. Other armed conflicts that occurred between the Indian Wars were the Mexican War and the Civil War. The Mexican War lasted between 1846 and 1848. Pension files and service records have been indexed on microfilm, and many soldiers received land grants for their service. Some veterans of the Mexican War also served in the Civil War.

Many American men, both young boys and older veterans of the Mexican war, served in the Civil War. Residence in a Union or Confederate State does not guarantee that your ancestor served on the same side of the war as his neighbors. Pension records for Union Soldiers are located in the National Archives and some are also online. Many confederate soldiers did not receive pensions, and if they did, they received them from the state. Records can be found in state archives and/or adjutant general's offices. The Allen County Public Library and the National Park Service battlefields, cemeteries, obituaries, and census records also serve as good resources for information on Civil War Veterans.

Finally, three more conflicts occurred before World War I at the end of the nineteenth century. Veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898-1899), the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902), and the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901) have pension or service records, some of which are indexed and available in the National Archives.

Veterans of World War I, which lasted from 1917-1918, can be found through draft cards (easily found if you know where your ancestor lived), Internet sites and archives of service records, discharge papers, and, if you have your ancestor's service number, through the National Military Personnel Records. Some World War II records, including National Military Personnel Records are available. Online databases list soldiers who died in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC also lists deceased soldiers.

## **Several Ways to Search Ship Manifests for Your Family's History**

Before the days of airplane travel, emigrants typically left their countries of origin on ships and braved long and difficult journeys across the ocean. Finding evidence of an ancestor's journey to a new world through passenger lists and ship manifests can be a thrilling experience for anyone who is interested in their family history. Such valuable documents, kept by most shipping companies across the world, can be incredibly difficult to search, however, leading genealogists to spend countless hours in fruitless inquiry.

Many of the lists, for instance, have not been put into indexes and lay moldering in some obscure or unreachable archive. At other times, even when genealogists do find their ancestors on a ship manifest, only their name and country of departure are listed; no other exciting information, such as birth date, country of origin, or occupation, is included. Such warnings

aside, however, there are ways genealogists can increase their chance of success in finding their ancestors on passenger lists.

First, remember that your ancestors may have been included on a number of lists, not just the ones made upon arrival in their new country. Lists were made when they first got on the ship and whenever they stopped along the way. Newspapers and organizations that may have paid for their journey, such as aid societies, would also have kept lists. Even passport applications and naturalization papers can provide valuable clues to your ancestor's journey.

After becoming aware of the variety of places in which you can look for your ancestors, try and keep the time period in which they arrived in consideration. Passenger lists made for immigrants arriving in America before 1820, for example, are particularly difficult to search for because they were not standardized or carefully preserved and either do not exist anymore or are extremely difficult to find. The search for immigrants arriving between 1820 and 1891 is slightly less difficult but information is still limited. Finally, in 1891, the Immigration and Naturalization Service came into existence in the United States, and passenger lists were greatly improved, becoming more reliable, informative and well-preserved.

Before you begin searching passenger lists, you need to know your ancestor's complete and original name, the date of his arrival in America, and the port at which he arrived. It is also helpful to know his age; the port from which he departed; his country of origin; his ultimate destination in the United States; and the names of his ship or of any fellow travelers. You can find this information through a piece memorabilia, such as a letter or ticket; through previously researched family history; through census records, which are available on the internet and on purchasable computer programs; through naturalization records, which are actually more informative than passenger lists for immigrants arriving after 1906; and through passport records, if your ancestor applied for one to visit his country of origin.

If you discover that your ancestor arrived before 1820, there is no centralized place to search for passenger lists. Many ships did keep lists, which they left at the ports of arrival, but since the government did not require these lists to be kept or saved, they were lost, destroyed, or scattered in different libraries or private collections. Many of the surviving lists have been published on the web or in books, so these are the best places to search. Newspapers from the time which have been microfilmed are also valuable resources. Finally, the government does have records in the national archives for arrivals in New York from 1789 to 1919, in New Orleans from 1813 to 1819, and in Philadelphia from 1800 to 1819.

