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Your Ancestors

A Guide to help with your Family History Research

Brought to you by Pamela Murphy

<http://www.genlinks.net/>

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Your Ancestors

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The Importance of Your Family History.

We often wander through life and question where we belong. Sometimes we meander because we don't have a definite idea of self. Connect with who you are through your family history.

A strong sense of who you are can be traced to your family roots. Many people don't know about their extended family. They are acquainted with parents, maybe grandparents, and siblings. Beyond that, it is a toss-up at best, a mystery waiting to be solved.

Learn about your family through the stories they share. You probably have a few of your own. Write them down if you have to so that you remember them later on. Ask your immediate family to share their fondest memories of family occasions. Those memories do not have to be huge events such as marriages, deaths or vacations. They could be as simple as a trip to the store, a picnic, or a church service just to name a few.

Telling stories is a way to connect with family members that you hardly know. Maybe you can get to the bottom of that feud between Cousin Connie and Aunt Jane. They might not even know why they are still fighting. Create a new relationship through the memories you'll discover.

Family stories can lead to important findings too. A story or a firsthand account of an event may have made the history books. Maybe a family member was present in Europe when the Berlin Wall came down. What if a family member marched with Martin Luther King, Jr.? They may even have invented something we use today. You never know what you might find that ties your family to important times gone by.

Through the years, your family may have retained a philosophy passed down by one of your ancestors. If they went to war, maybe what they saw inspired them to raise their kids not to fight or to be a military family. Such sentiments run through a family and shape it to be what you see today. You might not have known why before but as you learn about your family's past, you will find out.

Family history inspires pride many people lack. Maybe you think that your family hasn't amounted to much because they are not rich or lack possessions such as their own home. Family research can teach you that there is more to a life than money. Listen to the advice of your elders who have a lot of life experience to share with you and others of younger generations.

Each of us has a legacy to leave the ones who come after us. Sharing family facts through stories or a written history opens a window into the life of the people who made it possible for us to be here in the first place. Make it a family tradition. Begin sharing your own stories, along with those you've discovered in your search for information, with children, siblings, and other relatives. As you start passing along your stories, you'll feel better about where you came from and you'll help those younger than you to do the same in the future.

Chronicle Your Family History.

Where do you come from? Do you look like your grandmother or maybe a relative you hardly even know or never knew? To answer these and other questions you can start by chronicling the history of your family.

We are all products of past generations. You didn't just show up in the cabbage patch one sunny afternoon. Someone gave birth to you. In turn, someone gave birth to them. Each successive generation creates a new chapter in your family history.

Many of us don't know anything about our families beyond the family members that we know now. This is a shame because it tells us about the now but nothing about the past that turned us into the person we have become.

To begin keeping track of your family history, start with the most recent additions and work backwards. If you don't start somewhere, no one in your family will know anything about themselves. The living relatives may be able to shed some light on your new family tree.

Interview your family members. Grandma probably has a few interesting stories to tell about her childhood. In each of those stories are clues to another chapter of your heritage. When you do talk to your relatives about their life and times, keep an audio or video recording. You can go back later and analyze what you have heard from them.

Within each story are clues to where ancestors lived and what the times were like. Let's say for instance that a family member tells a story about trying to keep from going to the bathroom in the middle of the night because it was cold. That story may not mean much until it's explained that during that specific time in history there was no indoor plumbing.

Ask your parents about their earliest memories. Great grandparents that you never knew could be mentioned in their descriptions. If anyone in your family was an avid shutterbug, there could be pictures to accompany those stories. Their childhood ramblings can lead to an evening of laughter and fun for everyone.

Part of learning your family history is sharing some accounts of the times past. Even you have some stories to share. Tell them to your children as a way of passing on a word of mouth legacy. If you ever want to carry your knowledge of your family's past further than the narratives, you'll need some sort of record. That is where the recordings come in.

There are many ways to record your family history. You can write it down, compile interviews in the form of audio or video, create a photo memory book, or even combine various forms such as these together. The possibilities are endless and the important thing is to do something.

Piecing together our past adds meaning to our lives. It also adds a newfound perspective on some of the situations we find ourselves in when we know that our ancestors experienced them first and triumphed.

Tools Used to Research Family History.

