

A Genealogical Beginner's Packet



How to Start Tracing Your Family Tree

It doesn't have to be hard to start researching your family history. Just like anything else, begin with what you know—in this case, yourself—and work back in time to your parents, your grandparents, and so on. These 10 tips will get you going.

1. Gather what you already know about your family. Scour your basement, attic and closets (and those of relatives) and collect family records, old photos, letters, diaries, photocopies from family Bibles, and newspaper clippings.

2. Talk to your relatives. Ask your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles about their memories. Don't ask just about facts and dates—get the stories of their growing up and of the ancestors they remember.

3. Put it on paper. Write down what you know and fill out a five-generation "pedigree" chart (find one at <www.familytreemagazine.com/freeforms>).

4. Focus your search. Don't try to fill in the blanks in your family tree all at once—focus on someone from the most recent generation where your chart is missing information. Try to answer that "mystery" first, then work backward in time.

5. Search the Web. Try Google searches and websites such as Ancestry.com <ancestry.com> (by subscription) and the FamilySearch Record Search Pilot <pilot.familysearch.org> (free). But don't expect to "find your whole family tree" online.

6. Explore specific Web sites about your ethnic heritage or the parts of the country where your relatives lived. Start with *Family Tree Magazine's* list of 101 Best Websites

<www.familytreemagazine.com/Info/101Best2009> and Cyndi's List <cyndislist.com>.

7. Visit the library. Look for census records on microfilm or in online databases (ask the librarian), as well as resources such as newspapers, city directories, school yearbooks and local history books.

8. Discover your local Family History Center. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has more than 4,000 Family History Centers where you can tap the world's largest collection of genealogical information. You can borrow microfilm of birth, marriage, death, immigration and other records from all over the world. To find the center nearest you, go to <www.familysearch.org/eng/library/FHC/frameset_fhc.asp>.

9. Organize your new information. Enter your findings into family tree software programs or on paper charts (make sure you note your sources). File photocopies and notes by family, geography or source so you can refer to them again. Write down stories and photograph heirlooms, too.

10. Visit the state archives website for your ancestral states (link to the site from <www.statearchivists.org/states.htm>). Look for information about genealogy resources to learn what records might exist about your ancestors. Many state archives even post online databases of a variety of genealogical information.

Genealogy Advice and Links

- **AfriGeneas** <afrigeneas.com>
- **Cyndi's List** <www.cyndislist.com>
- **FamilyTreeMagazine.com** <familytreemagazine.com>
- **JewishGen** <jewishgen.org>
- **National Archives and Records Administration: Genealogy** <archives.gov/genealogy>

Genealogy Records and Indexes

- **Ancestry.com** <ancestry.com> (by subscription)
- **Ancestry Library Edition** (free at many libraries; ask at genealogy desk)
- **Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System** <www.itd.nps.gov/cwss> (free)
- **Ellis Island Passenger Search** <ellisland.org> (free)
- **FamilySearch** <familysearch.org> (free)
- **FamilySearch Record Search Pilot** <pilot.familysearch.org> (free)
- **Footnote.com** <footnote.com> (by subscription)
- **Genealogy Bank** <genealogybank.com> (by subscription)
- **HeritageQuest Online** (free at many libraries; ask at genealogy desk)
- **The USGenWeb Project** <usgenweb.org>

Genealogy How-to Books

- *The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy* by Kimberly Powell (Adams Media)
- *Family Tree Legacies: Preserving Memories Throughout Time* by Allison Stacy and Diane Haddad (Family Tree Books)
- *How to Do Everything Genealogy* by George G. Morgan (McGraw Hill)
- *The Family Tree Resource Book for Genealogists* edited by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack and Erin Nevius (Family Tree Books)
- *Unpuzzling Your Past* by Emily Anne Croom (Family Tree Books)
- *Who Do You Think You Are? The Essential Guide to Tracing Your Family History* by Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak (Viking)

