Step 16 - Computers and Family History
– Terry and Jim Willard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the sixteenth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step."   http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/4672.asp Watch for the final two articles in this series to be posted in coming weeks.
http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp

In one of the first classes we taught on computers and family history back in 1983, a student unfamiliar with computers asked, "Does this mean all I have to do is type in my name, push a button, and watch my entire genealogy appear on the screen?" We had to stifle a chuckle.

It is important to remember that computers are not the be all and end all of family history. They are simply another tool researchers should be comfortable with as they delve into this wonderful hobby. However, the fact is, nothing has revolutionized family history like the PC; it is hard to imagine family history without it.

With that in mind, genealogists should become acquainted with what a computer can and cannot do, and then decide what is appropriate for their research needs. It is worth the expense in both time and money to learn about computers and how they can benefit research.

When we present family history workshops, we ask how many people in the audience own a computer and use it in their research. We are pleased that the number has risen from about one in ten back in the early- to mid-1980s to approximately nine in ten today. So most family historians are now using a computer in their pursuit of ancestors. But are they getting the most out it?

The answer to this question is appropriate for two different groups of genealogists: those who are looking to purchase a system for the first time, and those deciding that it is time to upgrade their current system.

Hardware for Genealogists
It is important to note that any state-of-the-art computer system will serve family historians for at least three to five years. Also, note that the recommendations in this article are aimed at the upper-end of technology and are therefore more expensive. As a general rule, $2,000 to $2,500 will pay for a solid, state-of-the-art computer system. In terms of specifics, here are our recommendations for an ideal computer system for family historians.

Processor. While the brand name of the processor may be important to some researchers, the speed of the processor is the more important consideration. Whether you have a Pentium III or IV, a Celeron, or an Athalon, faster is better. A good processing speed is at least 750 MHz. If you can afford it, get a processor with one GHz or more.

RAM. RAM is probably the most important consideration when buying or upgrading a computer system. We recommend at least 128 megabytes (MB), but you should get more RAM if you can afford it. RAM is generally the first part of the system that needs to be upgraded, so it's really a pay-now or pay-later decision.

Hard Drive. The hard drive is the primary storage device on a computer, so it's a good idea to

have as much storage space as you can afford. Ten gigabytes (GB) is a good amount, but if you have the option for more and you can afford it, again, more is better.

Floppy-disk Drive. The 3.5-inch floppy drive remains a necessity, as it allows researchers to back up important data. The floppy also allows us to share our data with others. In most computer systems, the floppy-disk drive is included with the base system.

RW/CD-ROM Drive. The readable/writable CD-ROM drive has emerged as a truly useful option for genealogists. A CD can store large computer files (such as scanned images) and is portable. For most computer systems, this drive is optional, but it is worth the additional cost.

MODEM. The modem is the means of connecting to the Internet. The four Internet connection options are telephone lines, DSL (Digital Subscriber Line), cable, and wireless. Investigate the fastest connection available in your area. If you feel you can afford the monthly fee (the faster connections are generally more expensive), buy the appropriate modem when you purchase your computer. It will save you money over time.

Monitor. Buy the largest display surface you can afford. Our decision to buy a 19-inch monitor for our desktop computer was one of the best decisions we made. And when it is time to upgrade our computer, there will likely be no need to purchase another monitor.

Printer. When deciding what printer model is best for you, determine what you want to accomplish. If images are a big part of your work, a printer that can produce high-quality reproductions of your images is a must. Is color printing important to you? What about speed? Also, if you don't have extensive space for a printer, a copier, a fax machine, and a scanner, a combination model might be the appropriate choice.

Scanner. Scanners have become a must-have for genealogists. Any research project can benefit with the addition of pictures, original documents, newspaper clippings, etc. The scanner not only allows a researcher to add these items to his or her computer digitally, but it also allows researchers to share the items with family members and fellow researchers by attaching them to e-mail messages.

Digital Camera. Virtually any image can be transferred from a digital camera to a computer, and then inserted directly into a favorite genealogy software program. Cost, quality, and usability vary with each camera model. Consult your local genealogy society, computer users group, or a publication such as *Genealogical Computing* for advice on the digital camera that will fit your needs and budget.

Finding the Right Software
When you're searching for a good genealogy software program, determine first what your specific needs are. In other words, what do you want from your genealogy software program? In using the software to store, organize, and print data, the following are key elements you should find in whichever software program you choose:

Install software and enter data easily
Enter unlimited events for each person and custom-create events
Cite data source(s)

Handle unusual situations, e.g. name changes, social relationships, user-defined fields, unrelated individuals, etc.
Easily correct data-entry errors
Add anecdotal text
Include multimedia such as image, video, and sound files
"Split" off a branch of the family tree and "splice" on a branch
Provide GEDCOM support
Print standard charts and reports
Print family histories and customized forms and charts
Add research from another program automatically

Now, where are the best places to find the right genealogy software? Fortunately, there are four general sources for software, and we encourage you to investigate each of them before you settle on a software program.

The first source comes through the regular commercial offerings. These programs are available in retail software stores or directly from the producer or a sales representative. Some software companies offer a demo version of their product, which can be downloaded from company Web sites. Before buying any of these programs, try the demo versions. You should get a good feel for how each program handles data entry, editing, printing, etc. Also, talk to other researchers about their software choice or read a few issues of *Genealogical Computing.* This journal reviews software programs in each issue.

A second source for genealogical software comes from shareware companies. They offer their product for free but request that the user submit a registration fee (usually about twenty dollars) to continue using it. Perhaps the best-known shareware program for Windows is *Brother's Keeper*. For the Mac, the most popular shareware programs are *Gene* and *MacFamily Tree*. The easiest way to locate these programs is to enter the name of the desired program in your favorite search engine and use the results to locate a Web site where you can download the program.

A third source of genealogical software is through companies and individuals that make their product(s) available free of charge. This type of software is generally referred to as freeware. These are fully functioning programs that are freely distributed as a service to genealogists or for advertising purposes. Two programs in this category merit investigation. The first is *Personal Ancestral File 5.0,* which is available at familysearch.org. This is a fully functioning software program that has been around in one version or another for many years. The second free software program is *Legacy 3.0*, available from Millennia. As with *PAF 5.0, Legacy* is full-featured genealogy software.

The final source of genealogical software is through a Web site that hosts a genealogy software program. The advantages to this approach are obvious. You don't need to worry about having space on your computer to store your information. Also, your research can be accessed from anywhere. Research can truly become a collaborative effort if you are working online. The *Online Family Tree* is the best offering for this type of service; it is available at Ancestry.com. Simply click on the Record tab from the main page to go to the *Online Family Tree* software. The time required to register is minimal and the benefits are great.

Regardless of your skill level, when it comes to genealogy and/or computers, there are products and services out there from which you can benefit. The key is to periodically evaluate if you have the right stuff. If not, how do you get it?

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