If your ancestor arrived after 1820, then your main job will be in consulting the variety of resources available. Customs Passenger Lists, compiled by ship captains from 1820 to around 1891 and indexes for these lists can be found at the National Archives; in libraries, including the comprehensive genealogical archives of the Church of Latter Day Saints; online in images, transcripts, and indexes; on purchasable CD-ROMs; and in books. The archives and other resources contain notable gaps in information and errors, so it is best to search in a variety of indexes.

Beginning around 1891, Immigration Passenger Lists replaced Customs Passenger Lists due to the flood of immigrants to the United States and the establishment of a Superintendent of Immigration. Immigration Passenger Lists are much more detailed and two pages long by 1906.

They can be found in the National Archives, in the Latter Day Saints library, on the Ellis Island on-line database, and on other on-line sites. Once again, errors were made in microfilming lists and a variety of resources should be consulted. In the end, genealogy is like a scavenger hunt where you must use the clues provided to you and search in a variety of places before you find what you are looking for.

## **Rooting for Military Records for Your Family Tree**

One of the most difficult parts of genealogical research can be finding military records for family members within your circle. While hard to find, these records can prove invaluable to your search for more information about your family. They can help you track who a family member dealt with and where they might have been stationed. This can help you track your family members' travel across the country or even the world.

Starting your search for military records begins by searching your brain and your families' collective memories for information about the parties you are looking for. Information that can help you in this search includes the branch of service the member of your family served in, the conflict (if any) the member of your family was involved in, the dates your family member was involved in the service, the type of unit (volunteer, draft, etc) the member of your family served with, whether the member of your family drew a pension from the service, and whether the member of your family was an officer or a member of the enlisted personnel.

Once you've gathered your information, you're ready to start searching databases. There are several you will need to look through, depending upon how much information you have. One valuable source is the National Archives and Records Administration. Over the course of the history of the United States, and extensive amount of paperwork has been produced by the federal government. The National Archives and Records Administration have worked to preserve what they could of documents containing important bits of national history. They have more than three thousand types of records archived on microfilm and on the Internet that you can access and view. Some of these will cost you something while others are free. Their military service records catalog runs about three hundred and thirty pages and can be a very valuable resource in your search for family military records.

Another good source of information on all military personnel is the census. By eighteen forty, the census bureau listed the name, age, and residence of every single member of the American services. Even though much of the eighteen ninety census was destroyed by fire, it had essential facts about the person's name, rank, company, regiment or vessel, length of service, and disabilities associated with the service. There is even a listing of the widows of Union veterans for some states. In addition to the above information, the nineteen ten census asked every man over the age of fifty about military service history. As the census progressed, more and more information was collected about veterans.

If your family member served in the regular Army, there are three possible publications that might help you with your search. First, take a look at a volume of the Regular Army Enlistment Papers. There are several volumes of this available from a variety of locations. Another possibility is to examine Francis B. Heitman's Historical Register if you know the family member

you are searching for was an officer. One final possibility is to look at the Dictionary of the United States Army, available from a number of different locations.

There are two major repositories of military information for your searching purposes. If you are looking for the military records for anyone who served in the Revolutionary War through nineteen twelve, the National Archives Building in Washington D.C. is the place you should go. You cannot leave with any of the information, but you are welcome to make an appointment to take notes from their paperwork. They also offer informational courses that you might find helpful to your search.

If you are searching for information about a family member who served in the military from World War I to the present, the best place to go to examine information is the National Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. In order to obtain a copy of the records you require, though, expect to have to fill out some paperwork, as privacy standards for more recent records are a bit more rigorous than those for records dating from the eighteen hundreds.

Finding the military records of your family members can really advance the search for your genealogical history in a number of different ways.

## **Organizations and Unions – Searching for Family via Membership**

Researching the branches of your family tree can be a complex and time-consuming process. Sometimes you may feel like you have reached a dead end and not know where else you can look. That's when it's time to think like your ancestors and look for them in unexpected places. Perhaps they were a member of a church, a professional organization, or a civic organization. These organizations often create and store records of their own, in which you might find vital information on your family members.

Your ancestors, like most Americans, were most likely members of a church or synagogue, which might still have records of baptisms, first communions, confirmation, bar or bas mitzvahs, marriages, or deaths of their members. Organizations within the church may also have kept their own records that you can research. Baptism records may provide evidence of your ancestors' parents, their residence at the time, their date of birth, and the names of friends or relatives who acted as their Godparents.

