

# FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH FOR DUMMIES

A Genealogy Primer Compiled by Ralph Tobias

## **I**ntroduction

Congratulations. You have been infected by the genealogy bug. But don't be alarmed; conducting family history research can be a life-long labor of love. The lives of your ancestors are intimately woven into the fabric of history. If you are just beginning to trace your family tree, you will soon discover that searching for ancestors involves more than just collecting names and dates. In the process you will learn a great deal about history, geography, ancestors, and even yourself. You will become a detective, historian, linguist, and snoop. You will learn the value of patience and perseverance. Welcome to the largest, most dedicated group of hobbyists in the world!

## **G**etting Started

- A. Begin with yourself and work backwards. You might even want to write a brief personal history!
- B. Gather together everything you already have – paper, photos, documents, family Bible, etc.
- C. Interview the living. Drain the brain of the oldest living relative you can find. When you're finished, talk with the friends. Ask for stories, not just names and dates! But beware of the infamous "family legend." Use a recording device.
- D. Find out what has already been done. Don't reinvent the wheel, but beware of unconfirmed information, too. Proper source information is very important.
- E. Choose which surname you want to work on first. Stay focused.
- F. Become familiar with the different types of forms you will use – family group sheets, pedigree charts, research logs, etc. Start filling them out right away.

## **P**rimaries Sources

### *Did you know...*

Primary sources are those sources of information based upon firsthand knowledge.  
Secondary sources are everything else.

- A. Vital Records – These are connected with central life events: birth, marriage, divorce, and death. Maintained by civil authorities, these public records are prime sources of genealogical information. These records are critically important in genealogy research, often supplying details on family members well back into the nineteenth century.

- a. Birth – These records *usually* contain the name, race and gender of the child; the date and place of birth; and the names of parents. These records *may* contain the father and mother’s age, race, occupation, and place of birth; the number of children in the family; and witnesses to the birth.
  - b. Marriage – In general, there are three primary types of civil marriage records: marriage license (usually contain the most information of genealogical value), marriage register (general information recorded after the ceremony by a clerk), and marriage certificate (issued by the person performing the ceremony). These records *usually* contain the full names of the bride and groom as well as the date and place of marriage. They *may* contain the ages and birth dates of the wedding couple; names and places of birth of their parents; places of residence; occupations; previous marriage information; and names of witnesses.
  - c. Divorce – These records contain information on family members, their marital history (including marriage date and place), their property, residences, and dates of other important events such as the children’s births. Divorce records are primary source records for the information on property, living children, age of husband and wife and date of divorce and secondary source records for information on the marriage, birth dates of children, etc.
  - d. Death – The validity of information on death certificates can be a bit tricky because information on the deceased individual (other than the time, date and place of death) is provided by someone who knew the deceased (an informant). Therefore, a death certificate is considered a secondary source for information such as the birthplace, birth date and parents’ names of the deceased. These records *usually* contain the name and date and place of death of the deceased. They *may* contain the age, exact time of death and cause of death as well as parental, spousal, burial and funeral information.
- B. Census Records – The best known public record is the federal census. This enumeration of state populations has been taken by the government every ten years since 1790. However, most of the 1890 census was unfortunately destroyed by fire and is not available. State census records are also available.
- a. While older census records provide little more than “head counts,” more recent census records are rich in important data like names, birth dates, and even the birthplace of parents!
  - b. Organized by state, county, township, and/or city.
  - c. These records are available at most LDS Family History Centers, online, and at the National Archives in Washington, DC.
  - d. A Soundex system of indexing was used for the 1880, 1900, 1910 (not all states), and 1920 censuses to help locate names with alternative spellings. The formula, which always consists of the first letter of the surname followed by three numbers, is as follows: (1) ignore the letters a, e, i, o, u, y, w and h; (2) count double letters only once; and (3) use “0” if you run out of letters. Number assignments are as follows: 1-b,p,f,v; 2-c,s,k,g,j,q,x,z; 3-d,t; 4-l; 5-m,n; 6-r. For example, the Soundex code for the name *Schmidt* would be S253.
  - e. Census records have several drawbacks including unreliable spellings (names were given orally to enumerators), missed persons and families, and the use of nicknames.

