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presents

Build a Family Story
Step by Step

by
Sunny Jane Morton

Build a Family Story



Sunny Morton is a Contributing Editor at Family Tree Magazine and YourDNAGuide.com. She is past Editor of Ohio Genealogy News. Book credits include [*How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records*](#) (co-author) and [*Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy*](#). Find her at www.sunnymorton.com.

Turn findings into sentences

Get inspired by auto-generated tools that turn your tree into a timeline or narrative: Ancestry.com LifeStory timeline and FamilySearch timelines and life summaries

FamilySearch template:

When NAME was born on BIRTH DATE in BIRTHPLACE, her father, FATHER'S NAME, was FATHER'S AGE AT NAME'S BIRTH and her mother, MOTHER'S NAME, was MOTHER'S AGE AT NAME'S BIRTH. She married SPOUSE on MARRIAGE DATE in MARRIAGE PLACE. They were the parents of at least X CHILDREN. She lived in RESIDENCE in YEAR and RESIDENCE in YEAR. [Add other residences, military service, education, etc. here.] She died on DEATH DATE in DEATH PLACE, at the age of AGE AT DEATH.

Birth record: According to the civil birth record, NAME was born on DATE to MOTHER'S NAME and FATHER'S NAME. He/she was born in BIRTHPLACE.

Census: According to the federal census, the SURNAME family lived in PLACE in YEAR. ADULT NAME (AGE), who was born in BIRTHPLACE, was working as a JOB; ADULT NAME (AGE), who was born in BIRTHPLACE, was working as a JOB. They had been married X years. Living with them were children NAME (AGE), NAME (AGE), and NAME (AGE). [Refine with specifics and observational commentary, such as "The children were all under the age of 6" or "They appear to have lived in an apartment building with 23 other families."]

Find the story elements

Beginning, middle, end: What happened over time?

- Follow them in repeating records, such as censuses, city directories or children's vital records
- Do the math, and watch for patterns or changes. When were relatives born/when did they die? How long did they live somewhere? How many jobs, marriages/relationships, or children did they have? When were moments of big change?
- Create a [timeline](#) using all the records you have
- Watch for any "story arc:" what is the narrative that emerges over time?



The "so what" factor: Why does this story matter? How did that person or family change? How did their experiences impact future generations (even you)?

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Census enumerator instructions

Not that they always followed the directions, but it helps to know what the answers were supposed to mean....

- [Original instructions for census-takers \(1790-2010\)](#)
- [Easy-to-read transcripts \(1850-1950\)](#)
- [Occupation and other codes used in census, 1910-1950](#)

Official census dates

1790: August 2	1890: June 2
1800: August 4	1900: June 1
1810: August 6	1910: April 15
1820: August 7	1920: January 1
1830-1880: June 1	1930-1950: April 1

Find record types that tell stories FOR you

- Newspapers, including obituaries
- Court records of all kinds
- Military service/pension records
- Published family histories

[My son's favorite ancestor: Chief, the fire dog](#)

Research the backstory

- Read history books or articles about your relative's locale, occupation, time period, migration path, life experiences (of women, ethnic minorities, etc.)
- Ask specific questions: see if a research librarian can help you find answers

Resources for finding historical books, articles, documentaries, interviews, maps and photos

- [HistoryPin website tour](#)
- [The Genealogist's Google Toolbox](#), 3rd edition by Lisa Louise Cooke
- [Using Google Books to Find Your Ancestors in Family History Books](#) by Rick Crume
- [Google Scholar for Genealogy? Here's Why to Try It](#) by Lisa Louise Cooke (look for histories from a social, medical, economic, ethnic, labor, religion, migration perspective, etc.)
- [Periodical Source Index at Allen County Public Library website](#)
- [Using PERSI: A quick video tour](#) by Sunny Jane Morton
- [JSTOR for Genealogists](#)
- Oral history interviews (see [Centers and Collections](#), Oral History Association)

Example: "[Andrew O'Hotnicky: Slovakian Firefighter](#)" by Sunny Jane Morton