Confirmation records, which are usually kept for adults, may provide clues to childhood activities or spouses. Burial records may have information on spouses and direct descendants and act as a supplement for or in lieu of a death certificate. Marriage records vary in detail, possibly containing the names, ages, residences, and parentage of a couple in addition to their occupations, educational history, and the name and locations of their witnesses.

In order to find church records, you must first find the congregations of which your ancestors were members. Be careful not to assume that all family members went to the same church. Different family members can be different religions. Also some denominations have changed their names over time. Memorabilia, such as family bibles; newspaper articles and obituaries;

death certificates and funeral home records; marriage records; and census records could provide you with clues to your ancestor's church membership. Once you locate the church, check their records first, if they have any. Later you can solicit information about records from church or clergy members or at local history libraries. Churches that no longer exist may have records at affiliated churches nearby, in the church denomination's archives, or in local libraries or museums.

Schools and universities also may keep records, such as enrollment records and transcripts, and the local or state government may keep records on students as well for tax or census purposes. Different colleges keep records differently, however, and, for the sake of privacy, most make it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain transcripts for students within the past seventy years. Depending on the state, if you request a transcript for an ancestor who attended school there greater than seventy years ago and can prove that you are related, you might not have a problem, though.

Besides transcripts, you could also look in alumni association or university archives for student directories, yearbooks, literary journals, newspapers, and scrapbooks. Sororities and fraternities, honor societies, and other service organizations may also keep their own records. Public libraries and museums may keep yearbooks or other school publications, particularly for school that closed down. Finally, local newspapers may contain information on students or school events.

After school is thoroughly searched, comes work, and if you can identify your ancestor's occupation using other records, such as census records, you can usually find employee records of unions and other organizations. Employment records for early railroad workers and early employees of the federal government are available in publications in history libraries. Different organizations also exist for businessmen and other professionals, such as engineers, teachers, doctors, and even dairymen and morticians. These organizations often have their own publications, which may contain biographical information, such as birth date, education, residence, and death date. Publications about members of the clergy can also be found in church archives.

Finally, if you can identify any civic or fraternal organizations to which your relatives belonged, you can seek out any records they may have kept. The Masons, for example, keep very good records. Libraries, archives and museums may also contain organizational records. The Smithsonian, specifically the National Museum of American History, possesses extensive archives containing manuscripts and publications of professional organizations. If your great-grandpa worked in advertising, for example, their collection of advertising materials may be the place to look.

### **What Property Records Can Tell You About Your Family's Past**

Property records can tell you a lot about your family's past. Real estate leaves a paper trail. Deeds, wills, deeds of trust, property transfer agreements, mortgages, homestead records, land grants, all can go a long ways towards helping you trace the path that your ancestors took to reach the area where you grew up.

One example of how some people use property records when tracing family roots involves the family of the American pioneer and explorer Daniel Boone. Boone is well known as an explorer, who opened up the Kentucky wilderness to settlers, and the state of Kentucky lays claim to him for sure, but he lived many other places as well. Daniel Boone grew up as a child of Quaker parents. His family originally emigrated from England to Pennsylvania and owned property there. They eventually settled in North Carolina and Daniel learned his love of the outdoors in the North Carolina wilderness where his family owned property.

But when Daniel Boone came of age he traveled a great deal, and in addition to exploring, he settled. He purchased land in Virginia and settled there for a time, and later did the same in what would one day be Tennessee. So you can see that the Boone family itself lived in four states – or what would eventually be four states – before migrating to Kentucky, state number five. But Daniel always longed for better land with fewer neighbors and sought elbowroom. After many years in Kentucky he moved to the Spanish wilderness near the Mississippi River, near the city of St. Louis in the present state of Missouri.

Daniel's son, Nathan Boone, had his father's wanderlust and went down to the southwest corner of Missouri to found the small town of Ash Grove, in the corner of the state that is near the current Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas borders. Property records of the time form a clear paper trail of the travels of the Boone family, Daniel and his children that are used by the many researchers today who claim ancestry of Boone and his kin.

