

Intro to Genealogy

Getting Started

1. Start with yourself. Always work your way back from the known to the unknown. Family legend or tradition may involve having a well-known ancestor. Unless this link has been thoroughly researched and documented, never assume that the connection is valid. Working back from a known ancestor will eliminate much frustration (not to mention wasted time and money).
2. Talk with members of your family. Interview older family members about their parents and grandparents. Take notes about places, people, and dates. While their memories may not be perfect, they can provide you with valuable clues. Don't neglect younger family members in this process. Someone may have already delved into the family history and is willing to share what they have found.

Once you have exhausted your own knowledge and have visited with family members, you are ready to begin research using the various records available to genealogists. These usually include home sources, vital records, church records, courthouse records, census records, and online sources.

Getting Organized

The most basic organizational tool for genealogy is the ancestor chart. Fill the chart out as completely as you can. The blank spaces that are left show you where you need more information and can help focus your research.

There are several software packages that you can purchase to organize your research and there are websites (some free, some not) that keep track of your ancestors. See about.com's page for a run-down of online family tree sites:

http://genealogy.about.com/od/publishing/tp/web_sites.htm#

For a side by side comparison of genealogy software programs, check out these reviews:

<http://www.genealogy-software-review.toptenreviews.com/>

Guidelines for using a library, archives, or courthouse

1. Call before visiting to ask about hours, parking, and copying procedures.
2. Visit the website for the institution you are interested in. Many organizations have great sites with indexes, bibliographies, photographs, and other helpful sources.
3. You may also be able to e-mail an archivist or reference librarian with questions. Keep these questions brief and be as specific as possible (example: Can you look in the index of *Cavaliers and Pioneers* for Edward Johnson?). Do not ask for "Everything you have on the Johnson family."
4. Think about your research questions in terms of location and time period and not necessarily in terms of surnames. Location and time period will determine what

- sources might be available that will have information on your ancestor. For example, asking “I’m looking for a marriage record from Jefferson County from the 1930s” is better than “I’m looking for the marriage of Calvin Johnson.”
5. Become familiar with the library’s online card catalog. By searching the catalog prior to your visit, you become knowledgeable about the collection and can make a list of “must see” items. This will help you maximize your time once you arrive.

Getting started in the records

1. Home Sources

Don’t overlook items in your home or the homes of family members that can yield genealogical information. These items include letters, photographs, scrapbooks, diplomas, newspaper clippings, family Bibles, and school yearbooks. These items may be in attics, basements, underneath beds, or other out of way places.

2. Vital Records

Vital records are records issued upon the birth, marriage, divorce, or death of an individual. Genealogists value these records because they allow us to learn birth dates/locations, parents’ names, maiden names of female ancestors, death dates and locations, and many other facts. Modern vital records are easy to obtain and are a fairly recent invention. Many states did not begin keeping these records until the late 19th or early 20th century. The following information pertains to vital records in the state of Alabama:

Birth and death certificates are available beginning in 1908

Marriage licenses are available from the state beginning in 1936. Prior to that, the licenses are available at the courthouse in the county where the license was issued.

Divorce certificates are available beginning in 1950. Prior to that, they are available in the county where the divorce was granted.

Alabama has the following privacy restrictions for birth and death certificates:

For birth certificates there is a 125 year waiting period unless the person requesting the certificate is the person named on the certificate or the sibling, parent, spouse, child, or legal representative of the person named. For death certificates there is a 25 year waiting period. The same restrictions apply on who can obtain a death certificate except they also include grandchildren and the informant (person who gave the information for the certificate). Marriage and divorce papers are public information and there is no waiting period or limit on who can obtain them.

Alabama vital records can be obtained from any county health department in Alabama. They can also be ordered from the Alabama Department of Public Health in Montgomery. The cost is \$15.00.

3. Church Records

Since church records often pre-date vital records, they may be the only place where a birth, marriage, or death is recorded. Knowing about your ancestors' faith helps to make them more real and they become more than just names and dates.

Use family tradition, local histories, city directories, obituaries, or tombstone inscriptions for clues about their faith. Information on your ancestors' probable country of origin and its religious history can also provide clues.

County histories can be invaluable sources of information on the religious history of the area. They can list early religious influences, churches, and clergymen. Use city directories to determine which churches were available to people living in urban areas. By comparing older directories to current ones, it is possible to determine how long a congregation has been in existence or if a church has moved.

Once you've identified a particular faith or denomination, begin by researching its history and practices. If you have identified the specific church that your ancestors attended, try to determine if the church still exists. Many churches have split, moved, or their congregations have died off and are no longer in existence. Once this happens, the records become difficult and sometimes impossible to locate. Learn about local, regional, and national repositories for church records and histories.

4. Courthouse Records

Courthouse records actually comprise many different types of records that are available in most county courthouses. These include wills, deeds, tax lists, and marriages. You will need to know the state and county in which the ancestors you are researching lived in order to access the courthouse records. Many courthouse records have been microfilmed and made available to researchers by the Church of Latter Day Saints.

5. Census Records

Taken every 10 years since 1790, the Federal Census is the official count of the U.S. population. Mandated for the purpose of drawing congressional districts, the Federal Census is probably the most important source for genealogists at all levels of experience. Personal information contained in the Census is sealed for 72 years by Federal Law for privacy. The most recent census available to genealogists is the 1940 census which was released on April 2, 2012. It will be another 10 years before the 1950 census is made available to researchers.

Census records are available in the Library's microfilm department and online via our subscription to ancestry.com. The 1940 census is freely available online at the website for the National Archives and the Church of Latter Day Saints.

6. The Internet

The World Wide Web has drastically changed how people do genealogical research. Many records are now available online and contacting people has never been easier. Remember that information posted online may not be 100% accurate. Facts and relationships still need to be verified, if possible.

Evaluating your information

As you have seen, genealogical information is taken from a wide variety of sources. Evaluating these sources for accuracy is an important part of the research process. Original records are regarded as being more likely to be accurate than compiled or transcribed records. However, original records are only as good as their source. For instance, a death certificate would certainly be considered an original (or primary) source. The information on the certificate was most likely provided by a physician, friend, or relative; any one of whom might not be able to accurately answer the questions. The census is another good example of an original source that should be carefully evaluated. Census takers may have gotten their answers from neighbors, the children, or they could simply have made them up.

Information taken from secondary sources (published family histories, compiled indexes, transcribed records, etc.) should be carefully evaluated as well. Consider whether the author of the family history had access to original records or were they relying on family stories and tradition. When looking at a transcription of records imagine how things like handwriting and unfamiliar terminology might affect the transcriber's interpretation. Remember that every time a record is indexed or transcribed an opportunity arises for errors to occur that can be perpetuated indefinitely if they go unnoticed.

Lastly, when using public family trees online (worldconnect, ancestry.com, etc.) remember that no one is checking them for accuracy. Anyone can publish anything online. That doesn't make it true.

For an interesting article on evaluating genealogical evidence, see the following site:
<http://www.progenealogists.com/evidenceevaluation.htm>

Popular Genealogy Websites

National Archives and Records Administration

<http://www.archives.gov/>

U.S. Vital Records

<http://www.vitalrec.com>

Alabama Vital Records

<http://adph.org/vitalrecords>

Genforum

<http://www.genforum.com>

Cyndi's List

www.cyndislist.com

The World Connect Project

<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com>

U.S. Gen Web Project

<http://www.usgenweb.com>

Bureau of Land Management

<http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov>

Latter Day Saints (LDS)

<http://www.familysearch.org>

Alabama State Archives

<http://www.archives.state.al.us>