

Step 5: At the Library
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the fifth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

While discussing ancestors at a family reunion, attending a genealogical conference, and using the Internet for genealogical research can be very exciting, there is just something special about a research trip to a good library.

In Step 4 we discussed getting ready for this trip. We covered such items as preparing your research objectives and preparing yourself for your visit to the library. In this article we will explore the different types of research libraries available to you, and how you can most benefit from your visit.

One of the most unique aspects of genealogical research is the variety of libraries which house a vast array of information. In some, one can find reel after reel of census microfilms; in others, shelves of published family histories; in others, extensive information relating to the history of that area; and, in still others, all of these resources together under one roof. In our own research, we have used many different repositories and we would like to introduce you to some of them.

Libraries

- Local public libraries—We have used numerous local public libraries and have found that all contain varying amounts of information. Usually they have a very strong collection of books, maps, and vital records relating to their own communities. Their reference librarians can also tell you who the local genealogy experts are and how to contact them.
- Local historical society libraries—Society libraries have excellent information relating to the community, especially their collections of pictures, artifacts, maps, clothing, and other items of local interest. This unique information adds texture to your research as you learn more about the community (and possibly even the homes) in which your ancestors resided.
- Local genealogical society libraries—If your ancestors lived in one area for a long period of time, or were early settlers in that area, there may be unique research available on the families from that town, such as the only copy of research done by a local historian. If you are fortunate enough to find such a treasure, it will save many hours of research.
- County public libraries—In many communities the county maintains the public library. These are excellent places for research as they have information relating to all the towns within their boundary. Since many of our ancestors married someone from the "next town," a county library often has all the necessary resources under one roof. For example, the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has evolved from a county library to a world class genealogical research center.

- County historical society libraries—These are similar to their local counterparts, except they have information on the entire county. They also contain displays and dioramas that make the history of their county come alive.
- State libraries—The state library (located in the state's capital city) can be a truly valuable source of genealogical information. Quite often, we have located secondary sources of vital records for all the communities within the state. This type of information can prove useful in those cases where ancestors migrated between towns within a state. You can track them from the comfort of a good library chair. In some states, the state archives are located in the same complex as the state library. Thus, primary source research can be conducted easily in the archives after locating a secondary reference to a particular life event in the library.
- State historical societies—Many states have a state historical society, which house materials of interest to both historians and to genealogists. They often contain excellent collections and are located in historic buildings.
- Regional research libraries—There are several regional libraries, but one excellent example is the New England Historic Genealogical Society located in Boston, Massachusetts. NEHGS, or "Hist-Gen" as it is often called, houses a tremendous collection of materials that relate to New England research. This facility is a necessary visit for those who can trace their roots to New England.
- Ethnic genealogical society libraries—Virtually every ethnic group in the United States has created and maintains a research facility, which houses materials relating to that particular ethnic group. One in particular is worthy of note: the American-Canadian Genealogical Society (ACGS) Library in Manchester, New Hampshire. This library has an outstanding collection relating to Franco-American, Acadian, and French-Canadian genealogy.
- National libraries—As one can imagine, there are libraries on a much larger scale than any mentioned thus far and these are the national libraries. Two in particular deserve mention and are worthy of inclusion on your list of places to visit. The first is the National Archives located in Washington, D.C. It contains a huge collection of materials relating to all aspects of genealogy. Central to these materials are Federal records such as census, military, and public land records. The other national library is the Family History Library located in Salt Lake City, Utah. This library houses the world's leading collection of primary and secondary source material, much of which is available on microforms and on loan for use at its family history centers located throughout the United States.

This sampling represents virtually every type of research facility you might use in your research. Being presented with such variety can be intimidating, however, one characteristic should ease some of this intimidation—all of these facilities share certain features. Once you become acquainted with these common features, your research trips will become much less daunting and more productive.