The small town of Ash Grove holds a gathering once a year, the Nathan Boone festival, to honor this early pioneer. With an average of 200 descendants of the Boone clan coming into the town to visit the restored old Nathan Boone homestead. Copies of the land records are available in the adjoining museum for all to see.

The Boone family is just one example of how American families traveled, and how land records can be used to map the moves. The Jameson family is another prime example. Originally from Virginia, they moved east to Tennessee and Kentucky like the Boones, and then on to Missouri, but they didn't stop there. On to Kansas, and then westward, the Jameson's were bound for California because of talk of a gold strike, but didn't get quite that far. When they reached Utah poor health caused them to cut the journey short. Today they own a great deal of land in Salt Lake City, all travels documented by land records. But one member of the family didn't stay put. Land purchase records indicate that the youngest son of the Jameson's actually went back east, to Ohio, where he bought land in the city of Cleveland and became a shopkeeper.

One genealogical researcher, tracing her lineage back to England, was delighted to find such extensive property records in the old country. Her family was poor, but they owned a small farm, and paid taxes on it every year, which gave her access to a great deal of information about her ancestors that she would not have had otherwise. This of course led to records at the local church, and helped her in her quest to find her family roots. In her case, it seems that the family went from Wales to England, and was granted a small piece of land for services performed for a nobleman. Amazing what one can find when researching property records, isn't it?

When you do genealogical research there are many tools you will find of value. Check out property records and add them to your tool kit and you'll be pleasantly surprised at the new wealth of information they present.

## **How the Social Security Death Index Can Help Your Genealogical Search**

Anyone who is interested in researching their family tree knows how wonderful it would be to have vital information on their ancestors available to them at the stroke of a key. The Social Security Death Index, a huge database compiled by the United States Social Security Administration, is a gold mine to be plumbed for genealogists searching for recent ancestors, and it's only a computer disc or Internet search away. It contains data on around 64 million people, the vast majority of whom are American, who filed for social security benefits and later died between 1962 and 1988. It also includes a smaller number of records dating back to 1937, as well as railroad retirement records from around 1900 to the 1950s.

The database provides information on first and last names, birth and death dates, social security numbers and the states where they were issued, and the final places where social security benefits were sent. This information can help genealogists obtain birth and death certificates, employment information, and information on other relatives and ancestors. Like putting together the pieces of a puzzle, discovering one tiny bit of data can lead to a whole treasure trove of additional information.

As helpful as the Social Security Death Index can be to someone researching their family's history, it can also be an incredibly tricky database to navigate successfully. Genealogists often execute a quick search and then give up when they don't find the person they are looking for. Perhaps their relative died before 1962 or never filed for social security. Also, their relative's death might never have been reported. It's most likely, however, that the genealogists are not executing a successful search. Numerous errors--in the form of typos and missing information--were made in the early collection of social security information. Therefore, using the various search engines available to search the database is a time consuming, trial and error process. Knowing a few tips for using the database, however, can improve a genealogist's chances of a successful search.

First, remember that less is more when it comes to searching for your ancestor using the variety of fields available to you. Unlike most search engines, it's best to start with the least amount of information first so that one incorrectly entered field does not eliminate the person you are searching for from the results. For example, if you are searching for your Uncle Tom McMahon, use just two pieces of information, such as a last name and a birth date, to begin your search. Also, be aware of not only the variety of ways information can be entered into a search field but also the most beneficial ways in which to enter to the information.

For the "Last Name" field on the index, for example, try alternative spellings (i.e. McMahon or McMann), different punctuation options (i.e. commas in names like d'Angelo), and different spacing options, particularly for last names with prefixes or suffixes (i.e. McMahon or Mc Mahon). When searching for women, don't forget to try maiden names as well as married names. Finally, if possible, use the "soundex" to search for last names in order to retrieve

entries with obvious spelling errors.

If, on the other hand, you decide to search for your uncle by using his first name (in addition to another piece of information), your spelling has to be an exact match with the spelling in the record. The index permits no room for error, so get creative. Try Thomas or Tomas, Tommy, the abbreviation "T," or even a middle name.

