Who Were MY Ancestors? Beginning Genealogical Research

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Getting Started

Genealogical research involves finding sources that establish relationships between a person and their ancestors. Sometimes these sources are documents created at the time of an event, such as a birth or death certificate. At other times, these sources might only point to an event, and its up to the genealogist to fill in the complete picture.

Research typically begins with home sources. These are documents found around the home, or perhaps around the home of a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other relative. These documents might include birth, death, and marriage certificates, land deeds, military discharge papers, obituaries, insurance policies, church programs, family bibles, or a pile of old photographs. You might even get lucky and find a stack of old letters, a scrap book, or a diary. Also, talk to your older relatives. Most people know the names of their parents and many know the names of their grandparents. Your grandmother's grandmother is your great-great grandmother. If you ask them, they can often provide information that would take a great deal of research to find on your own.

Once you have assembled all of your home sources, begin combining the information onto genealogical charts, specifically four-generation charts[1] and family group sheets[2]. These can be downloaded from the St. Louis County Library's website. Write what you know to be absolute fact in ink, but if you aren't certain write it in pencil.

The information can be kept on paper or it can be maintained through the use of genealogical software. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, so use the method you are most comfortable with.

Your home sources need to get your research back to someone who was alive in 1940. It really doesn't matter who that was or how old they were in 1940. They just need to have been alive then. This is because the 1940 U.S. Federal Census is the most recent census to be released to the public. The 1950 Census will become available in April 2022.

Types of Records

The U.S. Government is constitutionally required to take a population census every ten years. The first one was taken in 1790 and the most recent in 2020. To preserve privacy, however, the census bureau releases them 72 years after the date they were taken.

Each decade's census asks different questions. For example, the 1930 Census asked if the household owned a radio. They did not ask that question before 1930 because radios were not very

common. They do not ask it now because they know everyone has one. Typical questions include name, age, gender, marital status, occupation, state (or foreign country) of birth and state (or foreign country) of his or her parents' birth.

In 2020, searching census records is relatively easy. They are available online and fully indexed on Ancestry and a number of other websites. Start with the 1940 Census and work backward in time to 1930, 1920, 1910, and so on. As you move backward in time you will see parents becoming children and living with their own parents. To learn more about using census records, take our free class, 103 | *Finding Ancestors in U.S. Census Records.*

Birth, marriage and death records are called vital records.. They are a very important source of information about your ancestors. Marriage records were often kept relatively early, but most states did not begin keeping birth and death records until the early part of the Twentieth Century.

Courthouse records include land, wills & probate, tax records, and often vital records. While a visit to the courthouse might be necessary, more and more these are digitized on FamiySearch.

Church records can be another great source for information. Denominations that practice infant baptism typically record birth information in the baptism records. Churches also keep records of marriages and funerals.

In many cases, FamilySearch digitized vital, courthouse, and church records. For information on how to find them, take our free classes, 204 | *Family Search Basics* and 205 | *Getting More out of Family Search.*

Immigration and naturalization records might be useful to help researchers find their ancestors place of origin overseas. These are not the only records that might contain this information, so check other resources too. To learn more about immigration and naturalization research, take our free class 301 | *Finding Immigrant European Ancestors.*

Military records, including service records and pension files can be a wonderful source of information about our ancestors. Once you discover where an individual served, check for unit histories in addition to personal records. To learn more about military research, take our class 302 | *Discovering Ancestral Military Veterans.*

Funeral home records and cemetery records can provide information about your ancestors. The records typically include a date of death and a date of burial. Sometimes they include a birthdate too. If the individual was buried in a family plot, you can often learn about other family members. Even if your ancestor is buried in a single grave, it is likely other family members are buried at the same cemetery. FindAGrave.com and BillionGraves.com have cemetery information from around the world.

Newspapers have existed since the earliest days of the settlement of what is now the United States. Historically, they have been difficult to search and therefore tend to be an underutilized resource. Databases, such as *Newspapers.com* and *NewspaperARCHIVE* have made it much easier to find articles about your ancestors. To learn more about newspaper research, take our free class: 104 | History and Genealogy in Newspapers.

