Step 17 - Online Research
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the seventeenth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." Watch for the concluding articles in this series to be posted in coming weeks. http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp

It has been said before and will be repeated many times in the future that nothing has revolutionized genealogy like the Internet. However, just as the potential of the Internet is exciting, its pitfalls are potentially dangerous. As wonderful as the Internet is as a source of genealogical information, this information often lacks the proof needed to make sound genealogical conclusions. The Internet is not a shortcut for sound research. The same guidelines that apply to pencil and paper research apply equally to electronic research. In this article we will present six steps for using the Internet wisely in your quest for ancestors.

Step 1: Develop an Objective
As with offline research, it is essential that you clearly define your research objective. Having done pencil and paper research in a library, you know how easy it is to be led away from the person you are researching. To avoid this pitfall, write down your objective and keep it in front of you while you are online. Your objective should include 1) the name of the individual you are researching, including all spelling variations you are aware of, and 2) the information you currently know about the individual, including date range estimates for unknown vital information.

For this article, we will focus on the ancestor who caused us so much difficulty when we began our family history research more than thirty years ago: Charles Morse Willard, Jim's paternal great-great-grandfather. This time, however, we have the Internet.

To stay focused on our online research goals, we will write down the name, name variations, and vital information about the person we are seeking. **Name**: Willard, Charles Morse. **Variations**: Williard, Charles M.; Willard, Chas; Willard, C.M. **Vital Information**: date of birth: ca. 1810; place of birth: Keene, New Hampshire; date of marriage: ca. 1835; place of marriage: unknown; date of death: 22 October 1871; place of death: Turner, Androscoggin, Maine.

Step 2: Develop a Search Strategy
The problem with locating genealogical data on the Internet is deciding where to begin. In a sense, there are two "Internets" we can use to start our quest. The first Internet, which we consider the "civilized" Internet, consists of sites that have placed genealogical data online for users to search for specific names. These sites are referred to as premium sites because they charge fees for some of the services they provide. These sites often provide a free period so the user can explore the information and decide if he or she wants to pay the fee to use the data and services. Also, there is often excellent material available on these sites that is free of charge. The other Internet, which we consider the "wilderness," consists of data that has been placed on

the Internet primarily by individuals who have made their research available on a personal Web page.

We recommend that your search strategy start with the civilized Internet and then move to the wilderness. In our example of Charles Morse Willard, we will visit three civilized sites and then turn our attention to three search engines to help us prowl through the wilderness. Our goal is to test each of these sources for information on Charles Morse Willard.

Before we discuss the results of our search, it is important to make a few observations about name searching on Web sites.

1. When searching the civilized Web sites, use the full name including the middle name, if known. Some sites allow a field for the middle name. If no separate field is provided, make a space after the first name and type in the middle name even if there doesn't appear to be enough space.

2. If you are given the opportunity to request a Soundex search, take advantage of it. (Soundex searches for the exact spelling of the name and spelling variations.) This is especially true of those family names that have spelling variations.

3. If space is provided, enter as much information as possible. Some of these dedicated Web sites allow you to specify a state, a date range, and even the parents of your key person. The more specific the search criteria, the greater the chance for success.

4. Remember to return to these sites frequently as more data is constantly added.

5. Keep a research log noting the date of your search, the exact name spellings you researched, and any results you find.

Civilized Research
Armed with these suggestions, we will now turn our attention to three civilized sites–Ancestry.com, Genealogy.com, and FamilySearch.org.

Ancestry.com. At <www.ancestry. com>, we decided to enter only Charles and Willard even though we could have entered the middle name. We were curious to see how the results would differ from our next search using the middle name. The search results for Charles Willard yielded 1,954 hits, which were spread among categories, such as Featured Databases, Census Records, Vital & Church Records, Compiled Genealogy, etc. Since these hits could take considerable time to investigate, we decided to restart our search using the middle name. The search for Charles Morse Willard yielded two hits, both in the category "Biography and History."

We checked these sources and found them to be references to two separate entries from the Daughters of the American Revolution Lineage Books. A click of the mouse brought the text

from the first reference on the screen and we found the information that had taken us months to locate back in 1967. We learned the names of Charles Morse' parents and the dates they lived, along with other clues. The DAR Lineage Books are secondary sources, so we still needed independent proof such as birth or marriage certificates. We located these valuable leads in a matter of minutes.