If you already know your Uncle Tom's social security number, then you can skip the aforementioned steps and type it directly into the search engine. If you not only know his number but also have proof of his death, you can order his social security application, a coveted piece of material that provides all sorts of interesting information about his family history. The first three digits of his social security number will also tell you the state in which his number was issued. If, for example, you think you know where your Uncle was living when he received his Social Security Number (but you don't actually know the number), you could use that information to search the index, but you would have to be careful because some people receive their numbers from states in which they are not living.

If you don't know your uncle's social security number, but you do know his birthday, you can use that as well to search for him. Birthdays are tricky, however, because they are often entered incorrectly. Try searching the index using just the date, the month, or the year of his birth (remember, less is more!), and don't forget to try searching for typos. For example, if he was born in 1902, you could search for people born in 1920 as well, just in case.

Finally, if you're confident in your information, you could search for your uncle by typing in the zip code of his last residence or the individual who received his last benefit. Zip codes can't be used to find early records, however, and a fifth of the records don't list one at all. While it's likely that a spouse or other next of kin would receive the last benefit, it can easily go to any number of people and is not as reliable a field to search with unless you have some reliable outside information.

In the end, don't give up before you find your ancestor. The index is as tricky as it is valuable, and you need to use your creativity when typing information into the variety of fields available on search engines. You can also try different search engines to see if some have perks, like a "soundex," that will make all the difference in your search for your family history.

## **Family Religion – Tracing Genealogy Through Church Records**

Using church records to trace genealogical information is a great resource that is rapidly being discovered by those who are tracing their family tree information. Your church or the church that your family belonged to in the past may have extensive records. Many do.

The most well known church records for genealogy research are those of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. The LDS church maintains extensive records and several web sites, and you don't have to be a member of their church to access the records as they consider genealogy records to be part of the mission of their church. They have a free genealogy search engine, as well as links to many other sites that can assist in research. Links

include US, British and Canadian census records online. The LDS church also offers a free workbook for researchers and other tools either free or at a very low cost that can prove helpful.

Many other churches also keep records of membership, marriages, births, confirmation, baptism, death, anniversaries and other important events in the lives of their members. If your church is part of a large denomination there may be a central record center where this information is kept. If you or your family belonged to a smaller church, you may have to visit the church or write to the pastor to gain this information. Many times the logs or journals of pastors will be passed down from one to another. If logs or journals are not available, church records will generally show attendance and that can help tremendously in determining if your family members were at this particular church during the specified time period.

In the country many churches have adjoining cemeteries and extensive burial records. One family researcher has been known to hang out at cemeteries reading the inscriptions on gravestones looking for long lost relatives, and has had very good results. Other researchers have had good luck with the records of church affiliated organizations. As an example, the Knights of Columbus is a Catholic organization for men that has been around for a very long time and keeps records of membership. This is a group formed to provide men of the parish with a meeting place for fellowship and an organizational structure for doing good works for the community.

The various rites of the Masonic Lodge has a similar goal and has had affiliation with many Protestant churches and one genealogic researcher discovered that most of her male ancestors were members of a particular lodge, which led her to visit that lodge and ask for help in finding records of her ancestors. The lodge members were quite helpful. It turned out that in the small community where the lodge was located most of the members were also members of the same area churches, and many of the records coincided.

As fortune would have it, one of the churches also had a nearby cemetery and she was able to find the graves of many ancestors by visiting there, as well as photographs of two grandfathers and two great grandfathers who had been Lodge Masters during the years. This was a rare find, and proved the value of checking with churches, cemeteries and fraternal orders.

Family bibles often have indispensable information, and while most families keep possession of the family bible, some donate them to churches. If this is the case, checking out the family bibles of other families in the area can give clues to what may have been going on with your own family around that time.

Of course, if your family is from a rural area there may be less organization than would be found in a larger or older city. Boston for instance is filled with churches and graveyards, and most of them keep very good records. On the other hand, a small town in Arizona may not have been settled that long ago in the grand scheme of things and may not have records that are as extensive. But, you never know until you check it out, and part of family tree research is following leads to see where they go. While one lead may dry out, it also may split off and lead you in a different and more productive direction.

