

GenGuides | BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH

by *Genwriters* | Taking the First Steps

Before you begin your research, there are a few steps you ought to take to start your family history search.

- ✓ Look around your house. You may have inherited documents and treasures you're not even aware of. Who has the family Bible? Where are all those childhood photos? Did your mother pass an old shoe box of letters on to you? Are there important vital record documents stored in your safe deposit box? Gather these items together. You might be surprised what you will learn.
- ✓ Talk to your relatives. Discuss your genealogy research plans with your parents and your grandparents, your cousins, your aunts and uncles. They ought to be able to provide you with a framework of names for at least a generation or two.
- ✓ Ask your relatives if they have done any family history research already. Perhaps Aunt Ann has documented your Howell family line back to the days of the Revolution. This would save you time and allow you to focus your research efforts on another, unresearched, family line.
- ✓ Ask your relatives for family memorabilia they might have in their closets, basements, or attics. Does anyone have immigration papers for your grandparents who arrived from Germany? You might want to ask Grandma Jones if you could help her sort through her attic. There could be a treasure trove of genealogy sources hidden in her house.
- ✓ Pay a visit to the local library and historical museum where your parents and grandparents lived. Both repositories could have historical displays and books about the town they grew up in. It's even possible to find information specifically about your family.
- ✓ Join the local genealogical society. You will reap many educational benefits from joining a society. You might also find others who are researching the same family lines.
- ✓ Subscribe to and read genealogy magazines. They are filled with helpful hints, tips, and case studies that are entertaining and informative.

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HOME SOURCES

In addition to interviewing friends and relatives, you will want to gather documents, photographs, and other mementos (*Home Sources*). Do your parents have a shoebox, suitcase, trunk, or old cardboard box of documents, letters, and other papers tucked away? Or is Aunt Jane the keeper of the family papers? If there are family mementos in someone's closet, attic or basement, you want to know where, and you will want to look at them. You may be fortunate by having Aunt Jane gladly give you the "box that's just taking up space." At the very least, she should let you photocopy and/or photograph its contents. What types of documents or mementos are you seeking? Anything that will reveal more about the lives of your ancestors. Everyone left behind a trail of paper. Your task as family historian is to find and follow that trail. Your genealogical journey will enable you to find the documents and piece them together to build your family history.

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| accounting books/ledgers | land records and deeds |
| achievement awards | legal papers |
| baby albums | medical records |
| bank statements | membership lists |
| baptism certificate | memorial cards |
| birth announcement | military documents |
| birth certificate | military uniform |
| business receipts | mortgage papers |
| christening record | naturalization record |
| citizenship papers | newspaper clippings |
| cookbooks | obituaries |
| death certificates | old letters |
| diaries | organization membership cards |
| diplomas | passports and visas |
| divorce papers | photographs |
| employment records | postcards |
| estate inventories | probate records |
| family Bible | receipts |
| family histories | school report cards |
| family recipes | school yearbooks |
| graduation certificate | scrapbooks |
| greeting cards | social security card |
| heirlooms | ticket stubs |
| income tax records | wedding albums |
| insurance policies | wedding invitations |
| journals | wills |

THE ESSENTIAL GENEALOGY LIBRARY

Your next step should be to invest in a good, basic genealogy how-to book. There are several excellent ones on the market.

Unpuzzling Your Past

by Emily Croom

A great book for the beginning genealogist. The book is filled with tools and information you need to begin your family history adventure, with step-by-step guidance, forms to copy, places to look, and interesting examples each step along the way.

Unpuzzling Your Past Workbook

by Emily Croom

This book is filled with multiple forms and checklists. Look no further for your organizational tools.

How to do Everything with your Genealogy

by George G. Morgan

An excellent and well-written resource, this book covers all aspects of genealogy for beginners and advanced researchers. This book will quickly become your most valuable genealogy how-to reference book.

The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy

Edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking

A thorough guide to selecting, locating, and using appropriate primary and secondary sources. This book serves as an instructional tool for novice genealogists and as a refresher course for experienced researchers. Individual chapters are written by subject specialists.

The Genealogist's Question and Answer Book

by Marcia Yannizze Melnyk

This handy guide provides answers to more than 250 commonly-posed questions pertaining to the methodology and execution of genealogical research and inquiry.

Managing a Genealogical Project

by William Dollarhide

This book presents explicit details about one method of organizing research materials. From preliminary stage to final presentation, this book will guide you through each step of your genealogy research.

Hidden Sources

by Laura Szucs Pfeiffer

Go beyond vital records, censuses, and other commonly-used sources. Discover more obscure sources that can lead a genealogist to vital information. This directory will explain over 100 of these little-known sources.

Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace

by Elizabeth Shown Mills

The definitive guide for citing sources used during genealogy research. Get off on the right foot and cite your sources properly.

RESEARCH GOALS

Think about your research goals. What is your goal for doing a family history search? What will the breadth and/or depth of your project be? Is your goal:

- ♦ To find out how far back you can research your family?
- ♦ To research one family, one person, or all of your ancestors?
- ♦ To trace each family line to their immigrant ancestor to find their home country?
- ♦ To focus on recent generations to learn more about their lives?
- ♦ To track the migration routes of your ancestors?
- ♦ To satisfy your curiosity, to see where the research takes you?
- ♦ To verify family folklore?