- C. Military Records – These may not provide the solution to every pedigree problem, but they can provide valuable clues.
- a. Pre-Revolutionary records are generally historical in nature and seldom contain specific individual genealogical information. Records created since the Revolution contain more information such as birth, marriage, death, parents, pension, and land.
  - b. Documents relating to a soldier, his widow, or children are on file in the National Archives in Washington, DC, and are available for a fee. You should request all information in the file including unselected material.
  - c. Available war records include Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Indian Wars, Mexican War, Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War
  - d. Some military records are only provided to close relatives upon application with sufficient information to locate the records such as name, service number, and branch of service.
- D. Church Records – Because civil records are not always available, church records can be vital in reconstructing your family tree. Many churches maintain excellent records. However, these records are of no value if you cannot find the ones that fit your specific problems.
- a. Clues to determining the church with which your ancestors were affiliated might come from many sources including their national origin, family tradition, a will, a deed, a tombstone, an obituary, a place of residence, or the family's present affiliation.
  - b. The records of many churches have been published, especially in genealogical and historical periodicals, and are thus available.
  - c. Many church records are now being microfilmed by the churches themselves and by other agencies. Historical societies often preserve microfilm copies as well as originals, and copies are frequently available for sale or for reading. The LDS Family History Library has microfilmed the records of many churches throughout the U.S. and you may find it worthwhile to check its holdings before making a lot of other searches.
  - d. Some significant information available from church records are birth, baptism, christening, marriage, death, and burial. In addition, valuable support data can often be obtained from published minutes of meetings.
  - e. Church records rank as the best available sources for information on birth, marriage and death for the periods before civil registration of vital statistics. They are also among the most under-used major records in American genealogy.
- E. Cemetery Records – Visiting the graveyards of ancestors can be fascinating, moving and informative. Never rely entirely on the information on a tombstone. The stone may have been added at a later date, and incorrect dates or spellings could be cut into the stone.
- a. Remember that the graves of family members are often grouped together. Go armed with details of the maiden names of women in your family tree and keep an eye open for any related headstones.

*Did you know...*

There is no complete and comprehensive guide to American church records.

- b. Ask to see any documentation kept by the church or cemetery (maybe a grave ownership or plot book, interment book or burial list). These can verify or add to the information on the headstone, or indeed the headstone may have crumbled or disappeared, but the record remains intact.
        - c. Often, old headstones are very difficult to read because of erosion. In these cases it can be helpful to photograph and or take a rubbing from the stone.
- F. Probate Records – These are all records relating to the disposition of an estate after the owner's death and include wills, letters of administration, petitions, inventories, and appraisals. These are found among county records and are usually indexed, with abstracts also being published.
- G. Land Records & Tax Assessment Rolls – For each family researcher there eventually comes a time when these records must be searched. Land records are usually indexed in county records by the names of both the buyer (grantee) and the seller (grantor). Tax assessment roles give useful information as to property held by ancestors.
  - a. Deed books are a wealth of information and can be used to distinguish one man from another by locating him on a particular piece of property. They will often show family relationships, in the instance of land being split between heirs. These records can also contain such items as "Power of Attorney", leases, partnership papers and performance bonds. However, the bulk of the records are transfers of real estate.
  - b. Land records are important sources of information because long ago land was inexpensive and readily available. They may provide clues when no other record exists for relationships, locations, names of spouses, married names of daughters, and heirs.
  - c. Tax rolls usually show names of property owners, legal description of real property (including land and improvements), classification of taxable personal property, assessed valuation of real property and taxable personal property, and taxes levied.
- H. Social Security Records – Since 1935, Americans have been eligible to receive benefits through the United States Social Security Administration. These records contain an impressive amount of information on the filer and his or her family.
  - a. The Social Security Death Index is computer file created by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is available on compact disc and on the FamilySearch Internet Genealogy Service. Most records start in 1962, but the file also contains a few records of deaths that occurred before that date.
- I. Immigration & Naturalization Records – These records detail how, when, and where individuals arrive in a new country. They also provide information on how and when
  - a. Information available from passenger lists (also called ship manifests) depends upon the time period of arrival. Lists between 1565-1819 usually provide little personal information. From 1820-1893 captains of ships were required by Congress to prepare lists of passengers that contained the name of ship, the name of master, the port left, the date and port of arrival, and the name, age, sex, occupation and nationality of each passenger. Information from 1895-1954 is available through the National Archives.

