



NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

A National Center for Family & Local History

Frequently Asked Questions for Beginning Genealogists

The following questions and answers were compiled for Genealogy Outreach, a project initiated by the New England Historic Genealogical Society with shared funding through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Genealogy Outreach: A Partnership Between Libraries and NEHGS was designed to help librarians serve their genealogical patrons more effectively. These questions resulted from input provided by the staff at NEHGS as well as front-line librarians around the country. We hope you find them useful in helping you get started.



QUESTIONS

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ANSWERS

1. Where do I start?

Start with yourself and work backward, one generation at a time. Write down as many facts and interesting items you can think of about yourself. If married, include your spouse and information about him/her. Remember to list siblings, parents, children, and cousins. You will then need to find tangible or recorded evidence for each event or fact.

Some people like to collect as many names as possible, supported by standard facts like dates, placenames, and relationships. Others prefer to concentrate on particular family groups or surnames and spend time researching the history, heritage, and unique qualities of a particular group of ancestors. It is up to you to decide the course that interests you most. Keep in mind that in the future, if you decide to publish a history of your family, you will need to meet strict standards of evidence and research. Until then, it is best to follow your curiosity, enjoy the hunt, and track your findings as precisely as possible.

Over time, you will assemble a number of records about your ancestors. From that collected evidence, you will try to construct an understanding of them. It's like a game of connect-the-dots where you learn the full story of a person's life through records, artifacts, and the time period in which he lived. When you connect the dots, you'll see the person.

Every fact must be supported by documentation such as certificates for vital events (birth, baptism, marriage, death, burial), newspaper notices, references in compiled genealogies, and government records (naturalization, census, military records).

2. How do I prepare for a library visit?

It is always a good idea to call ahead to the library you wish to visit so that you are aware of any special policies and to learn if what you are looking for will be in its collection. This will ensure that you can make the best use of your time while you are there. Beyond the basics, such as finding out where to park and what the hours are, you might want to ask if the library has any rules about what you can bring into its reference areas. Many will not allow you to bring pens or briefcases into their genealogy and local history rooms. Be sure to bring change for photocopyers.

Try to gather some basic information about your family before you go to the library. The more you know in advance, the more flexible you can be with your research time while you are there. Nothing can be more frustrating than not finding the record you are hoping to find and being unprepared to spend time on an alternative piece of your family puzzle. The more data you know and have with you – surnames, dates, and placenames – the more likely it will be that you can spend your time resourcefully.

Be brief with your requests for assistance. Remember that librarians have already heard a lot of genealogy stories and might not be interested in every particular detail of yours. They are not there to do your research for you, but to help you find the resources that will be most useful to your research.

Finally, plan to familiarize yourself with the mechanics of the research process at any library – copying, microfilm use, computer use – before you begin your work. Most libraries have catalogs online, thus allowing you to make a list of sources in advance that you can reference when you get there. They may have additional catalogs available onsite, so be sure to check once you arrive. Doing your homework up front will save you time and money as well as establish a good interactive relationship between you and the library staff.

3. What does your library have that will help me with my genealogy?

Genealogical collections vary greatly from library to library. There is no standard format describing the resources in different repositories. Collections usually include books, periodicals, vertical files, microfilm, newspapers, maps, as well as information about local topics and history that may be available nowhere else. Most libraries have connections to the Internet, and there is often a list of pertinent Internet sites next to the computer. They often have subscriptions

to websites like *Ancestry.com*, *HeritageQuest Online*, and *NewEnglandAncestors.org*, all of which have very useful content and images for your research, including vital records, census images, pension files, newspaper abstracts, and more.

In addition to materials specific to genealogy, you will also want to look for books or periodicals addressing topics relating to genealogy, such as county and regional information, migration, heraldry, church history, military history, and cemetery information.

If you learn of books that are unavailable at your library, ask your librarian if he or she can locate books and periodicals via interlibrary loan, through a library specializing in genealogy, or through a genealogical society. Many regional and national societies lend books to members through the mail. Genealogical societies are discussed further in Question 7.

