



How to Begin Genealogical Research

As the depository of the Federal Government's records deemed of permanent value for historical purposes, the National Archives and Records Administration houses many records that can be helpful to persons who wish to trace their ancestry. However, the search cannot be completed at NARA alone. Many other sources and depositories should be consulted. Here are suggestions about ways to go about finding your ancestors.

Start With Yourself

You are the beginning "twig" on your vast family tree. Start with yourself, the known, and work toward the unknown. Find out all the vital information you can about your parents and write it down. Then find out about your grandparents, great-grandparents, etc.

Look for Names, Dates, Places, and Relationships

You will be concerned with pulling four key items from the many and varied documents of recorded history: *names, dates, places, and relationships*. These are the tools of the family searcher. People can be identified in records by their names, the dates of events in their lives (birth, marriage, death), the places they lived, and by relationships to others, either stated or implied, in the records.

Begin at Home

The place to begin is at home. Here you can find much information in family bibles, newspaper clippings, military certificates, birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, naturalization certificates, diaries, letters, scrapbooks, photographs, backs of photographs, baby books, and many other documents.

Relatives as Sources

Visit, telephone, or write those in your family who may have information, particularly older relatives. More often than not, others before you have gathered data about the families in which you are interested. Write a letter, make a personal visit, or perform a telephone survey to find out about such persons and what information has already been collected. In addition to possessing vital information, family members may also know family stories that can be collected and preserved for future generations and may assist in your continuing research.

Federal Records

The National Archives and Records Administration maintains records that are of great use to genealogical researchers. The U.S. federal census which was taken every ten years since 1790 is a very important source and, thanks to partnerships between NARA and other organizations, all censuses taken more than 72 years ago have been made available to the public on-line. The National Archives and Records Administration also holds records documenting military service, passenger arrival, naturalization, taxation, court actions, land ownership, and much more.

State Records

Every state also has their own Archives. State archives hold records of great value to genealogists. Some of these records include state censuses, military records, bounty land records, court records, prison records, and much more.

County Records

There are many records held by the individual counties in each state. Some of these include deed records, probate records, criminal and civil court records, tax records, and voting records. All of these records have the potential for being good sources of genealogical data. Such records are normally in the county courthouses although some original documents have been filmed by different organizations and can be viewed elsewhere. Often, the earliest county records or copies of them are available in state archives.

Birth, Marriage, and Death Records

Some states began to keep records of births and deaths earlier, but for most of the United States, birth and death registration became a requirement between 1890 and 1915. Before that time, these events will generally be found recorded only in church records and family bibles. Most marriages will be found recorded in county records which sometimes date to the establishment of the county. Don't overlook funeral home records, obituaries, cemetery records, and gravestone inscriptions.

Church Records

Investigate the possibility of finding genealogical data in the records of the church to which your ancestor belonged. A few churches have records of important events in the lives of members and provide valuable information for family historians.

Libraries, Societies, and Archives

Visit the state, regional, and local institutions in your area. Libraries, family history centers, historical and genealogical societies and non-government archival repositories are all good sources for genealogical and family history data and may hold things such as newspapers, private papers of individuals, and records of private organizations.