- b. Searching for an ancestor among passenger lists can be a long and tedious search unless you have some specific information such as port, date, or name of ship.
  - c. If you locate your ancestor, make a copy of the entire list since it may also include the names of relatives and friends who came from the same location and settled in the same area.
  - d. Naturalization is the process by which an alien (foreign-born resident) becomes a citizen of another country. Such papers can be an important source of information regarding the immigrant's place of origin, his or her original name, former residence, and date of arrival in the new country.
  - e. Naturalization records from county courts may still be at the county court, or in county or state archives, or at regional archives. Some of these records or indexes have been published.
  - f. As a general rule, the National Archives does not have naturalization records created in state or local courts. However, some county court naturalization records have been donated to the National Archives.
  - g. Not all of our immigrant ancestors became U.S. citizens. Some filed the first papers, but never completed the process. Before starting the search for naturalization records, you should trace your ancestors through the federal censuses. The 1920, 1910, 1900, and 1870 censuses all have columns pertaining to citizenship. While the information is not always 100 percent accurate, it does provide clues and should not be ignored.
  - h. There are three important time frames pertaining to American naturalization records: the Colonial Period (ancestors who arrived prior to the Revolutionary War); Revolutionary War to 1906 (before 1802, the records are limited in value and availability); and Post 1906 (all proceedings were required to be recorded by the clerk of the court and a copy sent to the INS).
- J. Manuscript Collections – The use of any manuscript collection as a genealogical resource is often appropriate, especially if the collection provides a significant association with a particular ancestor.

## **S**econdary Sources

- A. Atlases & Maps – Without knowing the jurisdiction under which a particular genealogical event was recorded (like a birth or marriage) it is often difficult to obtain information.
- a. Borders of jurisdiction (like county lines) frequently change as populations change or move. Becoming familiar with the proper borders at the time of the event you are researching can save time and eliminate frustration.
  - b. Gazetteers are helpful in isolating most of the jurisdictions that covered the city or village where ancestors lived.
- B. Newspapers & Obituaries – Articles and notices found in newspapers usually are published about the time of the event, making them a vital source for any family history researcher. However, errors can and often do occur, so information must be compared with other sources for accuracy. Information available from these sources includes birth,

marriage, death, burial, reunions, news items, business advertisements, and legal notices.

- a. The obituary is one of the most under-valued and overlooked piece of historical information. This is an excellent place to start when you have little more than a date to go on.
  - b. Marriage notices often provide information on names of parents and close relatives, residences, life events, and religious affiliations.
  - c. Family reunions and social events may give accounts of family gatherings, relatives visiting, or trips to visit relatives or for business.
- C. Local Histories – These are usually found in book form and are available through local historical and genealogical societies, libraries, or LDS Family History Libraries. Information is quite fascinating, but should be scrutinized for accuracy.
- D. City & County Directories – These records can help to identify the residences of ancestors, locate them on the census, estimate death dates, identify other relatives at the same address, and give occupational or professional information.
- E. Biographical Records – Everyone hopes to discover a famous twig on their family tree and this may be the way to find it. While not always accurate, these records give a rare glimpse into the lives of their subjects and should not be overlooked.