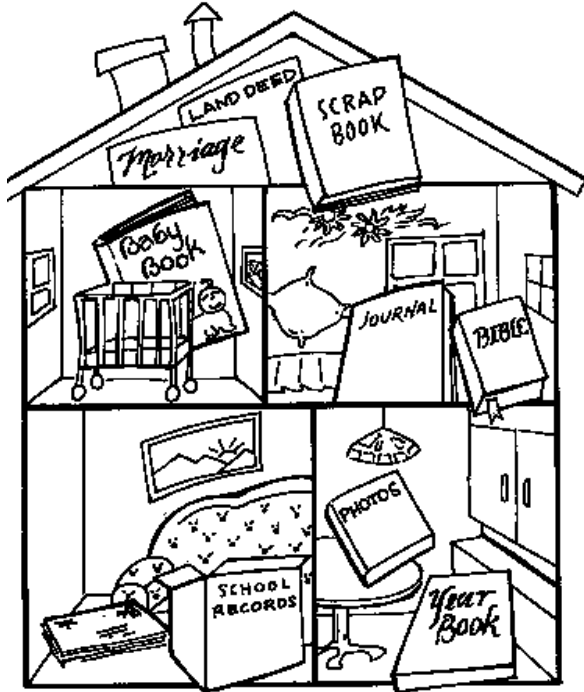
familytreemagazine
<familytreemagazine.com>

© FAMILY TREE MAGAZINE 2010

A N C E S T O R S

Family and Home Information Sources Checklist

Use this checklist as a guide to sources of information you might find in your home or the home of a relative.
Check each source you find.



Sources of information about ...

... Birth

- ☐ Baby Book
- ☐ Adoption Record

... Marriage

- ☐ Wedding Announcement
- ☐ Wedding Book
- ☐ Anniversary Announcement

... Divorce

- ☐ Papers

... Death

- ☐ Obituary
- ☐ Funeral Book
- ☐ Will
- ☐ Memorial Cards

... School

- ☐ Report Cards
- ☐ Honor Roll
- ☐ Awards
- ☐ Graduation Diplomas
- ☐ Transcripts
- ☐ yearbooks

... Religious Activity

- ☐ Blessing
- ☐ Baptismal Record
- ☐ Christening Record
- ☐ Confirmation Record
- ☐ Ordination Record
- ☐ Ministerial Record

... Every Day Life

- ☐ Journal
- ☐ Diary
- ☐ Biography
- ☐ Letters
- ☐ Photographs
- ☐ Autograph Album

- ☐ Publications/ newspaper clippings (about the person)
- ☐ Scrapbooks

... Employment

- ☐ Social Security Card
- ☐ Apprenticeship Records
- ☐ Citations
- ☐ Achievement Awards
- ☐ Disability Records
- ☐ Pension Records
- ☐ Membership Records
- ☐ Income Tax Records
- ☐ Union Records
- ☐ Severance Records
- ☐ Retirement Records

... Military Service

- ☐ Selective Service Records
- ☐ Pension Records
- ☐ National Guard Service Records
- ☐ Citations
- ☐ Disability Records
- ☐ Service Medals
- ☐ Ribbons
- ☐ Insignias
- ☐ Discharge Records
- ☐ Sword
- ☐ Firearms
- ☐ Uniform

... Land and property ownership

- ☐ Deeds
- ☐ Land Grants
- ☐ Water Rights
- ☐ Mortgages
- ☐ Leases
- ☐ Tax Notices
- ☐ Abstracts of Title
- ☐ Estate Records
- ☐ Financial Records

... Civil and Legal Activity

- ☐ Bonds
- ☐ Summons
- ☐ Subpoena
- ☐ Guardian Papers
- ☐ Contracts
- ☐ Bounty Award

... Family

- ☐ Bible
- ☐ Lineages
- ☐ Genealogies
- ☐ Histories
- ☐ Bulletins/ newsletters
- ☐ Coat of Arms

... Health

- ☐ Hospital Records
- ☐ Medical Records
- ☐ Immunization Records
- ☐ X-Rays
- ☐ Insurance Papers
- ☐ Vaccination Records

... Household Items

- ☐ Engraved Items
- ☐ Dishes
- ☐ Silverware
- ☐ Stitched Sampler
- ☐ Tapestries
- ☐ Quilts
- ☐ Needlework

... Licenses

- ☐ Business
- ☐ Occupation
- ☐ Professional
- ☐ Hunting/Fishing
- ☐ Firearms
- ☐ Drivers
- ☐ Motor Vehicle

... Citizenship Papers

- ☐ Naturalization Papers
- ☐ Alien Registration
- ☐ Deportment Papers
- ☐ Passport
- ☐ Visa

Five-Generation Ancestor Chart

Chart # _____
1 on this chart = _____ on chart # _____

1 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE SPOUSE		2 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		3 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		4 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		5 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		6 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		7 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		8 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		9 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		10 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		11 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		12 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		13 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		14 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		15 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		16 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		17 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		18 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		19 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		20 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		21 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		22 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		23 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		24 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		25 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		26 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		27 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		28 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		29 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		30 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE		31 BIRTH DATE AND PLACE MARRIAGE DATE AND PLACE DEATH DATE AND PLACE	
--	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

SEE CHART # _____

 Biographical Outline of the Life of



(Name of Person)

Record information on education, military service, marriage, children, illnesses, religious milestones, migrations, residences, jobs, family events, land purchases, court appearances, deaths and burials, etc.

