Guide to Beginning Genealogy

Use this guide to help get started with researching your family history. You may want to start by viewing our Genealogy for Beginners class.

Step 1: Get organized

Set a goal
- There are various reasons for doing your genealogy. Maybe you want to discover where your grandparents were born, finding the truth behind a family folk tale or see how far back in time you can go to find your earliest ancestor. Having a goal makes it easier to organize your research from the beginning.

Establish parameters

- Once you have a goal, think about the best way to get there. You may want to focus only on one side of the family tree to start or limit how many generations you plan to trace back. Opening too many lines of research at once can be confusing and overwhelming.

Decide how to organize your research

- There are various ways to organize your research, including making paper copies stored in a binder, digital copies stored on an external drive or PC or using online genealogy software such as Familytree maker or Ancestry. The one that is best for your is a personal choice.

Charts & Forms

- You will use a variety of forms in research, but the two most important ones are pedigree charts and family group sheets. You can download examples from the library's Genealogy Toolkit.
  - *Pedigree charts* track the direct ancestral line only (no siblings) and include full names, dates and locations for birth, marriage and death.
  - *Family group sheets* provide further details for each couple including names of all children. They also include residence, occupation, religion, military service, other spouses/partners.

Step 2: Getting started with your research

Start with yourself

- Moving backwards helps you authenticate connections with each generation and will avoid researching an entire family line that doesn't actually connect to yours.
- Genealogy records are available for deceased individuals, so it may help to search for your nearest deceased relative.
- The 1940 Federal Census is a good place to start. You can find it on Ancestry or Family Search through the Columbus Metropolitan Library.

Look for clues

- Record what you and others know. Talk to your relatives and record what information they provide. Fill out your pedigree chart based on what you've learned and don't worry about gaps. Even guessing is okay for now.
- You will eventually validate all information with your own research. It is important at this early stage to gather clues to help direct your search. It may help to keep 2 copies of your pedigree chart: a working copy you use to record clues and a final copy that only includes details verified through documentation.

Formatting

Dates

- To avoid confusion about dates, genealogists list the 2-digit day, followed by a three character abbreviation for the month, followed by a four digit year: DD MMM YYYY

Location

- Record places smallest to largest.
- City, county & country
- Family Search Wiki – great resource for location information and county specifics including boundary changes and known record loss.

Names

- Always record full names including middle names
- Keep track of nick names
- List women with their maiden name. Even if you don't know it, leave it blank.
- Remember your ancestor's name may be spelled various ways and many people had the same or similar names, so be careful to examine all clues and confirm you are looking at the right individual

Step 3: Documentation

Documented research backs up name, date, location and relationship details with records that show where the researcher got the information. Ideally these documents are original, primary source material, but may be a combination of secondary sources when no primary source exist.

Primary source: a document that was recorded at the time the event took place or by someone who experienced the event first hand

- Examples: Court records, military records, land records like deeds, correspondence, journals and government records which includes vital records and census records. Even newspapers articles the appeared at the time of the event.

*Secondary source***:** a document that that was recorded after the event occurred or by someone who did not experience it for themselves

- Examples: Books, indexes, transcriptions & translations or newspaper articles that appeared after the time of the event.

NOTE: It is possible for a record to contain both primary and secondary information. For example, a death record provides primary source details on an individual's death, but secondary information on things like place of birth and names and residences of the deceased's parents. Another example, a census record is a primary source for place of residence but secondary source for date of birth and other such details.

Records types and what you can learn from them

Vital records: birth, marriage & death

- Dates and locations for major life events, parentage and relationships between ancestors

Census records

- Family relationships, occupation, address, immigration, marital status, military service

Military service records

- Location, occupation, family relationships, medical history

Court records (wills, probate & guardianship)

- Family relationships, age, approximate death date and location or even household inventories

City directories

- Occupation/employer, address

Immigration & naturalization records

- Ancestral home, family relationships

Newspapers

- Interests (societies & clubs), travel, family relationships, addresses, real estate transfers, life events (birth, marriage & death announcements), obituaries

Land records

- Property ownership, wealth, family relationships

Church records

- Help fill in gaps where government vital records don't exist
- Birth, marriage, death

Finding records

Many of these records still exist in library and archive collections, courthouses or government agencies. Only a small portion have been digitized. When using the library, you will want to use online catalogs & finding aids.

- Library collections include primarily published secondary sources like indexes, compiled genealogies, biographies & histories
- Archive collections contain primary sources and original records (though they may be copies) of things like court records, birth registers, photographs, correspondence and journals

Online databases have revolutionized genealogy research. Many databases can be accessed for free with your library card, including:

Ancestry

- Subscription database for genealogy research
- Access Ancestry Library Edition not fully comprehensive, but is a good place to start your research. In some cases, it may include more records that you can get with a basic Ancestry subscription.

Family Search

- Free genealogy database but requires you to sign up to create a username and password.
- Contains the largest collection of unindexed online genealogy records. This means you may have to search through records from a place rather than search by the individual's name.

Fold3

- Subscription database focused primarily on military records and history.

Step 4: Online search tips

Each database works a little differently, but here are some overall search strategies:

- Start with a fairly broad search. Include name, general location and rough date information. Then, based on what you see, narrow results by making name, location or date more specific or adding details in additional search fields.
- Use check boxes next to individual search fields to match terms in that field exactly. This will narrow search results to those that specifically match specific details you are confident about.
- As you review your search results and see a record that looks like it may pertain to your ancestor, click on the result to see a summary page with indexed data fields from the record. If the details still look as though they may relate to the person you are looking for - *always* click through to see the original record!!!
- Wildcard searches - use special characters to allow replacement of letters with other variations. For instance, a question mark may replace one missing letter and a star would replace up to 2 letters.
- Exact phrase searches - when searching newspaper or text resources like a digitized book, you may want to use quotation marks to limit search results to a specific phrase.
- Proximity searching - looks for two terms within a specified distance apart in the text. For example, it's useful for when you don't know exactly how someone's name may have been formatted. Was it Robert B. Jones or Robert Jones? In some databases a search for Robert near2 Jones will find both results.
- Contact the library for help if you are not finding what you are looking for.

Questions? Contact us at history@columbuslibrary.org or book a Reserve an Expert for a virtual meeting with a librarian.