## **T**he Internet: An Incredible Resource

- A. Dedicated Websites – Numerous websites have cropped up that are dedicated to assisting individuals in their genealogical research. Some offer free information and services, while others charge various fees.
- a. [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) – This free site is maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is a premiere resource for any serious family history researcher. Through this powerful website you can access almost every bit of genealogical information in the church's possession including Ancestral File, International Genealogical Index (IGI), 1880 U.S. Census as well as 1881 British & Canadian Censuses, Vital Records Index for Mexico & Scandinavia, Social Security Index, Military Index (Korea & Vietnam only), and Vital Records Index. You can also share information with other users!
  - b. [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com) – An impressive free collection of over 264,000 links to virtually every genealogy-related website on the Internet. Constantly updated with new information as it becomes available.
  - c. [www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com) – This free site boasts an impressive list of genealogy databases as well as links to other researchers just like you!
  - d. [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) – While this site does offer free services, it is designed primarily as a for-profit venture.
  - e. [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com) – A subsidiary of A&E Television Networks, this free site is helpful but limited. A useful place to go if you are new to genealogy.

- f. [www.interment.net](http://www.interment.net) – Started in 1997, this unique, free site provides access to millions of burial records from over thousands of cemeteries around the world. Truly unique and worth investigating!
- g. [www.allvitalrecords.com](http://www.allvitalrecords.com) – This for-profit site purports to contain links to all vital records, but doesn't quite make it. Still, with access to over 6 billion names, it is an impressive attempt.
- h. [www.broadcasting.byu.edu/ancestors](http://www.broadcasting.byu.edu/ancestors) – This is a free companion website to the PBS family history and genealogy television series of the same name.
- i. [www.censusfinder.com](http://www.censusfinder.com) – Over 33,000 links to free census records and growing.

## **T**ips For Correspondence

- A. Be short, simple, direct and sincere; do not ramble.
- B. Limit request to 2 or 3 direct questions; don't ask for all the person's information.
- C. Always include a business size self addressed stamped envelope (S.A.S.E.).
- D. Write in a friendly letter, express thanks for any information.
- E. Ask about anyone else who might have some information.
- F. Offer to share information.
- G. Keep a copy of the letter that you send.

## **S**ecrets To Success

- A. LDS Family History Centers – You wouldn't believe the amount of information available from all over the world at your neighborhood LDS Family History Center! Most likely there is a center located within 35 miles of your home. All information and help from center volunteers is always free of charge; however, come prepared to pay a modest fee for all copies you make. Computer access available for genealogy research only.
- B. Recording Names – When recording your genealogical data on charts there are some important conventions that should be followed with regard to names, dates and places. By following these standard rules, you can help to ensure that your genealogy data is as complete as possible and that it will not be misinterpreted by others.
  - a. Record names in their natural order – first, middle, last (surname). Use full names if known. If the middle name is not known, you may use an initial. **Example:** Shawn Michael THOMAS
  - b. Print SURNAMES in upper case letters. This provides easy scanning on pedigree charts and family group sheets and also helps to distinguish the surname from first and middle names. This convention is widely used, but is not necessary. **Example:** Garrett John TODD