4. Can you recommend a book for beginners?

There are many good books for beginners, including:

- *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy* by Christine Rose and Kay Germain Ingalls, New York: Alpha Books, 1997.
- *How to Climb Your Family Tree: Genealogy for Beginners* by Harriet Stryker-Rodda, Baltimore: GPC, 1995.
- *Organizing Your Family History Search: Efficient & Effective Ways to Gather and Protect Your Genealogical Research* by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1999.
- *Shaking Your Family Tree: A Basic Guide to Tracing Your Family's Genealogy*, 2nd edition by Ralph J. Crandall, Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2001.
- *The Unpuzzling Your Past Workbook: Essential Forms and Letters for All Genealogists* by Emily Anne Croom, Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1996.
- *Unpuzzling Your Past: A Basic Guide to Genealogy* by Emily Anne Croom, Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1995.

Such books will discuss beginning and more advanced topics in greater detail than we can cover in these brief FAQ pages. You will also find more in-depth coverage of topics you may be interested in like court records, ethnic research, military records, and land deeds.

Ask your librarian for a bibliography of other titles that may be useful to your research. Whether you are new to genealogy or have some experience, if you have not yet read one of these informative books please consider doing so before you reinvent the wheel. At least familiarize yourself with the topics covered so that you can reference the book for answers when you have questions. Through them you can quickly learn the basics of genealogical record keeping, source verification, and where to find the records you seek.

5. Do you have a book about my family?

One of the most common mistakes made by people new to genealogy is to look for and rely on a published compiled genealogy of their family. While many such genealogies are excellent, others can be misleading and factually incorrect. If you find a book with the surname you are researching, use it for clues to lead you to other sources for accurate facts. If it includes proper citations, it is still a good idea to double check the original source.

You will also discover there is information about certain families within compiled genealogies of a surname other than the ones you are researching. For instance, a published genealogy of the Richardson family will have information about the Fletcher and Wyman families, as well, because there were many marriages between the families in the communities in which they lived in early New England. When you do a catalog search for a surname, be sure to look at every book listed as they may contain information about your family found nowhere else.

If you would like to find a book about someone with your surname, you have a variety of options to choose from including catalogs at your library and at several genealogical libraries around the country (usually available online), as well as through the Library of Congress website at <http://loc.gov>. You may also want to look in *Genealogies in the*

Library of Congress by Marion J. Kaminkow, *Genealogies in Print*, and in genealogical magazines under queries. Many genealogies have been digitized and are available online or on CD-ROM. Photoduplicated reprints of thousands of published genealogies may be purchased from NEHGS through its *Special Orders Catalog*, or via its online bookstore at www.NewEnglandAncestors.org/store.

6. Will I need special forms?

Genealogists use many special forms – pedigree charts, family group sheets, research logs, census forms, correspondence logs, and others. Although, it is possible to do your research without these forms, they are very useful for maintaining and organizing your data.

Charts and forms can be purchased from genealogical and historical societies as well as from companies specializing in genealogy. Most how-to books have a few basic forms that you can photocopy. One of the most complete sources is *The Unpuzzling Your Past Workbook: Essential Forms and Letters for All Genealogists* by Emily Anne Croom.

If you are ready to invest in genealogical software, you will find it easy to create forms of your own, either blank or already completed with family names and information you have entered into the database.

Some forms can be downloaded off the Internet. You may want to try the following URLs:

- www.familysearch.org
- www.notablekin.org
- www.ancestry.com/save/charts/ancchart.htm
- www.familytreemagazine.com/forms/download.html

7. Can you direct me to a genealogical society or family association?

Joining a genealogical society will give you a great boost toward enhancing your understanding of genealogy as a whole and your own family lines in particular. It is often a good idea to join a local society in an area where your family has a history. Newsletters, research assistance, and contact information are a few of the benefits.

The *Directory of Family Associations* or *The Genealogist's Address Book*, both by Elizabeth Petty Bentley, are good sources to check first. The latter is also now available on CD-ROM. You will find many societies listed on Rootsweb (www.rootsweb.org) and in the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) Directory or on its website (www.fgs.org).

Family associations come in many sizes and offer varying degrees of assistance. Most publish a newsletter and many can be found on the Internet. Use your browser to search on the surname you are most interested in or check links from Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com) or Rootsweb.