As of late, it has become an increasingly favorite pastime of many to research their past. Finding out where we came from can lead to some very interesting discoveries. Here are some of the tools you can use to help dig out those gold nuggets of information.

1. **Family Bible** – An old tradition that many families kept in the past was to record any family events in the big Bible that was passed down from generation to generation. The Bible usually sat on the coffee table where everyone could make an entry if they needed to. Here, accounts of births, deaths, and marriages were recorded. For people who weren't included in other recordkeeping activities, like slaves and some immigrants, it was a way to trace the history of their families.
2. [Birth Certificates](#) – Usually parents keep these in their possession until their children grow up. Then they pass them on to their children in the event of death. Someone in your family could have a treasure trove of records just waiting for your eyes. All births are submitted for public recording. You can always contact the local hall of records in your city or the state's records to find a birth certificate and purchase a copy. Birth records before 1910 didn't always contain the child's name but only the name of the parent's. You can use them to trace the family surname if not a specific individual.
3. [Death certificates](#) – When a person dies, a death certificate is kept on file. A death certificate can be used as proof to stop certain payments and services once the person is deceased. Death records after 1910 contain a lot of pertinent information not the least of which is the deceased person's name. You can find out their family's name, where they died, the cause of death, the deceased person's occupation, and much more. Before 1910 the records weren't as thorough and usually contained merely the name of the deceased and their cause of death.
4. [Marriage certificates](#) – Each person that gets married files for a marriage license with their local court system. There is a lot of important information that is noted on these marriage licenses. You can find out the maiden name of the bride, the name of both the groom and bride's parents, the wedding witnesses (when

applicable – some states do not require these anymore), and of course the date of the nuptials. Just like other vital records, before 1910 there was no mandatory recording of certain information so a lot of what you might be looking for may be missing. You can find out the names of the wedding couple and who performed the ceremony.

[Vital records](#) are powerful tools to use in your search for the origins of your family. Check with family members to see if they are in possession of any of these vital records before trying to look them up in the hall of records.

Tracing Immigrant Ancestors in your Family.

In America, all of our families started somewhere else, unless you are Native American. We can trace our family back through the generations and possibly find when they entered this country, but what about before that? Can you discover what your family was like in another country?

It is not easy to trace immigrant ancestors back to the country of their birth, but it can be done with patience and a bit of legwork. First, utilize all of the information that you can get from sources in the country you live in. Use vital records, family recollections, any documents you can dig up, church records, and stories people tell about events surrounding family members.

Once you have exhausted all of these resources, you can be reasonably assured you will have a surname that can be traced back further. Don't forget to consider alternate spellings of the name in older records as many name spellings changed especially if the family was moving from one country to another. Once you have this critical piece of information, now it's time to dig deeper.

Beginning in the 1820s, the United States decided to keep records of immigrants coming into this country. If your relative arrived in the United States after 1820 but before 1900, their names should be included on passenger lists that ship captains were required to have filled out. The main reason for the lists was to keep track of the number of immigrants flooding the shores of the still newly declared country but it still is a viable record that you can view for possible clues to your families past. These records are now translated and kept in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

The records kept had to be quite thorough. They included information that you would find useful in your search for your family ancestry: name, country of origin, age, destination in the New World, and sex were supposed to be collected. Researchers can use Ellis Island as another resource. The passenger lists created on board the ships were used to verify the immigrants wanting to enter this country.

This information could lead you to the country where the next leg of your research will begin. Before approaching foreign databases, use a database online to see if there was any other information that you couldn't find on your own. Many of these databases could find out the town - not just the country - of origin for your ancestors. Google has other international versions of their search engine so you can search a specific country's records with a familiar search engine.

Have you gone as far as you can in this country with your ancestral search? Use that information to find records of your ancestors in foreign countries and possibly even living relatives you'd have never known about otherwise.

Online Resources to Help You Trace Your Family Tree.

You don't have to go it alone when it comes to finding your ancestors. Fleshing out your family tree is not the easiest thing in the world. If you have a computer and access to the Internet, there are a number of resources that can help you find information about your relatives. Here are six of the most common online resources you can use to help fill in the blanks of your family history.