## **What's in a Name? Why Spelling is so Important in Your Ancestry Search**

What's in a name? The answer is, quite a bit actually. If you are beginning a search of your family tree it will help you tremendously to know the history of your family name, or for that matter of the names of other branches of the family. Many times names were changed when people immigrated to this country. If a person's name sounded too "foreign" in a culture that was primarily of English ancestry then that name may very well have been changed. To a lesser extent, if the spelling of the name seemed difficult or again foreign then it could have been changed for that reason as well.

A prime example of simple spelling differences in languages is in the American and British spellings of certain words. The American word theater is spelled theatre in the UK. Defense is spelled defence. Shop in old English is shoppe. The same small changes often happen with names.

When doing genealogy research you will sometimes notice names spelled several different ways in the same document. Many years ago standardized spellings for names didn't really exist. Not everyone could read and write in those days, and often members of the same family would spell names differently. The English name Darby for instance could also be spelled Derby, but still pronounced the same way. Also Smith could be spelled Smithe or Smyth, or Smythe. Maddox can also be spelled Maddux, Madux, or even Maddoc. The Scottish name Munro was more commonly spelled Monroe by the English. Then look at names that are translated from one language to another. The French name Choamote was sometimes Americanized to Shumate, a totally different spelling.

Another reason for name changes is that immigration authorities both made mistakes, including typographical errors, which would stick with an immigrant, and would sometimes arbitrarily change names on their own because they couldn't pronounce a name or didn't like the spelling. For instance, the Swedish name Sjoblom, with a silent j, is pronounced see-bloom. Some members of the Sjoblom family had their names changed, involuntarily, to Seebloom or Seabloom.

As another example of how names were changed is the Italian name Tagliaferro which means ironworker. This name became Tolliver. Another Italian name, Amici, which means friend, was Americanized into Ameche. Even the families of presidents have not been immune. Roosevelt comes from the Dutch name Van Rosevelt, which means of the rose field. Blum, which means flower, was Americanized into Bloom. The German name Roggenfelder, which means rye field, could have been directly translated into Ryefield, but instead it commonly became Rockefeller.

American names like the American population itself come from all countries of the world. Remember the old movie *Stripes* when Bill Murray in Army basic training said, "Our ancestors were kicked out of all the best countries in Europe"? Well most were not kicked out, but instead chose to leave. This included Dutch settlers in New York, French in Louisiana, Spanish in Florida and Texas, Germans in Pennsylvania, English in Virginia, and on and on. The American melting pot and the hope of opportunity in the new country caused most people to want to assimilate, and many did so partly by changing their names. General George Armstrong Custer, so well known for Custer's Last Stand, had a German grandfather, a Hessian soldier whose name was Kuster. Another German name, Schwab, which comes from Swabia, became Swope

for many.

Another reason for changes were to simply make the spelling of a name look more American, which was more common English. Double letters such as RR or LL could be replaced by a single letter. Common spellings in other languages, or even in British English, were often subject to change. The common name Grover for instance, can also be Krover, Krober, Groeber, or Crower, as well as other spellings. Sometimes the reason for the change in spelling was the accent of the person immigrating. Sometimes immigration officials would hear the accent and misinterpret it, and usually the new name stuck.

It is important to know the alternative spellings of your family name to do a complete search of your ancestry. If you don't have that information you could miss vital branches of the family tree.

## **How to Locate Maiden Names for Your Genealogy Search**

When working on your genealogy, sometimes the most difficult obstacle to overcome is that of finding the maiden names of female ancestors. However, by finding this information you can be lead to an entirely new branch of your family tree and a whole new set of information and history to explore. To get to that point, though, you do have to find the maiden names in the first place. How do you do it? Here are eight tips on where to look for such information in your genealogy quest.

First of all, as obvious as it may seem, check with marriage records. The bride's maiden name is always listed on her marriage record. If you can't find a license, look for marriage certificates, announcements, bonds, or anything else that may have been used to mark the occasion at the time. You will be surprised at what you might find if you are creative.

Secondly, you can check out cemetery records. It may seem morbid, but especially in the past, the only proof you may find that a female ancestor even had a maiden name may be on her tombstone. Many of them will list a woman under her maiden name with her married name listed in terms of "married to" inscriptions.