8. Where do I find vital records?

Vital records are maintained by various government agencies. Some records are kept in state archives, some in county or municipal clerk's offices. In general, birth, marriage and death records are found in the state, county or town where the event took place, but it varies depending upon the time period and the state. The process for requesting these records is different from one place to the next, so it is important to contact the office directly for specific instructions.

The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking; *The Genealogist's Address Book* or *The County Courthouse Book*, both by Elizabeth Petty Bentley; and *Courthouse Research for Family Historians: Your Guide to Genealogical Treasure* by Christine Rose will help you locate names and addresses of the best places to write for information. *Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources* by Alice Eichholz also outlines when records were first recorded in a particular location, what level of government maintains them, and where you can find them today.

You can often learn more about obtaining vital records by visiting state websites and finding a link for information pertaining to government records. State sites are accessed via *www.state.**.us*. Simply insert the two-letter postal abbreviation of the state you want information from in place of the **. An additional source for up-to-date information about more recent vital records is *www.vitalrec.com*. Several subscription websites like *Ancestry.com* and *NewEnglandAncestors.org*, and some state library websites also have vital records available online.

In addition to vital records, you will also want to learn more about church, court, cemetery, military, and land records, among others. For whatever life experience you want to document, it is very likely there is an official record of it somewhere.

9. Do you have census records?

Different libraries have different collections of census records. The U.S. Federal Census has been taken every ten years since 1790. The most recently available is 1930. The best places to locate census records are the regional branches of the National Archives and Records Administration (*www.nara.gov*), your local Family History Center (*www.familysearch.org*), and in many larger public and university libraries. *HeritageQuest Online* and *Ancestry.com* have online census records, including digital images. *FamilySearch.org* has a free online database of every name and household from the 1880 census.

The information in a given census changes in two ways. First, the census information is grouped into schedules, the best known of which are the population schedules which list the residents of a household and/or the head of household. The schedules vary from one census to another. For example, enumerators no longer compile mortality schedules which recorded information about anyone who died the year before the census was taken.

Second, the content of a given schedule varies from one census to another. On the population schedule, the only person listed prior to 1850 was the head of household. From 1850 to present, everyone residing in one dwelling is listed with varying amounts of information including age, employment, birthplace, and more. Sometimes immigration data and value of assets are included.

To protect the privacy of living individuals, census records are not available to the public for 72 years. Therefore, all censuses prior to and including 1930 are available, except for large portions of 1890 which was mostly destroyed by fire in 1921. The 1940 census will be made public in 2012.

It is important to use census indexes when they are available. It is also important to know their limitations as some were done hastily and may have omissions, while others covered only certain populations or localities. Indexes are available in books, on CD-ROM, and microfilm.

10. How do I locate passenger lists?

Some ships passenger lists can be found on the Internet. Your browser can search for them or you can start with a link from a site like Cyndi's List. Two books by P. William Filby and Mary Keysor Meyer are also helpful: *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records* and *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records, Supplement Annual*.

Larger libraries, genealogical societies, the National Archives, and the Family History Center in Salt Lake City will have certain passenger lists on microfilm. They can also be found on CD-ROM. Some are indexed. Once you discover the name of one of your ancestors on a passenger list, you will find a wealth of useful information, often including the person's age, where he/she came from, port of departure, when the ship arrived at its destination, and relationships of those traveling together.

Passenger arrival records for Ellis Island are available online at *www.ellisland.org*, and for Castle Garden at *www.castlegarden.org*.

11. Where do I find information on immigration and naturalization?

Many people believe their immigrant ancestors were naturalized automatically after their arrival in the United States. However, in order to become a naturalized citizen, an immigrant had to petition for a naturalization certificate and meet the criteria of the period. Therefore, it is a good idea for you to familiarize yourself with which laws were in place at the time of your ancestor's arrival.

Aliens could be naturalized at any court of record (including police precincts) before 1906, but today all naturalizations go through the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States Government (INS). Therefore, records after 1906 must be obtained from the INS, while records prior to 1906 will be found in the appropriate state, local or county court. It is prudent to check the local courts in the area where your ancestors lived to get copies of their records. Some early naturalization records were indexed by WPA projects in the 1930s and 1940s and microfilmed. They are available at regional branches of the National Archives and through the Family History Library. Although good indexes exist for some regions, others cover selected courts or were never completed by the WPA. It helps to understand the limitations of the indexes you use to determine where else you may need to look.