1. Online genealogy websites – If you have some information or very little but don't know where to go from there; you can consult with websites that specialize in hunting down family origins. Sites like www.genealogy.com, www.familysearch.org, www.ancestry.com, and www.genealogy.org can help with the search. Some charge a fee for their services. There are also free sites on the Internet to check into: Genealogy.GovGenealogySearch.com and FamilyTrackers.com offer tools to help you translate records and search through thousands of records to find exactly what you are looking for.
2. Government records – Census records can definitely be of use in tracking down your family's history. They are taken every ten years and detail head of household, number of members in a family, and locations where people lived within a city, town, or state. Early records in the mid to late 1800s have issues with categorization, but once you know the system you can figure it out. For those looking for relatives originally from other countries, many immigration records are stored in the National Archives and can be accessed.
3. Online library databases – The Library of Congress and the Family Library in Utah contain thousands of indexed records on family names and other records that can prove useful in a genealogy search. Access to these databases can be purchased on a monthly or yearly basis for the ones that do not offer free access.

4. Foreign websites – Some surnames have a specific country of origin like McCloud or Moscovitz. Using one of the archives for a foreign country can set you on the path of immigrant ancestors before they came to this country.
5. Research information – Sites like www.RootsWeb.com offer informative articles that detail how to get started and what information to check out when researching your family history. Many of us don't know how to turn our accumulated records and jottings into anything coherent so these types of tutorials can be extremely helpful.
6. Hire professionals – You can even hire someone who has more experience with finding out obscure family facts than you do. At a site like ProGenealogists.com you can employ a genealogist to turn your information into a family history you can share with others.

Are you interested in tracing your family tree? Going to the Internet is faster than driving to the library or calling places on the phone. Use the Internet to quicken your search for vital family information.

Using Genealogy Websites to Find your Family History.

If you type “genealogy” in the search box for any search engine, at least half or more of the results will name websites that can help with putting together your family tree. Are these websites helpful or just out for your money? Let’s shed some light on the subject to find out.

Before you use any website to aid in your family record search, it is a good idea to see what you can dig up on your own. You’d be surprised at what types of records people keep for sentimental reasons. Old birth and death certificates, pictures of deceased people, Bible records, church records, and personal recollections all get you one step closer to filling out your family tree.

Determine how far back you want to go. Ideally we’d like to go back until caveman days but that won’t be possible when you consider civilizations that didn’t keep records or whose records have been lost. The decision of how far back to go with your family tree is up to you. If you think you can find more information using online databases, give it a try, but know what you are getting into.

Start with free genealogy websites. Just because it doesn’t have a cost doesn’t mean that the information is limited. One website to check is www.FamilySearch.com. This website is run by the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. It is a free searchable site that contains the International Genealogy Index (IGI) also created by the Mormons. The index contains thousands of names with birth and death dates as far back as 1500.

Another free site is U.S. GenWeb. The website is www.USGenWeb.com. The site is organized by state and contains information for almost every county including marriage, birth, and death information. If you know the state where a relative was born or lived, you have a better chance of pinpointing a county with this database.

Genealogy.com will help you to further your search with resources that include other more extensive databases. They use software to help you generate a family tree which you can easily share with others. People tracking immigrant ancestors can access

passenger manifests when you sign up for the gold subscription. The prices are high but whether it's worth it or not depends on what exactly you are looking for.

[Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is a genealogy website that you hear advertised a lot. You can get some information for free but you'll need to subscribe to get access to their databases that highlight the United States and England.

You can decide if you need to pay for genealogy information or if you can find what you need without paying subscription fees. Either way, there are numerous websites to fit your needs.

What is the International Genealogical Index?

Wouldn't it be nice to have many genealogical records all grouped together in one place for easy viewing? The [International Genealogical Index](#) brings you something that comes close. The IGI may assist you with finding an ancestor if you hit a brick wall with your other searches.

The International Genealogical Index or IGI is a compilation of names, dates, and events from a variety of sources that have been gathered together into one single database. This database was developed and maintained by the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. The main function of the database was to keep a log of all church members to administer temple ordinances, a tradition in the Mormon Church. Certain rites were performed for dead relatives and then recorded in these records.

The database now has listings for many individuals who lived and/or died between the years of 1500 and 1900 and lived in the United States, Canada, and Europe. That covers a large area and time frame and is a great help to those trying to locate information on ancestors who lived in any of those three places. If you use FamilySearch.com, you have access to the IGI since the Mormon Church runs this database. For the index, you need to know at least the first and/or last name of the ancestor and the country where they lived.

