

## Step 4: Beginning Your Library Research — Terry and Jim Willard

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

By now you have probably filled out pedigree charts and family group sheets containing genealogical information about your immediate family. You have looked around your home to find other information that could be added to your basic forms, and you have interviewed older family members to fill in more of the blanks in your research. Now, believe it or not, the fun begins.

You are ready to search for information about your family outside the confines of your memory—you are ready to go to a library. In Step 4, we will discuss two important considerations: what preparations you should make before leaving home, and what to look for once you arrive at the library.

### Before Leaving Home

First, prepare by compiling a list of all research centers and libraries near your home that might prove useful to you. This list should include your local public library, your nearest family history center (more on these in a later article), your local historical society, genealogical society, ethnic society, even a nearby college library.

Now decide which of these centers you want to visit and call ahead to find out what their days and hours of operation are. We encourage you to ask the following questions:

1. Is there an orientation tour of the library and does one need to sign up in advance? These orientation sessions can save hours of valuable time by helping you learn what is available and where to find it. You will also meet a staff member who might be a good contact person to answer questions that may arise later.
2. Does the library have any special requirements? Some research facilities require a picture ID before allowing a researcher to enter. Others require visitors to be a member or resident before entry is granted.
3. Is it necessary to sign up in advance to use any special equipment such as microfilm readers, microfiche readers, or computers? Most research centers have limited equipment and their use is regulated. This is especially true at busy times such as school vacations.
4. Is parking available and what does it cost? Some libraries are located in the heart of a city and the only available parking is in a nearby garage that charges. If so, find out what the cost is and what alternatives are available.

5. Are there restaurants or cafes nearby? A good research session requires a clear mind, and working on an empty stomach is not conducive to a clear mind. If no eating facilities are in close proximity, plan on bringing a lunch.

6. Are laptops allowed in the library? Many researchers bring their laptops with them, but you should check first to find out what the library's policy is on portable computers. If they are allowed, remember to carry all of your valuables with you when you leave your workspace.

After gathering this information, organize the genealogical data you have compiled thus far into a logical sequence. This will help you explain your information to someone who might not understand genealogy. The better you can describe what you have and what you are looking for, the better the librarian will be able to assist you. Good organization of your material also helps you have a better handle on where you have been and where you need to go.

Having your material with you also makes it easier to evaluate your research session. It is a good idea to have all of your material stored in something transportable. We have seen researchers with beautiful hand-embroidered bags, others with more traditional briefcases, and even some with boxes they roll along on a luggage carrier.

Most importantly, write down your research objectives—what facts you hope to uncover in your trip to the library. This does not need to be fancy, just a simple list of questions you hope to find the answers to. Here is a list we prepared some thirty years ago:

1. Who was Nana's father? We know the family name is Jones.
2. Where were Nana and Gramp married? We think Turner, but we're not sure.
3. Where were they living in 1900? 1910? 1920?
4. Are there any books on local history (Turner) that mention either of them?

Looking back on this list, the information we were after seems so basic. Yet we didn't have the answers to these questions and, like all researchers, we had to start at the beginning. Be complete in compiling your own list of questions and be prepared to reevaluate them as your session progresses throughout the day. Finally, organize all the "tools" you will need to make your research trip productive. Included on this list are the following:

1. Pencils—It is always a good idea to use a pencil in all of your preliminary research. Some libraries require researchers to use only pencil. This cuts down on stray pen marks that appear on the pages of research material, which are impossible to remove.
2. Reading glasses—Some of the material that one discovers can be difficult to read even under the best conditions. A good pair of reading glasses can simplify this task enormously.
3. Magnifying glass—Much of the material is difficult to read even with good light and a good pair of glasses. A magnifying glass or magnifying bar can help in these situations.

4. Blank research forms—Once you discover useful material, you need an ample supply of forms to record this information. Having a good supply with you ensures that you will not have to write on little slips of scrap paper only to have to redo everything once you get home.
5. Tissues—Libraries can be very dusty places. Need we say more? (Terry actually rates libraries by the number of tissues she uses during a research session. A good library is a "three tissue.")
6. Change—It is amazing how many nickels, dimes, and quarters photocopy machines can devour. Usually, libraries do not provide change and it can be frustrating to run out of change just when you need it most. In many libraries it is necessary to purchase a photocopy card. The machines that dispense these require change or bills so be certain to have enough of both.

#### At the Library

At the library we can provide two main points that are relevant to your research: the general considerations that apply to any research facility, and what materials you can expect to find once you get to the library.

Once you arrive at the library, there are some considerations to keep in mind. First, in many libraries, even public libraries, the people who work in the genealogy section are volunteers. Remember that they are there to guide you in your research, not to do your research for you. The best courtesy you can show them is to have your materials organized and easily understandable. Judy Perpente, a retired media specialist who now volunteers at a family history center in Sarasota, Florida asks that researchers "be organized—have something like a pedigree chart ready to show the librarian what it is you are looking for."

Take advantage of the library's orientation tour if they have one. Learn what materials they have and where they are located. Also, learn how to use special equipment such as photocopy machines, microfiche readers, microfilm readers, reader-copiers, and even computerized card catalogs.

Ease your way into the library. Take the time to familiarize yourself with special holdings, rooms devoted to local history, etc. Also, allow plenty of time for your research trip. A truly successful trip may require a half-day or even a full day. Having to leave too soon can be a very frustrating experience. Finally, take breaks during your research session. A well placed breather, bathroom break, or lunch break can prove invaluable to your success.

When visiting your local library, there are certain sections of the genealogy department that you can expect to find. These include the following:

1. Local history—If the family you are researching came from the town in which the library is located, this collection will contain information you will turn to frequently.
2. Reference and Self-help Material—Here one can find excellent books such as *The Source* that will let you know how to proceed with a genealogical research project.

3. Genealogy magazines—This section would include the leading magazines such as Ancestry as well as periodicals from throughout the United States that would be useful if your research takes you outside your local area.
4. Published family histories—It is amazing how many families have been researched. In some communities, the local library has histories on some families that have lived in the area for some time.
5. General indexes—Some very useful sources have been indexed and these indexes offer the researcher an excellent starting point. Among these are census indexes, DAR indexes, soldier indexes for the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, etc.
6. Newspapers—An excellent source of genealogy material comes from local newspapers including obituaries and even published births and marriages. Some local newspapers have even been indexed and are easier to use.
7. Maps and gazetteers. Any research in a particular geographic area requires knowledge of the area. These maps and gazetteers provide that information.

When beginning research at your local library, we recommend the following basic guide to getting started. While no single approach can be said to be best, we have had luck with the following formula. First, start with the published family histories. If research has already been done on your family, you may find a great deal of information that you will benefit from. Turn to local histories next. Many have specific family information included in them, and some have genealogies on two or more generations of a particular family. Finally, utilize the collection of local newspapers to add information to your research.

Always document the information you find. Write the source material on your research log and record sources used in your log even if you do not find any information in them. Don't allow yourself to be sidetracked—it is easy to be pulled away from your objectives. We have seen many research sessions wasted in tracking the wrong person or the wrong family. This is especially true when one encounters a book on a famous person who shares the same family name being researched. Also, be patient and persevere. Remember that you can search for hours before locating a single piece of valuable information, so don't give up too soon. Have realistic expectations. When developing your research objectives, make sure they can be accomplished. In other words, have measurable outcomes in mind. Do not expect to gather information on ten generations in ten minutes. And above all, have fun. Genealogy is a hobby that is about enjoyment.