The most important of these features is the division of collections into sections. Once you become familiar with these sections and how to use them, your task of locating relevant research material becomes much easier. Unfortunately, these libraries do not use the same numbering systems. It is imperative that you become familiar with whatever numbering system a library uses, whether it is Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress, or a unique system used only by one library.

General Reference Section

When you are ready to begin your research, the best place to start is in the general reference section. Included in this section are the books you need to maximize your time. It is recommended that your first few hours in a library be spent in this section. Here you will find the "how to" books which will point you in the right direction. All libraries have these volumes and you should use those that are best suited for your own research. For example, a place to start is *Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide to Family History and Genealogy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997) by Jim and Terry Willard with Jane Wilson. Other general reference books that should be consulted include:

Directory of Family Associations. Bentley, Elizabeth Petty, 1991.

Ancestry's Redbook: American State, County & Town Sources. Eichholz, Alice, editor. Orem: Ancestry, 1989.

The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy. Szucs, Loretto, and Luebking, Sandra, editors. Orem: Ancestry, 1997.

Using sources such as these will save you countless hours of research.

Books that provide historical maps of geographical areas you are researching should also be consulted, as well as those that list all the published family histories available in a particular library. You can also find books that will help you use the computer, and others that will help you organize your work so that others can benefit from your research.

Family Histories

All libraries have a section dedicated to their collection of published family histories. Here you may discover a volume dedicated entirely to the family name you are researching. While the odds of finding your own name and genealogy in such a book are quite slim, you may find some valuable clues that will aid your research. These volumes are usually displayed in alphabetical order by the name of the principal family covered in the book. Also, some libraries have an index of all the families covered in these volumes—in addition to the name or names listed in the title. Find out if such a volume exists and where it is located.

State Collections

Another section in most county, state, and national libraries is one devoted to published materials relating to other states. Here you can do some general research on a state where your ancestors may have lived. This section can give you a better idea of what sources might exist and where

they can be found, thus saving you valuable hours later. Remember, you are always a detective trying to gather as many clues as possible. Even general sources on a state you may never have visited can provide some of these valuable clues.

Military

One section that has proved very useful in our research was the section on the various wars in which America has been involved. These sections are usually arranged in chronological order, beginning with the earliest conflicts and continuing to the present. The volumes might provide a list of the pensioners from a particular war, a list of all the individuals who served in a particular war, where they were from and which unit(s) they served in, even regimental histories that detail where the regiment served during the war. Other valuable resources in this section are the journals and indexes for patriotic societies such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). These sources represent significant research that satisfies admission requirements to one of these societies. The submitter may have worked on one of the lines you are researching, thus saving you considerable time.

Society Newsletters & Publications

Most libraries subscribe to a variety of publications. Newsletters and magazines can be a source of general and specific information relevant to your research. Many publications allow readers to submit queries, so if you have encountered a "stone wall" from a particular area of your research, perhaps a query to a society specializing in that area would prove useful. A publication such as Ancestry Magazine can prove useful to beginning and advanced researchers.

Federal Materials

Some libraries have sources from the Federal government, especially indexes to various censuses. After searching published family histories, most researchers turn to Federal censuses. Fortunately, some libraries—especially the bigger ones—have the microfilm of the actual census. In such a case, you can go from the index to the microfilm room very easily to follow up on your families.

Computers

It is difficult to imagine doing genealogical research today without the use of a computer. Most libraries have computers that are beneficial to genealogists in two ways. First, the library might have a collection of research on CDs that are available for use. Secondly, they may have computers connected to the Internet. You can do considerable research using these machines. In either case, the amount of time one can spend at the computer is usually restricted. Most libraries with computers require patrons to sign up for their use in advance.

Nothing is more rewarding than planning a good library research session, arriving at the library to pursue the plan, and discovering the information you were seeking. Remember to make note of all the source materials you consult in your research log—this log will prove invaluable later. And, by the way, it's OK to give a little yelp when you find one of those missing ancestors. This serves as a reminder to all the other people doing research that perseverance pays off!