Since the database was set up for church members, there are references to rites if they were administered. People named in the index also have other interesting information listed like when they were married, how many children they had, and where they lived. The index also names the sources of the information so that you can further dig into the entries and possibly find out even more information on your own.

Early information in the IGI was mostly church members whose names were volunteered by their families. If you know your family's church affiliation was Mormon, it should not be a problem to locate their names if they are there. Around the time the database was set up in 1969, the Mormon Church were searching for and pulling names from church records in European countries. Every entry has a batch number that includes a letter and two numbers that refer to the year the information was received.

There is no guarantee that you will find a reference to a relative in the IGI but it is definitely worth a look. Some entries have the same name and you'll need to follow up on both to see if either will pan out to be the specific person you are searching for. Sometimes it takes a bit of sleuthing to figure out your family history, but it can be so much fun and is absolutely well worth the work in the end.

How to Use Census Records

Remember when census takers used to come to your door and ask questions or send you a questionnaire to fill out? Census records are used by the U.S. government for many things such as allotting federal funds, but did you also know you can use those same records to track down your ancestors?

[Census records](#) can provide a lot of information to get you started on your ancestor hunt. You can learn names, birth dates, residences, marital status, and much more from old census records. Knowing the name of a town can lead to other records such as old newspaper editions, books that chronicle the history of that particular region, or famous people from that area. If you hit a dead end with the surname on the page, you can also investigate the neighboring people for clues about your family.

Census records were not always easy to follow when it came to looking up information. The filing system was complicated at best during different periods in history and unless you know the system, you could look through hundreds of pages and still be lost. To begin, census records can be located in several places: The Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah or one of its branches, the National Archives, the Census online, or you can get copies mailed to your own house.

[Census records](#) were categorized in several ways. Some states used the head of household to file the records. In the 1800s, records were filed using the Soundex or the Miracode format. Both coding systems are similar but the Soundex was used the most. Earlier records are filed and recorded on AIS microfiche.

The Soundex system is just like it sounds. Sounds were used to group names together and not alphabetical order. Here's an example. If two names sounded alike such as Sell and Sellers, they were grouped together, as possibly were names like Peel and Peale. The point of the Soundex system was to make it easier for people to search for information based on the fact they knew what a name sounded like, but not necessarily the correct spelling. People would no longer furiously search for names in the wrong places.

When you find the reference to a name spelled like your ancestor's name, write down all of the information that you see. On each page is a page number and a number that identifies the district or town where the census was taken, called the enumeration district number. The consonants in each name are then coded using a number system. The resulting code leads you to the card for that family's information within the state where the census originated.

Searching [old census records](#) can be time consuming and complicated in the beginning but the information there could be of use. Once you learn the system you will have an easier time sifting through the data.

Crafting a Family Tree

Many times it starts as a class project. Everyone has had to create a family tree at some point in their life. But, how about creating one to display in your home for family members to see? Here are some ways to craft a family tree that will get noticed by all who enter your home's doors.

1. Don't get too attached to the first copy. As you discover more about your family members, the family tree will change. You can begin with a sizable poster board, but will inevitably have to add to it as more family members are discovered.
2. Write in pencil. Until you have everyone you can possibly find a pencil makes the family tree easier to read and make changes. You'll end up with more legible writing that way.
3. Choose the base of your family tree. Some people do use a tree that has many branches fanning out but you don't have to use a tree. Start with a circle and your family name in the center in bold capital letters. You can use a tree but start low with the branches so there is room to add more. Older family members are recorded first. You can start at either the top or the bottom depending on how your family tree is laid out.
4. Start with what you know. To stay organized, in each space put a title such as parent, grandparent, sibling, that will be replaced with a name once you learn it. Put in your name, your parent's names, and the names of all the people you know in the appropriate spot. Filling in the names may jog your relative's memories to think of more names when they look at it.
5. Don't forget the dates. Each person has a birth and death date (if applicable). To keep everything in chronological order the dates of birth are important.
6. Choose a final format for the family tree. Some people hang their family trees like a large tapestry and stencil the tree design on with name plates on each branch to represent the family members. A laminated poster is also nice but you won't be able to make changes if you need to add someone later. You can carry the

family tree around to family reunions so everyone gets a chance to see it and hopefully add any missing information you aren't aware of.