Not every immigrant wished to be naturalized, so there is no guarantee that there will be a record for your ancestor. However, even if your ancestor never became a naturalized citizen, he or she may have filed papers to start the process. It is important to check for that possibility. Most naturalization records will include descriptive information about the applicant, where and when the person was born, when he immigrated to the U.S. and on what vessel, names of spouse and children, occupation and much more. However, the farther back in time you go, the less likely there will be significant details available on the records. For more information, see the "Immigration: Finding Immigration Origins" chapter of *The Source*, or *They Became Americans* by Loretto Dennis Szucs.

12. How do I do research at a distance?

There are very few people who live in the same location as all their ancestors did. It is therefore an essential part of genealogical research to learn of ways to obtain records from distant places. There are primarily three options short of purchasing a plane ticket and traveling there yourself.

The first is correspondence. Write, email, or call a repository about the research services it offers. Information will usually be sent to you for a reasonable fee. Smaller organizations tend to have good turn-around times, but some state agencies and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. may take as little as three months or as long as a year to return records to you. Most historical and genealogical societies have research services of some kind, but many courthouses and libraries do not, in which case you will want to hire a researcher to obtain documents for you.

If you choose to hire a researcher, start with a small request to see if he or she is a good match for your needs. Most libraries and historical societies will provide you with a list of researchers in the area that do client work by the hour (usually \$20-50, depending upon location and expertise). The New England Historic Genealogical Society offers research services for a fee to members and non-members. Information and prices are available at www.NewEnglandAncestors.org/research. The Association of Professional Genealogists lists a directory of genealogists who do client work on its website at www.apgen.org. Many popular genealogy magazines such as *Everton's Genealogical Helper* and *Heritage Quest* have researcher lists or advertisements. Keep in mind, however, that you may need to hire a genealogist for several hours in order for her to complete the research you need. Most research projects cannot be accomplished in only one or two hours.

The third option is to access data through the microfilmed records of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. The Mormons have microfilmed records from all over the world that are useful to genealogists. Their vast collection of microfilm, which is best for the U.S. and Europe, but includes other countries as well, can be ordered and used at Family History Centers worldwide. Visit www.familysearch.org for the online catalog and to find a center near you.

13. What is available on the Internet?

The quality of information on the Internet varies widely, but there is a greater amount of it than can be found in books and periodicals. Because there are so many sites, and because they change daily, it is impossible to identify all of the content with a short answer. A quick overview of some places a beginner might visit include:

- Cyndi's List: Cyndi Howells' popular site contains over 243,000 links and is growing daily. She has organized it into categories to make it easier for genealogists to locate information. Categories are arranged by topic, geographical location, society, and surname. You will also discover many useful tips on this site to help you with your research. <www.cyndislist.com>

- Family Search: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon church, maintains a site that includes links to many other sites, but it is best known for its access to the Ancestral File, the IGI, its extensive catalog, U.S., British, and Canadian census collections, and much more. <www.familysearch.org>

- Ancestry, Inc.: A commercial firm with many databases of genealogical information. Some are free to the public, others only to subscribers. <www.ancestry.com>

- Rootsweb: Another commercial entity offering web services to users who contribute free information about census and cemetery information, as well as research tips and other useful information. <www.rootsweb.org>

- USGenWeb: A site maintained by a group of volunteers working together to provide Internet websites for genealogical research in every county and every state of the United States. This Project is non-commercial and fully committed to free access for everyone. <www.usgenweb.org>

Many genealogical societies have websites with content that will add to your knowledge of genealogy and help you with your own research. On these sites you will find query sections, events listings to help you locate a conference or seminar near you, library catalog collections, and even scholarly articles addressing topics of general and specialized areas of research.

14. Can you give me some useful tips for successful genealogical research?

Here are a few tips to help you begin your adventure into researching your family history:

- Educate yourself.