Third, you can check census records. If you go back far enough you will see the maiden name of your ancestor shown by looking at the records of who lived in the household. You may see that a young couple lived with the wife's parents, or that other relatives moved into the home that may give away the maiden name.

Fourth, check land records. Land records are a great resource any time you are working in genealogy, and for seeking a maiden name they can be as well. Many times in the past, land was passed from father to daughter. If you look at your family's deeds you may find the names of females or of children of owners that can give away the maiden name to you as you search. If you see a man or couple sold land to someone for a dollar or other small amount, it is often a relative, so use that as well.

Fifth, it may seem unusual, but churches can be a great resource for maiden names. The birth and christening records in many cases will have the names of both parents on them. The mother's name, in most cases, will be listed under her maiden name. Churches may also have marriage information, including maiden names, since there were times when civil registration was not in effect in certain areas.

Sixth, try probate records and even the wills themselves. If you find that you may have found a set of parents to go with the mystery relative, check their will or probate. They often listed the surnames of female children separately from those of their spouses. This information can be valuable in tracking down a maiden name.

Seventh, check the newspaper. That's right; the newspaper can be a great resource. If you look in the area where your relative lived or was married, you may be able to find announcements or obituaries, which like the tombstones, will often times include the maiden name of the deceased.

Finally, check out death records. If the ancestor you are searching for died recently enough that there is a death certificate, it may be one of the only places her maiden name will be listed. You should also read the certificate carefully, though, since the information on old death certificates can be inaccurate. If you look you will be able to find out who the informant is. The closer the relationship between the deceased and the informant, the more accurate the information often will be.

There are a number of things you can run into with genealogy that can be frustrating. One of the most common obstacles, though, is maiden names. Often times there just were not kept track of with any sort of regularity so it becomes a real challenge to find out which way that branch of your family tree goes. However, there are some things you can do to track down maiden names. The eight tips above should get you a good start on tracking down who married whom so that you can extend that family tree to include new and exciting branches.

## **Death and Taxes: Two Avenues to Travel on Your Genealogical Quest**

Reconstructing the lives of your dead ancestors is a bit like piecing together a large and complicated puzzle. Luckily, little bits of information are available in many different places if you know where to look. As the old saying goes, two things in everyone's life are inevitable: death and taxes. By researching these two aspects of your ancestor's existence, you can find information and leads that you might not be able to find otherwise.

Death certificates are a great place to start looking for information on your ancestors. The government didn't actually require states to officially register a person's death, however, until the twentieth century, so death certificates may not be available for more distant ancestors. Sometimes death registers were kept on a citywide or countywide basis before the twentieth century. Unfortunately, registering a death was voluntary so your ancestor may not be listed, and the information that was provided on the deceased varied greatly in detail.

If you decide to look for a more recent ancestor's death certificate, you first must know three vital pieces of information: full name, death date, and location of death. Knowing the location of death will allow you to locate the state's vital records office, either on the Internet or in books, and learn about the state's procedures for obtaining of a copy of a death certificate. Many charge a fee, and some require you to provide proof that you are a descendant.

The more recent a death certificate is, the more information it will provide. Most contain not only date and location of death but also birth date and birthplace, spouse's name, occupation, and reason for death or how long the person has been sick. While death certificate are considered a primary source, they do contain errors, and the information contained within them, particularly the manner of death as pronounced by coroners in the early twentieth century, should be scrutinized and substantiated by corresponding evidence.

Another great comprehensive source of information for the recently deceased is the Social Security Death Index, which contains vital information on 64 million people, most of whom are Americans. If your relative filed for Social Security and later died between 1962 and 1988, then he may be included in the index, which also includes a smaller number of records dating back to 1937 and railroad retirement records from around 1900 to the 1950s.

If you manage to find your relative in the index, you will learn his or her social security number and can use it to file for his or her social security application, which will provide you with even more information. Using the Social Security Death Index can be tricky, however, and you should search using the least amount of information possible so that you don't eliminate your ancestor from the search results. The index is available online and on a variety of computer programs.

