

GETTING STARTED IN FAMILY HISTORY

Start with what you already know, write it down, and work back gradually to earlier generations. Don't worry right now about "how far back you can get" – start at home. Interview your parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Seek out old photos. Then you can add information from other sources.

What if nobody in my family knows much about the family's history?

Your family may be larger than you think: ask your close relatives if they have any cousins they haven't spoken to recently, and ask for phone numbers or addresses. If you contact your parents' first cousins, odds are very good that at least one of them will have interesting personal reminiscences, or family photos, or old letters, or the beginnings of a family tree. Often this is information you would never be able to learn in any other way, and far more valuable than anything you could find on the internet.

Finding public records

County courthouses keep deeds, wills, and some marriage records. Each state has a vital records office with birth and death certificates and marriage and divorce records. The federal government has military service files, naturalization records, Social Security applications (which are public for deceased persons), and Native American resources. Most public records are not yet on the internet – but some are. These include the records of the U.S. Census Bureau – a gold mine for genealogists. Census records from 1930 and prior decades are available on several web sites, including www.Ancestry.com.

Using libraries and archives

Visit the county-seat library in the county where your ancestors lived. They may have books of cemetery inscriptions, old city directories, historic newspapers (with obituaries), local histories, maps, and a lot more. (In particular, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County has one of the finest genealogical collections in the United States.) The largest collection of genealogical records in the world is the main Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. Most of this collection is on microfilm, and any roll of microfilm in the vault at Salt Lake can be sent out to a Family History Center near you. (The John Parker Library at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is affiliated with this system.) To search the catalog of available microfilms, and to check the locations of Family History Centers, go to www.FamilySearch.org and click on the "FamilySearch Centers" tab.

Putting the pieces together

You'll get the best understanding of the lives of your ancestors by combining oral history with public records, and with the local history of the place where your ancestors lived. So try different avenues of research: talk to an elderly aunt, post a query to an electronic bulletin board, join a local historical society, visit your state archives, place flowers on an ancestor's grave. The more you look, the more you will see. Remember to keep a record of your work – a simple notebook is fine. Note the dates of interviews with family members, and keep complete citations (author, title, etc.) for books and articles you consult. And if you want to use a computer program to keep track of your data, you can download – for free – a program called "Personal Ancestral File" from www.FamilySearch.org.

Each family has many stories

What will you discover? Well, since you have four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great grandparents, and so on, there are a lot of potential stories. A few of these people may have been prominent in their communities. Some you will have trouble finding out anything about. And the odds are good that a few of them made some bad life decisions and lived lives of great disappointment, even tragedy. Try to respect them all. Because after a while, we realize that we do not honor our ancestors by trying to "get" impressive ancestors who will reflect well on us. We honor our ancestors by learning to live in a way that reflects well on *them*.