

Step 1: Getting Started
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the first in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." Read at <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

Few hobbies anywhere offer the reward of genealogy. The people who start their family history soon find themselves on a journey of discovery that takes them to places they never before imagined—including visits to their family's homeland and learning who they really were. In this column we will walk you, step-by-step, through this exciting journey. You will learn how to get started, how to record the information you already know, where to find the information you don't know, who you can talk with to get help when the "digging" gets tough, and even how the home computer can help you with this fulfilling task. So walk with us along this road to discovery, and meet some of your ancestors as we travel.

Every journey begins with a single step. The first step in doing genealogy is to begin with yourself. Think of your genealogy as a collection of individuals, one of whom is you, and each of whom has had a series of easily identified life events. These events include the obvious such as birth, christening, education, marriage, military service, employment, death, and burial. They are important enough to us that we usually have some record or evidence of their existence. This is the stuff that genealogy is made of. Begin your project by writing down all the information you have on your own life events. This includes recording the important pieces of information: who is the person involved, what was the event, where and when did the event occur, and what evidence is there that the event actually took place (what is the source of the information). In writing this information down, there are some guidelines you should follow.

Gather the Information

Who. Write the person's full name, including all middle names and any titles that might be relevant (Rev., Capt., Dr.). b.) Spelling does matter. The name should be spelled exactly as it appears in the source of the information. In doing research, it is possible that you may find a family name spelled two, three, or even more different ways. Make note of any of these variations; this information may prove valuable at a later time. c.) Always write a female's name using her family or birth name—never her married name, as this is how you will locate information about her prior to, and after, her marriage. If you only know her married name, then write this in parentheses, i.e. Mary (Jones). This will serve as a visual clue that you need to research further into her identity. d.) Finally, make note of any nicknames that your research may uncover and write these in quotation marks. If your Uncle Billy was really named William, you would write this information as William "Billy" Anders Jones. Sometimes a nickname can serve as a clue to other potential sources of information.

What. Identify the event as clearly as possible. For example, when listing graduation as an event in a person's life, specify which level of graduation is being documented. b.) Use standard abbreviations for events such as b for birth or bap for baptism. If you develop your own abbreviations for events, make sure someone reading your work one hundred years from now

will understand what you are writing about. Consistency in how you present your work is the important consideration.

Where. Record as much as you know about the location of a particular event. For example, a birth may have occurred in a hospital. When recording the location of this birth, name the hospital, the town or city, the county, the state, and even the country if necessary. In following this procedure, you will have a trail to follow to locate related sources of information.

Remember, in most places in the world, written records or vital records of events might exist at any one of the levels listed above; records might also exist at all levels listed above. Each record might provide a clue to a further piece of information. A marriage found in one county in 1845 might lead to a census record for that county in 1850. The where in genealogical research is one of the most important pieces of information you can discover. b.) It is important to remember that place names, like family names, might have changed over a period of time. Doing genealogical research requires that you learn as much as you can about the history of a community and where an event might have occurred. For example Turner (town), Androscoggin (county), Maine (state), might have been the sight of a birth in 1822. In 1780, that same place was known as Sylvester (town), Cumberland (county), Massachusetts (state). The records for the latter place might be located in a repository different from records for the former. In researching the marriage record for the parents of the child born in 1822, the researcher would have to look for records in both repositories. c.) Use abbreviations for place names such as ME for Maine or FL for Florida. Again, just be consistent; don't use MA for one event, MASS for a second, Mass. for a third, etc. This can be confusing to the reader.

When. As you write dates in your family history, adopt the international method of date entry. In this approach, you write the number for the day, then the standard three-letter abbreviation for the month, and conclude with all four digits for the year. Thus October 11, 1884 or 10/11/1884 should be written as 10 OCT 1884. This method eliminates the confusion as to whether it is October 11 or November 10 and lends consistency to your project.

Evidence. This area is perhaps the most important, yet the most often ignored of a family history project. As you gather information, regardless of its source—from a conversation, a family Bible, a treasured letter, a birth certificate, or a published family history—it is critical that you record this source as thoroughly as possible. This allows you to show where your evidence comes from and could keep you from unnecessarily retracing your steps at a later date. Documentation is also necessary for others to judge the reliability and accuracy of your work. Early in your project you should develop a system whereby you record the source of a particular piece of information as a footnote to that information. You should also maintain a list of your sources that could serve as a bibliography for a finished project such as a book.

Record Your Research

Now you are ready to begin writing what you already know, beginning with yourself. In genealogy, there are some forms that are basic to the hobby and it is important that you become familiar with these forms early in your project. It is on these forms that you will record all of the pieces of information you gather.

1. 3 x 5 cards can be a wonderful means of recording the information on the individuals in your project. Refer to the sample below for a suggested method of recording this data. By organizing your data on cards, you will also make the transition to a computer easier if and when you decide to do so. The important point is to record as much information as you can find. In the example above, the * indicates that there is evidence to support the event listed on the back of the card or on another card.

2. The pedigree chart is one of the most easily recognized forms used by genealogists. On this chart you can show relationships between multiple generations of a family and trace your ancestry by following back in time along a particular family line. The most common pedigree displays five generations of family data on a single page. The first individual named on the left of the page starts the chart. In preparing your own family history, you should place yourself as person number one on your first pedigree chart. The chart then branches in two to show your parents, then in fourths to show your grandparents, and so forth. This chart only shows your ancestors—those people from whom you are descended by blood. You will notice there is no room on a pedigree chart for siblings, multiple marriages, or social family connections. This information appears on the next form.

3. The family group sheet or family group record allows you to enter all the individuals connected to a particular family. At the top there is space for the names and vital information on the husband (or father) and wife (or mother). Included in this area is space for the names of the parents of husband (father) and wife (mother). Below, is space for the names of all the children born to the union of the two people named at the top, their birth and death information, and the name or names of their spouses. Should either of the two individuals named on the top have been married another time, that data would appear on a separate family group sheet. The proper procedure is to complete a family group sheet for every couple you discover in your family history research, and place an asterisk (*) near the name of the child in that family from whom you descend. On the back of the sheet, you can enter a citation for any source materials you used and/or record any anecdotal information you may have discovered in your research.

4. A research log can prove to be the most valuable form you work on. It is here that you record the sources you have consulted and the information you were seeking. By being diligent in working on this form, you will save yourself countless hours retracing your steps. It is wise to keep a log for each person you are researching—one that notes what you were looking for, where you have looked, and what you have found. While it may seem overwhelming at first, it soon becomes second nature. These forms are available in most libraries, local genealogical societies, family history centers, on-line, or from a genealogy specialty company. Once you have them, find a good pencil (ink is difficult to erase), gather some note cards, a pedigree chart, a family group sheet, and a research log and sit down in a quiet and comfortable place and begin to write. From your own memory, write all of the information you can recall about yourself, your parents, your grandparents, etc. You have embarked on a journey that could prove to be the most memorable you have ever undertaken.

Terry and Jim Willard hosted the ten-part PBS series "Ancestors." They have researched their genealogy fifteen generations back on both sides.