Genealogy.com. At <www.genealogy.com>, we entered Charles Morse Willard since there was a separate field for the middle name. Unfortunately, the search seemed to ignore the middle name, but the results were impressive. We found 941 references for Charles Willard. As with Ancestry.com, these results were spread among various categories such as Genealogy Library, Family Archives, Family Home Pages, etc.

Familysearch.org. At <www.familysearch.org>, we entered Charles Willard. We had the option of entering parent's names but since we didn't know this information in 1967, we left that field empty. We also could have entered place information. The results showed 137 matches, which are taken from the online version of the International Genealogical Index (IGI), the Ancestral File, Pedigree Resource File, and other sources of family data. Further investigation of these hits showed that none of the matches were for the Charles Willard we were seeking.

Wilderness Research
We then turned our attention to the "wilderness" Internet. There is no shortage of search engines, so we encourage you to utilize your favorite search engine. We used three search engines here that work well for us. Before testing these three, however, we have some general recommendations on name searching to make.

1. Conduct different searches for each possible name variation. For example, a search for Chas Willard will return different results from a search for Charles Willard. Even the initials C.M. Willard would merit a search.

2. Enclose the name you are searching in quotation marks. If you enter only Charles Willard, for example, some search engines will look for occurrences of the word Charles and the word Willard on the same Web page–not necessarily together. Putting the key words in quotes instructs the search engine to locate the words together on a particular Web page. Thus, "Charles Willard" should yield more accurate results than Charles Willard.

3. Conduct a search with the key words in reverse order. For example, try "Willard, Charles" as well as "Charles Willard." In some genealogical references, names are written in reverse order.

4. Try the same search string on more than one search engine. While there is some overlap of the pages and sites searched, there is enough of a difference to justify using different search engines. Listed below are the overall results of our search through the "wilderness" Internet. On the left are the three search engines we chose to use and on the right are the number of hits or potential name matches each search engine found.

As you can see, the results when not using quotes are unmanageable. Using quotation marks helps reduce the number of hits.

CHARLES MORSE WILLARD		
SEARCH ENGINE	No Quotes	Quotes
Google.com	10,600	0
Altavista.com	5,762,846	0
Excite.com	65,805	0

WILLARD, CHAS		
SEARCH ENGINE	No Quotes	Quotes
Google.com	9,540	18
Altavista.com	388,198	9
Excite.com	47,155	5

CHARLES WILLARD		
SEARCH ENGINE	No Quotes	Quotes
Google.com	163,000	2,220
Altavista.com	5,530,492	1,204
Excite.com	865,310	240

Step 3: Investigate Every Lead
Needless to say, investigating your leads is the time-consuming part of Internet research. However, all it takes is one success and the time spent is worthwhile.

One of the real potential benefits of genealogical research on the Internet is that your search might lead to someone who has done considerable research on your particular family. It is entirely possible that this individual has made his or her research available in the form of a GEDCOM file, which you could download to your computer and merge into your database. Remember to check the new file carefully before merging. First, you do not need all the information the other person entered. Second, check for sources. Do not blindly accept an undocumented GEDCOM file. Incorrect or unsupported research can cause you a great deal of frustration and easily lead to erroneous conclusions.

Step 4: Record Your Information
Keep your pedigree charts and family group sheets handy. As you discover potential information, enter it in pencil into the appropriate place. Do not write information in pen until you have verified the data. If you are using a software program to store your research, copy and paste the data from a Web site into a genealogy software program. This can be useful if you discover text on the Internet that relates to your ancestor.

Step 5: Document Your Sources
Research on the Internet requires the same source documentation as any other research. Keep an accurate research log and record the source data meticulously. Remember, someday someone is certain to ask you where found your information.

Step 6: Verify Your Information
Take the time to independently verify any information you discover on the Internet. One of the real concerns is that researchers accept data they find on the Internet and make it part of their own project without verifying it. This is the type of error that seems to compound itself as it gets passed on from one person to another. Finding supporting proof and recording that proof goes a long way toward solving this problem.

Yes, the Internet has changed the face of genealogy forever. But we must remember that it is just

one more tool we have at our disposal. As with the other tools we use, we must learn to use it wisely and responsibly.

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