City and county directories offer a glimpse into our ancestor's lives. They can be used fo answer uestions such as "Where did my ancestor live?" or "what was their occupation?" *To learn more about using directories, take our free class 303 | Using City and County Directories in Family History Research.*

Cardinal Rules

As you continue your research, remember the Seven Cardinal Rules.[3]

1. Work from the known to the unknown.

    Start with yourself and work back through your ancestry. Although it seems tempting to jump ahead, your future success depends on building a solid foundation. Brick walls aren't discovered, they are built.

2. Have a plan

    Think about what you want to research today. Narrow your focus to what you are actually going to work on immediately. Try to phrase things a specific questions, such as "Where and when was my great-grandfather born?' or "When did my grandmother move to St. Louis?" By answering specific questions you can build your research. Don't go looking for records, see out evidence.

3. Be Flexible

    Flexibility means two things in Genealogy. The first involves abandoning your preconceived notions. Uncle Cooter might actually be Clarence, or George. Junior might actually have the same first name as his grandfather not his father. The second point of flexibility comes in your research. If your search for your great-grandfather's birth place and date unearths a treasure trove of information about your great-grandmother's family be flexible enough to change your focus and accept the gift in hand.

4. Prove it!

    Genealogical research is based on proof. Other people's research is not proof (especially if their research consists of undocumented online trees). The Genealogical Proof Standard is your friend. Learn how to use it.

5. Cite your sources.

    Citing your sources is a part of genealogical proof. It allows you to find the information again and re-evaluate it if things seem to be going off track. Likewise, it allows future researchers to find the same information and understand your thinking.

6. Beware the internet, message boards, and online trees.

    The internet has done great things for genealogical research. Materials sored hundreds and even thousands of miles away are now accessible. At the same time, however, it has allowed all sorts of people to publish questionable material on online trees, message boards, and even family web pages. You must learn to distinguish between these types of data.

7. Get and stay organized.

    One of the hardest parts of this research is staying organized. It will be a lot easier if you start organized and stay that way. Use the standard genealogical forms. Write the source citations on any copies you make (if it is a digital copy put the source in the file name). Piles of unidentified papers and looking up the same record over and over again will otherwise bye the genealogist's curse.

The Library Catalog

Found at www.slcl.org, the library's catalog is the gateway to the print collection of the library. Our catalogers spend time evaluating each new book we receive and creating a detailed record about it. The more detail they put in, the easier it is to find a book that covers an individual subject. *You can learn more about the catalog and other library resources in our free class, 102 | Library Skills for Genealogical Research.*

History & Genealogy

History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library began in 1998 when the St. Louis Genealogical Society donated their collection of over 20,000 volumes. Since that time additional collections, including the National Genealogical Society Book Loan Collection, the Julius K. Hunter and Friends African American Research Collocation, among others, our collection has grown to over 100,000 resources.

History & Genealogy also provides access to a number of subscription databases to help with your research. Among these are AncestryLibraryEdition, FindMyPast, Fold3, HeritiageQuest and many others Many of the databases are accessible from home with a valid St. Louis County Library Card. Free classes on these databases and other genealogical topics are presented regularly around the St. Louis County Library System.

The staff at History & Genealogy created research guides to our collection. The guides describe resources available in our collection for specific subjects such as states, and ethnicities. They can be found on our website[4].

Genealogical research tells us something about who we are and from where we came. We often learn amazing stories of our ancestors that we previously knew nothing about. Where will your research take you?

NOTES:

[1]Four Generation Chart at https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/HG%20four%20generation%20chart_0.pdf
[2]Family Group Sheet at https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/HG%20family%20group%20sheet.pdf
[3]Franke, Larry, *Who Were my Ancestors? Beginning Genealogical Research*. Presented many
   times at all branches of St. Louis County Library, St. Louis County Library Program,
   2009—2020.
[4]Collection guides are at https://www.slcl.org/content/subject-guides-history-genealogy-department

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