Are you looking for something to do for your family or even something you can all do together? Craft a family tree as a living testament that you can share with loved ones for generations to come.

Family Tree Maker Software

When creating your family tree, it can sometimes be difficult to keep all of the information you find neat and organized. Often times you are flooded with information from several different sources and after all of the work you are putting into it, you want to make sure that everything stays together and accurate. Some people turn to the help of a computer software that they can load onto their computer for assistance.

When considering purchasing software to create your family tree, you want to invest in the product that is going to give you the most for your money. Probably the most popular software on the market for creating your family tree is the Family Tree Maker from Ancestry.com. There are several great features that are available with this software. This software allows you to upload your own videos, audio clips and pictures. You can also create a timeline, reports, charts and, of course, family trees to keep your information organized. Plus, you can easily add information that you find from other sites into this program that is able to store it for you. Plus, since it is from Ancestry.com, you can easily use the two together. You can also easily search the internet and connect to other genealogy sites like Rootsweb in order to collect and save vital information. Another great feature with the Family Tree Maker software is that you are able to print out keepsakes by using the Ancestry.com's online printing service. You are able to print out family history books or posters of the family tree you create. With this software you can also add specific information for one person at a time. You can then build on the person's history by added their parents, their siblings, their spouse, and their children. You can also add important dates to the person's profile like when they where born and what year they died. Or you can add information like where they lived. Once this data is entered Family Tree Maker software will show you on a map where that place is. Another great option is that this software allows you to publish your family tree online for other members of you family to view. Being able to share what you have put together is one of the most rewarding parts of creating a family tree. Of course with all of these wonderful features comes a price. The software is not too expensive but you might be interested in finding a free software for your computer that will do almost the same things.

[My Heritage.com](http://MyHeritage.com) offers a free download of a family tree software called Family Tree Builder. It is available at this website <http://www.myheritage.com/family-tree-builder>. Of

course you are not going to get all of the extended options like you would on a software that you have to pay for but the options it does offer is worth it for something that is free. This software allows you to do the basics like upload pictures and documents just like with Family Tree Maker. And with Family Tree Builder you can publish your family tree on the internet for your friends and family members to view. But with the Family Tree Builder software you can tag the people you recognize in a photograph and makes that information readily available.

Create a Scrapbook of Family Memories

Scrapbooking is a popular pastime. Using stickers, pictures, and other cute items, you can turn your scattered family memories into an organized history to share with others. Here are some tips for creating a family history scrapbook.

1. Gather your information. Call your relatives and see if they have pictures or family heirlooms they wouldn't mind you including in a pictorial history of your family. Pictures should include names, places, and dates on the back if they are known. Other information that has been collected over the years like newspaper clippings, flyers, and announcements are also great for scrapbooks. Leave no stone unturned.
2. Ask family members for their participation. Each family member who will be included in the scrapbook, needs something that identifies to them. Use pictures, ribbons, and certificates.
3. Give each family member a questionnaire. You can ask for things like your favourite childhood memory, names of as many relatives as you can think of, description of where you grew up, and other questions that yield valuable information. Create a miniature copy of the questionnaire and answers to add to the scrapbook.
4. Create a scrapbook page for each person. To give a good idea of who each person is, give them their own page in your book. Paste as many of the items that they give you on the page in whatever pattern you choose. For scrapbooks that already have pages, add embellishments to fit in with the items.
5. Crop your photos. To fit as many pictures on the page as you can, cut them into interesting shapes. If you need to, record the names of the people in the photos beside it in one of those cute bubbles they use in comic strips when people are speaking.

6. Have more than one scrapbook. With all of the embellishments and photos your scrapbook won't hold too many pages. You may have to create separate volumes just to give the entire family a page.
7. Create a collage page. Take one picture of each person and cut it down to the head. Combine the pictures on the page with numbers on each one. Create an answer key so that family members who look at it and try to guess the names can check their answers. It puts a fun ending on the family scrapbook. Try using a mix of baby pictures, childhood pictures, and adult pictures to challenge everyone.

Take your photos and other family heirlooms out of the boxes and mothballs and put them together in a pictorial of your family. Older and younger generations are brought together when they study their heritage.