- c. Enter women with their maiden name (surname at birth) rather than their husband's surname. When you do not know a female's maiden name, insert only her first (given) name on the chart followed by empty parentheses (). Some genealogists also record the husband's surname. Both ways are correct as long as you are consistent and follow all naming rules. In this example, your ancestor Mary Elizabeth's maiden name is unknown and she is married to John DEMPSEY. **Example:** Mary Elizabeth () or Mary Elizabeth () DEMPSEY
  - d. If a woman has had more than one husband, then you would enter her given name, followed by her maiden name in parentheses followed by the names of any previous husbands (in order of marriage). If the middle name is known then you may enter that as well. This example is for a woman named Mary CARTER at birth who was married to a man named Jackson CARTER prior to marrying your ancestor, William LANGLEY. **Example:** Mary (Carter) SMITH or Mary (Carter) SMITH LANGLEY
  - e. If there is a nickname that was commonly used for an ancestor, include it in quotes after the given name. Do not use it in place of a given name and do not enclose it in parentheses (parentheses between a given name and surname is used to enclose maiden names and will cause confusion if it is also used for nicknames). If the nickname is a common one (i.e. Kim for Kimberly) it is not necessary to record it. **Example:** Rachel "Shelley" Lynn BROOK
  - f. If a person is known by more than one name (i.e. due to adoption, name change, etc.) then include the alternate name or names in parentheses after the surname, preceded by a.k.a. **Example:** William Tom LAKE (a.k.a. William Tom FRENCH)
  - g. Be sure to include alternate spellings when your ancestor's surname has changed over time (possibly due to it being spelled phonetically or due to the surname being changed upon immigration into a new country). Record the earlier usage of the surname first, followed by later usages. **Example:** Michael HAIR/HIERS
  - h. Don't be afraid to use the notes field. For example, if you have a female ancestor whose birth name was the same as her husband's surname, then you will want to make a note of that so that it is not assumed in the future that you had just entered it incorrectly.
- C. Recording Dates – It is especially important to follow genealogical standards when recording dates as the usual way that you enter a date may be different from the standard date format in another country or a different time period.
- a. When recording dates, use the accepted European standard of DAY, MONTH (spelled out) and four-digit YEAR. This is different, for example, than most Americans are used to entering dates. Do not enter dates using a number format. If you enter a date as 02/01/01, people will not know if you meant February 1 or January 2 or if you meant 1801, 1901 or 2001. **Example:** 30 June 1993
  - b. It is usually standard practice to spell months out, but there are also standard abbreviations which may be used. May, June and July are usually not abbreviated. **Examples:** Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. May June July Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec.
  - c. Sometimes you may only have an approximate date and you want to indicate that it is not exact. You may specify an approximate date as either "about" (abbreviated abt) or "circa" (abbreviated ca. or c.). **Examples:** c. 1850, abt December 1850

- d. If you know an event occurred before or after a specific date (i.e. you know your ancestor was still living at the time he wrote his will), you might preface the date as bef. or aft. in your records. **Example:** aft. 19 January, 1771
  - e. If you are unable to determine an exact date that an event occurred, then try using the records to narrow it down to a specific span of time (i.e. it's a logical assumption that your ancestor would have died between the date a will was signed and the date it was admitted to probate). Record the time span using the abbreviation bet. (between) followed by the dates (in standard date format) with a hyphen between them. **Example:** bet. 13 Apr. 1789 - 3 May 1880
  - f. If you find a date in a record which may have multiple interpretations, what should you do? The best method is to enter it exactly as it was written. You can add your interpretation of the date, such as expressing it in the traditional format, by enclosing it in square brackets [ ] following the original date. **Example:** 02/01/01 [2 January, 1901]
  - g. An understanding of the change from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian calendar is very important to genealogists. This change took place in 1582 by order of Pope Gregory XIII, but it wasn't adopted by England and British North America until 1752. China didn't conform to the Gregorian calendar until 1949! I'm not going to get into too many details here (that could be another entire class), but here is an example of how it can affect genealogy records and why it is important to understand the history of the change to the Gregorian calendar. Example: The "Old Style" calendar was in effect in the British Empire before 1752, when the present (Gregorian) calendar was adopted. The new historical calendar recognized January 1 as the first day of the year, while the ecclesiastical calendar recognized March 25 as the first day. Thus, dates between those two days prior to the calendar change in 1752 were often written with both year numbers (i.e. 5 January 1712/13). This is referred to as double dating. Also, if a record says "The 6th day of the third month it could be referring to March or May, depending upon the calendar in use at the time. The best rule of thumb is to record dates in your records exactly as written. Then you can go to the historical records to determine the best possible date, depending on the country your ancestor lived in. Include this in brackets after the original date. The French Republican Calendar is another source of possible confusion but because of the complexity of dealing with dates that followed this calendar, I am not going into it here. For more specific information on the Julian, Gregorian, French Republican and other calendars, please see Calendars and Dates.
- D. Recording Places – The general rule of thumb when entering place names into genealogical records is to record place names from smallest to largest location (i.e. town/locality, county/parish/district, state/province, country). You may choose to leave off the country if it is the one in which you reside and the one where the majority of your research lies, but you may want to at least make a note of this in your files. The breakdown of these locations will vary by country.
- a. If you have additional place name details, feel free to include them. Just be sure to make note of what it is. For example, you could add the name of the barony (Upper Bunratty) to the above location details for Calluragh, Ireland.
  - b. Many paper pedigree charts and even some computer programs do not include enough room to record full place names. Abbreviations may certainly be used as long as they are the ones in standard use.