Date	Age	Event and Place	Source

Full Name of Husband		Source #	Birth Date and Place		Source #
His Father			Marriage Date and Place		
His Mother with Maiden Name			Death Date and Place		
			Burial		
Full Name of Wife			Birth Date and Place		
Her Father			Death Date and Place		
Her Mother with Maiden Name		Burial			
Other Spouses		Marriage Date and Place			
Children of This Marriage	Birth Date and Place	Death Date, Place and Burial		Marriage Date, Place and Spouse	

The Importance of Citing Sources in Genealogical Research

When beginning genealogical research, it is vital to record citations for all sources that are used to gather data and to cite with accuracy. This practice not only provides scholarly verification of all findings but also adds integrity to your compiled genealogy.

When a genealogical researcher, amateur or professional, can cite the specific source of found data, then the resulting information can be published, shared, and/or submitted with the highest credibility. Other reasons to cite all sources as you research your family are for keeping track of where and when you have searched, to create a specific record of every utilized source, and for avoiding the unnecessary duplication of researching within a source.

The source citation standard for genealogists is detailed in the book, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* by Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG, FNGS, FUGA. Mills also has published online with various tutorials, "quick check" examples, and numerous models that are correctly cited. The *Evidence Explained* Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/evidenceexplained/> and its companion website <https://www.evidenceexplained.com> are strongly recommended for your use.

The book *Evidence Explained* includes information for gathering and formatting the citation, no matter what type of source. A source of genealogical information could be print or digital, family lore or interview, or even an heirloom item. The links provided on *Evidence Explained* offer easy-to-find answers to citation questions for genealogists.

All well-known, online genealogical programs and services are set up so that source citations can be included when inputting data. A common practice among experienced genealogists is to set up an Excel spreadsheet with fields for the categories of information for sources, such as title, author, type of source, date of access, and more. Refer to *Evidence Explained* for what details to write down for the source citation and for where to find those details within a source.

Here are other places to access information about how and why to cite sources of information in genealogical research:

> Cyndi's List of Genealogical Sites on the Internet, "Citing Sources"
<https://www.cyndislist.com/citing/citations-in-genealogy/>

> FamilySearch.org Research Wiki, "Source Citation Formats"
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Citations_\(Evidence_Style\)](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Citations_(Evidence_Style))

> Article by Kimberly Powell, "How to Cite Genealogy Sources"
<https://www.thoughtco.com/how-to-cite-genealogy-sources-1421785>

Written by Susan L. Ennis, ©2018; 2025 updated.

Creating a Genealogical Research Plan

Date _____

Goal: _____

Known Facts

--

Working Hypothesis

--

Questions

--

Research Methods

--

Potential Sources

--

Ancestor's name

Locality

[illegible]

Helpful Hints for Beginning Genealogical Research

Getting Started

Start with yourself – what do you know about family members? Write it down. Verify info.

Gather family records. (Bibles, certificates, documents, previously created family trees)

Fill out what you know on a Five-Generation Chart: Names (including maiden names), BMD dates = Birth Dates, Marriage Dates, and Death Dates; Locations. These are the basics.

Interview older family members in person or in writing.

Search for family members in U.S. Federal Census Records ([FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) or [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)). The most recent census year available is 1950. Start there, and work back through the census years.

Check for State Records ([FamilySearch.org Wiki](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki), [Cyndi's List](#), local library databases).

County Records are common and can be located online or in public libraries, academic libraries, genealogy society, historical society, and courthouses.

Genealogy is most rewarding when you are the researcher. Plan time for research, and add it to your schedule. Keep track of your progress.

Time Savers

No matter what, VERIFY all facts that you have heard, think you know, or find online. Do this by cross-referencing data using two or more sources, locating primary source documents, and seeing the facts with your own eyes.

Remember, just because information is found on the Internet does not mean it is guaranteed to be accurate! Often you will locate incomplete information, which will need to be matched with other documents. Consider collecting and filing “possible relatives” for later reference.

Be open minded about the spelling of names. Keep a list of alternate spellings of surnames that you encounter on records. Also, keep track of given names, nicknames, aliases, etc. Misspellings of names should never be used to eliminate possible ancestors.