State and territory death indexes are similar to the Social Security Death Index but contain different information. They also are not standardized and vary in their availability and the amount of information they provide. Wills and estate document can also provide fascinating clues to ancestor's life. Even poorer people made wills, not only to ensure the correct distribution of their belonging but also to share wisdom or hidden emotions. Many wills are fascinating and provide clues about the members of a family, children and in-laws and even slaves. They can also indicate some of the personal characteristics of your ancestors, and their generousness or stinginess. Wills can be found on the internet and in books. Finally, funeral home records and obituaries can also provide valuable clues to your ancestors' lives after they have died.

Finally, taxes, on the federal, state, countywide, or citywide level were almost inevitably paid by your adult male ancestors during their lifetimes. Taxes can tell you where a person lived, when they lived there, and, perhaps, other interesting information about their lifestyles. Taxes were very different in previous centuries, however, and it's best to do your research on the taxes existing during the time period and in the area in which your ancestor lived. Different types of taxes were levied by landlords, the government, and even the church, and varied from marriage taxes, tax lists, and poor taxes to poll taxes, rent rolls, and quit rents. Tax lists can be found in a variety of libraries, archives, and on the internet, so keep looking even if it seems you aren't finding anything. You may also want to study the handwritten tax list, since the process of transcribing and indexing the records can lead to spelling errors.

## **Courting Information – How the Local Courthouse Can Be a Wealth of Information**

As a genealogist you have probably heard that a trip to any courthouse should be a last resort. This advice is passed along as a result of a bad experience or multiple bad experiences in visiting the courthouse. However, that is just not true; a trip to the local courthouse can result in a great deal of information that may be valuable to your genealogical searches. The idea is to know what you are getting into when starting your genealogy search and what you should do when you get to the courthouse. Once you have this lined up, you will see that a trip to the courthouse really can be a valuable and profitable trip. All it takes is some preparation and discipline to make it worth your time.

First of all, a courthouse can be a wealth of genealogical information. It is home to records going back as far as the courthouse itself in many instances including property records, wills, birth certificates, death certificates and the like. However, you have to know what you are doing when you go into the courthouse, in order to make your trip worthwhile. Here are a couple of tips.

First of all, consider this: you will be going into the record books at the courthouse. They are very large and heavy most of the time, weighing as much as 20 pounds each. If you are going to make copies, the pages will generally cover the entire glass top of the copy machine. Also, you will find them in racks that are metal and have pockets sized to hold each large record book. Each of these pockets is generally equipped with rollers that allow you to slide them in and out. They can also be located as high as 6 feet up and as low as the floor. In other words, proceed with caution if you have trouble with your back or knees. Another thing to consider is that many home and real estate closings happen at the end of the month. During that time, the records room will be filled with lawyers and their clerks. Consider making your trip to the courthouse during the middle two weeks of the month if you plan to check out the records.

In order to avoid wasting your time, when you first arrive at the courthouse you should ask if the records you are seeking are still there. The reason this is important is that many courthouses have moved many of their older records to the state archives. There is a chance you will be told that records aren't there simply because not every courthouse clerk is receptive to genealogists. They figure if they tell you the records aren't there that you will go away. Feel free to do a quick search anyway. If you are told they are at the state archives, you will want to make a follow up phone call just to be sure.

In order to make your trip to the courthouse as productive as possible, you should make sure that you are organized going into the visit. You should prioritize what you want to find on your trip. You may feel that it is hard to prioritize, but perhaps use the method of putting items you have been seeking the longest, nearest the top of your priority list. In order to keep yourself focused once you are in the room, write out your priorities and take them with you. Index cards, a written note, or a typed page will all work just fine. Just make sure that you keep yourself focused so that you get as much done as possible in the time you are there. Remember, productivity is the key to this trip.

Genealogy can be a fantastically exciting hobby, but there is so much you want to find out that you find yourself stuck. Many times experts will tell you to avoid that trip to the courthouse like

the plague. You may be told that you are not welcomed there, that the trip will be unproductive, and that you will deal with rude attorneys all day. That all may be true, but there is a way to make sure your trip is as productive as possible. Make sure that you are aware of the procedures and “tricks” used to avoid being uninvited. In addition, make sure you have a plan going in. Your time will be limited so you need to be focused and on task during the time you are there. Follow these simple tips and no matter what the experts say, your trip to the courthouse will be productive and exciting.

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