One of the most important things is to learn as much about genealogy as possible by reading the genealogical literature, joining a genealogical or historical society and attending related conferences, seminars, or workshops. Popular genealogical magazines like *Heritage Quest*, *New England Ancestors*, *Ancestry*, and *Family Chronicle* will introduce you to topics to help your research.

Look to historical and genealogical societies to acquaint yourself with more in-depth scholarly periodicals. Seek out scholarly journals with a national scope like *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, *The American Genealogist (TAG)*, and the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*. You'll also benefit enormously from numerous membership privileges provided by societies. Your library and local historical society may offer workshops for beginners. If they don't, suggest that they do. It's a wonderful way to meet others with the same interests.

Don't simply focus on the people you are researching. Learn as much as you can about a place and time period for unique insights on how your ancestors lived their lives and why they made some of the decisions they made. Of course, practice is the best way to hone your skills. The more you work on your genealogy and interact with others in the field, the more proficient you will become.

- Talk to your family.

Tell everyone in your family that you are interested in tracing your roots. Many will be puzzled with your obsession, but you could be surprised at the support and understanding you receive. If you cast your net widely enough, to distant cousins and old family friends, you may find artifacts and early genealogical charts to add to your cache of family records. Be sure to interview older family members to learn their stories and write them down for future generations.

Remember to save some memories of your own. Sometimes genealogists spend so much time working on the lives of their ancestors they neglect their own historical importance. Your great-great grandchildren are going to be

interested in your life, too, and will be excited to find your letters and photos when they become interested in their heritage.

- Remember the neighbors.

The more you learn about the families connected to your family – cousins, neighbors, friends – the more you'll understand how your ancestors lived their lives. Think of what your life would be like without the many influences of your neighbors and friends. Your ancestors were also part of a community. Studying those relationships will help you understand their lives and bring you to solutions you may not have found otherwise.

- Ask questions.

Don't just ask others, but question yourself and your findings constantly. The six classic question words: who, when, where, what, why, and how should be used over and over when you are trying to solve your genealogical puzzle. Who, when and where are often the easiest. What, why, and how are more difficult. They will help you fill in a complete picture of the person you are researching.

For example, asking yourself, "Who was my great-great grandmother" may seem easy if you know her name. But what else do you really know about her? Did she have a nickname? How many children did she have? Why did she move from Tennessee to Texas? When did she marry? Where was she during the Civil War? What did she do to support her family after her husband died? For every individual, there is a story that can only be created by asking questions.

- Join a society or family association.

The benefits are numerous when you join either a local historical society or a national genealogical society. For example, membership in the New England Historic Genealogical Society provides you with access to a research library, online databases, book sales, research services, educational programs, and much more. You can learn more on its website at www.NewEnglandAncestors.org.

Joining a family association is a great way to meet distant cousins and learn more about your earliest forebears. You can often find family associations via the Internet by doing a search on a surname, or visit Rootsweb or Cyndi's List for a link.

- Fill in the blanks.

Many beginning genealogists can be overwhelmed by the number of blanks they need to fill in on a pedigree chart. View a blank as a challenge, not an annoyance. But don't just fill in what you think is right. If you are unsure, make a note and work at checking it out. You will always have blanks. However, just because you filled in all the spaces on a pedigree chart doesn't mean you're done. In fact, when you think of all the men and women who contributed to your being alive today, you'll realize that there will always be a new puzzle to solve. And that's half the fun.

- Organize your work.

As with anything, you need to establish objectives. Define what you want to learn and go after it in a systematic way. Record every step so you'll remember what you did and did not do. Forms and charts are helpful for this.

If you own a computer, genealogical software is a great way to keep your records in order. Figure out what you want the software to do for you, read reviews by users of the software, and make your decision based on what will best fit your needs. Programs can be similar in many ways but some have features you will find more useful than others.

- Cite your sources.

It is important to record the source of every bit of information you use, or don't use. Even negative information can keep you from going back over ground you've already covered.

If you do not feel that it is important to document your sources, please remember that you are not doing all this work for yourself alone. Your descendants and others reading your records are going to appreciate knowing that you found the right records and may even want to locate the same records themselves at some point.

- Pace yourself.

Genealogy is like detective work. It can not be done quickly. Be patient with yourself and others. For every frustration there are many rewards. Take your time and enjoy the adventure.