Web Sites and Online Databases: Return often, at least once a month, to search for information. Online sites are updated continually; information that was not available one month might be newly available the next month. Make it a habit to search sites periodically, and watch for announcements of updates or the addition of new categories of information.

Search the holdings of libraries and repositories in advance of going to the location by using online catalogs. Also find out operating hours and days, parking, where to eat, and contact names, if applicable. E-mailing or calling ahead will make for a more positive experience.

Education – Learn as much as you can through workshops, meetings of local groups, conferences, reading wiki pages or blogs, and participating in webinars or podcasts. In fact, networking with other genealogical researchers and family historians can lead to a helpful exchange of ideas.

Suggestions for Success with Genealogical Research

Do your homework before you go! If you plan to visit a library or archives, be sure you know what holdings are available for your research, how to access them, fees, and expected practices at that location.

Develop your own style of research. Reflect on ways you have successfully taken notes in your past or at your job; keep a similar style. Organize files, both print and digital, in a way that makes sense to you; but also consider what would make sense to other family members.

Write and refer to research goals to focus your research time. Research goals may be questions to answer, a hypothesis to prove, or a “To Do” list. Take time after every research session to make a note of findings and also, note what your next step will be. Research goals become a checklist of what you have found and what you still need to find.

Find a genealogical friend or two. Collaboration is helpful, especially when information has to be deciphered or interpreted. Ideally, you will have genealogy buddies within your family as well as among fellow genealogists. Networking among genealogists can lead to contacts from a remote research area or to those with expertise that you need.

When arriving enthusiastically at a working repository, such as a courthouse, remember that the workers have a job to do, including guiding or assisting you. Do not pontificate about your own family – watch for glazed eyes as you share your genealogy! Instead, ask a question or make a request. Plan in advance, and stay focused with research goals.

Attend meetings of genealogy enthusiasts in your local area, even if your ancestors lived elsewhere. Every genealogy group has members who are eager to share and exchange information about sources, repositories, online collections, methods and best practices, and more.

Write family stories to publish and share now or in the future.

Gather photos, artifacts, and heirlooms; preserve them for future generations.

Schedule time dedicated to genealogical research for yourself. Start today!

Written by Susan L. Ennis, ©2018; 2025 updated.

Local Repositories for Getting Started in Genealogical Research

The following list can be used *to get you started* with researching your family history in repositories in our region of Pennsylvania.

Butler Area Public Library, Weir Genealogy Room

<https://www.butlerlibrary.info/genealogy1>

FamilySearch Center,

Corner of Powell and Rochester Roads,

Cranberry Township, PA. 16066

Wednesdays only from 10 A.M. – 3 P.M. and 6:30 -8:30 P.M.

Volunteers available to assist

<https://locations.familysearch.org/en/us/pa/cranberry-township/2771>

Northland Public Library (Be sure to use the links *e-Library* and *Catalog*.)

<http://www.northlandlibrary.org>

Carnegie Library, Oakland – Pennsylvania Room

<https://www.carnegielibrary.org/research-overview/genealogy-historical-collections/>

Senator John Heinz History Center

<https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/detre-library-archives>

Pennsylvania State Archives

<https://www.phmc.pa.gov/archives/Pages/default.aspx>

Pennsylvania State Library

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/statelibrary>

Directory of Pennsylvania's Public Libraries (by town and county)

<http://www.publiclibraries.com/pennsylvania.htm>

Directory of Pennsylvania Genealogical and Historical Societies

<https://www.paancestors.com/pennsylvania-genealogical-societies/>

Sources: A Genealogical Beginner's Packet

This packet contains the following free downloads from *Family Tree Magazine* and are provided here for personal and educational use with permission of the Editors. *Family Tree Magazine* is produced by F & W, a Content and eCommerce Company, Cincinnati, OH
©2025 <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/FreeForms>.

- “How to Start Tracing Your Family Tree”
- Ancestors: Family and Home Information Sources Checklist
- Five-Generation Ancestor Chart
- Biographical Outline of the Life of _____
- Family Group Sheet
- Research Log

“The Importance of Citing Sources in Genealogical Research” and “Creating a Genealogical Research Plan” are original items written by Susan L. Ennis, originally for use and publication in the Beginner's Packet of the North Hills Genealogists, ©SLEnnis2018; updated ©October, 2025, for the Cranberry Genealogy Club, Cranberry Township, Butler County, PA 16066.

All rights reserved. ©2018, 2025