Your goal will dictate your research methods, and ultimately your family history book, if you choose to publish the results of your findings. Always research with your goal in mind. It will help you stay focused, and organized.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Start at the beginning ... with yourself. Move from the known toward the unknown as you journey down your genealogical path.

Sound genealogical research habits include proving the relationships between and within generations. In doing so, you will gather vital records, such as birth certificates, marriage records, death certificates, and other official documents created at these particular events in your ancestors' lives. As an example, to prove that you are a child of your parents, you will want to examine your birth certificate. That document, issued by the state in which you were born and often with an official stamp or seal, proves parentage and will be used as a source. In the same manner, your father's birth certificate will prove his lineage to his parents.

Fully document each generation as you move backward in time. Do not jump generations assuming you're related to an earlier person sharing your surname. Continue researching generation by generation, verifying each piece of information gathered along the way.

CREATE AN ANCESTOR CHART

An Ancestor Chart is a lineage-linked diagram genealogists use for entering direct-line ancestors. This form is used by all genealogists and is particularly useful to beginning researchers to capture a snapshot of several generations. It is useful in planning and setting goals because missing information becomes evident quickly. An Ancestor Chart is essential to the success of your genealogy journey.

You may be able to fill in many spaces on the ancestor chart from memory. Other information may be gleaned from Home Sources and interviews with your relatives. The blank spaces provide research opportunities. You're on the way to building a family tree.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Understanding the difference between primary and secondary sources will help you properly analyze the documents discovered in your research.

A **PRIMARY SOURCE** is a document created near the time that the event occurred and is typically created by someone having direct knowledge of the event and the parties involved. A primary source is often the first record of an event and can be the most reliable of sources.

A **SECONDARY SOURCE** is one created by someone who did not have personal knowledge of the event or the parties involved. Although a secondary source may be created at or near the time of an event, secondary sources are often later or subsequent records of events. A source created at or near the time of an event would be considered secondary if that source was created by a person or persons not present at or with personal knowledge of the event. The accuracy of secondary sources should be proven against primary sources.

Example: A death certificate created at the time of death is a Primary Source for that person's death date. The birth date on that same death certificate, and provided by the son of the deceased, is a Secondary Source because the document was created long after the date of birth and the information was likely given by someone who did not have first-hand knowledge of the event.

THE RESEARCH LOG

The research calendar is a necessary form in a genealogist's supply cabinet. A research calendar is not a calendar at all, but a form on which the genealogist tracks research steps completed. Often referred to as a Research Log, the form keeps track of all research whether successful or not. On your Research Log, you will want to track the name of the person you are researching, where you looked, what you found, and any other pertinent information to help you or another researcher find it again.

Why do genealogists use Research Logs? The log helps a researcher know what sources have been checked and whether they provided helpful information. Research logs help the genealogist eliminate duplication of effort by tracking all sources checked. It is important to include a source on a log whether that source had useful information or not. Sometimes the lack of information is a clue in itself and you will want to include that fact as you complete the Research Log.

How many Research Logs do you need? If you are just beginning your genealogical journey, one research log for all your ancestors might work well. But think into the future as you add more children to families, more ancestors, and more geographic locations. One simple way to create manageable and useful Research Logs is to create one for each surname, or even one for each family unit.



DOCUMENTING SOURCES

A brief mention must be made about source citations. A source citation tells you what you looked at and where you found it in the event you or another researcher want to look at it again. As you gather documents, be sure to note on each its source information, or source citation. Many a researcher have papers in their genealogy files with valuable information but with no hint as to where that information came from. Genealogists document and cite sources for every piece or tidbit of information they uncover about their ancestors Begin citing your sources now. It will be second nature to you as you continue on your journey, and you may avoid those phantom records that reside in many genealogists' files. One of the best resources for learning to cite sources is the book written by Elizabeth Shown Mills titled *Evidence Explained! Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*.

YOUR ANCESTORS AWAIT YOU

This GenGuide is intended to give you an overview of the genealogical research process. Areas of further study will be driven by your individual needs. As you move forward on your journey, keep these tips in mind:

- ♦ Join a local genealogical society. Not only will you find camaraderie with fellow researchers, but you will enjoy educational opportunities sponsored by the organization.
- ♦ Attend local, regional, and national seminars. Many genealogical and historical societies sponsor nationally-

known genealogists and many of these seminars are open to the general public.

- ♦ Reading genealogy magazines is a great way to stay abreast of new trends and products in the field. A few you might want to consider:
 - Family Tree Magazine
 - Family Chronicle
 - Internet Genealogy
 - Ancestry Magazine
 - Digital Family History
- ♦ Visit your local public library. Most libraries have, at a minimum, several genealogy how-to manuals. Larger library branches will often have more extensive genealogical collections. Many collections are not limited to a local perspective, but may have reference books covering a broad cross-section of America.
- ♦ Consider purchasing a computer program to organize your research. There are many excellent programs on the market today, the most popular of which is Family Tree Maker.

READY ... SET ... GO

Now that you are ready to start, begin your research with yourself, then your parents, then their parents, and so forth. Always work from the known to the unknown as you identify and verify each generation. Start by interviewing your living relatives, look around your house for memorabilia that will help you in your search, visit your local library, visit genealogy web sites ... the search is on.