- c. If you only know the town or city in which an event occurred, then you should consult a gazetteer to find the county, parish, province, etc. There are also many online sources from which you can obtain information on the county or province in which a town or city is now located. See **Geographic Place Names** for a list of online sources.
  - d. Population changes, wars and other historic events have caused location boundaries to change over time. It may be something as simple as a town which no longer exists or has changed names or something a little more complex such as a town which was originally part of one country and is now part of another. It is very important to know the history of the area in which you are researching so that you will be able to make educated guesses as to where to find the records for a given time period. When recording a place name for an event, you should always record the locality as it was situated at the time of the event. Then, if space permits, you may also include the information for the locality as it exists today.
  - e. If you aren't sure of a location, but you have records which suggest the most likely alternative (i.e. if you know where an ancestor is buried, you may make the assumption that he probably died in that locality), then you can record the place as a "probable."
- E. The Phone Book – This might be a great place to go when you hit a dead end. Just find your surname, dial, and start asking polite questions. Be aware that the party you are calling doesn't know you from Adam, so tact and caution should be used.
- F. The Recycle Bin – Don't throw anything away, even if you don't think you need it. You never know when that name you cared little about before might become the rich great-great uncle everybody couldn't stop talking about.
- G. Memories – These can fail, so be sure and cross-check your information for accuracy whenever possible.
- H. Keep Copies of Everything – Enough said about that.
- I. Exact versus Similar Spelling – Not all relatives spell their names the same way, so try not to draw any definite conclusions along this line. For example, you may be convinced that "Smith" in your family is spelled with an "i", but that doesn't mean your great grandfather Ebenezer Smyth got the memo.
- J. Brick Walls – When you hit one of these (which everyone invariably does) you could do one or more of the following: organize what you have, do a narrative of your information, broaden your research by tracing siblings of direct ancestors, read some history of the time and area, look at patterns of migration, share problems with others, hire a professional researcher, or sit back and let it stew for a while.
- K. Kissin' Cousins - When working on your family history, it is important to understand the various types of cousin relationships.
- a. "First cousins" are persons in your family who have two of the same grandparents as you. "Second cousins" have the same great-grandparents as you, but not the same grandparents. "Third cousins" have in common two great-great grandparents and their ancestors.
  - b. "Once removed" means there is a difference of one generation. For example, your mother's first cousin would be your first cousin, once removed. She is one

generation younger than your grandparents and you are two generations younger than your grandparents.

- L. Allow Time – Allow plenty of time for your research trip and keep your search organized. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of material available to you, but if you don't take time to scan records for all clues and make careful, detailed notes and source citations, you will regret it later.

## **T**op Ten Genealogy Mistakes To Avoid

1. Don't misspell the word "genealogy."
2. Don't trust everything you see in print.
3. We're related to...someone famous.
4. Don't be satisfied with names and dates.
5. Beware of the "generic" family history.
6. Don't accept family "legends" without question.
7. Don't limit yourself to the current spelling of your surname.
8. Don't neglect to write down your sources.
9. Don't assume that everything you find on the Internet is reliable.
10. Don't put off talking to relatives.