

INSIDE START THE NEW YEAR WITH AI FOR GENEALOGY

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AI for Genealogy

A User's Guide

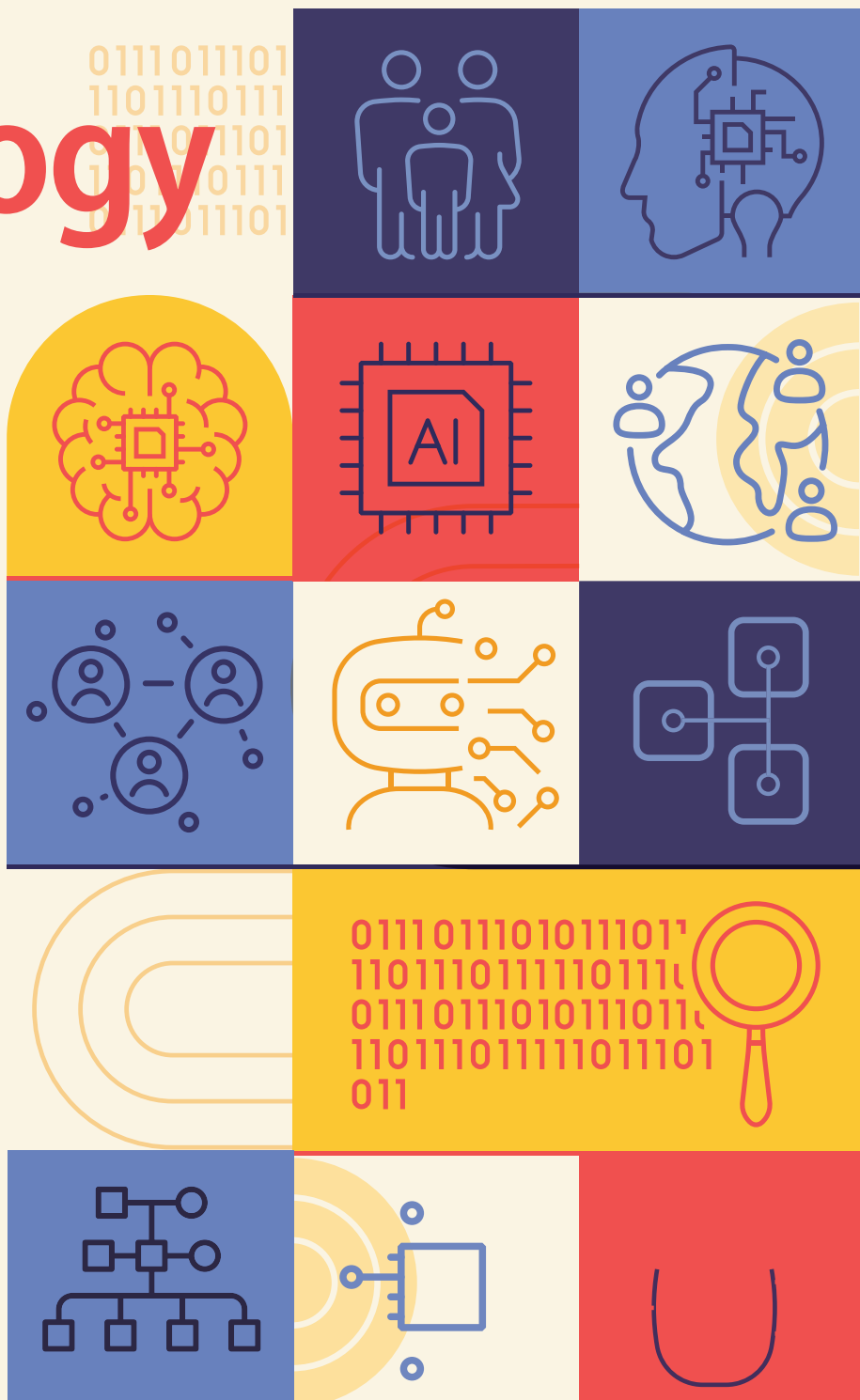
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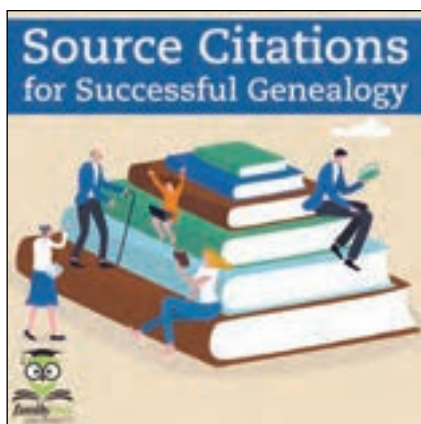
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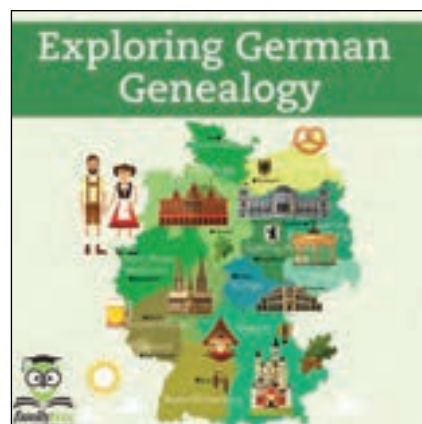
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COVER: JULIE BARNETT
 (SOURCES: CNYTHZL/ISTOCK; ADOBE STOCK)

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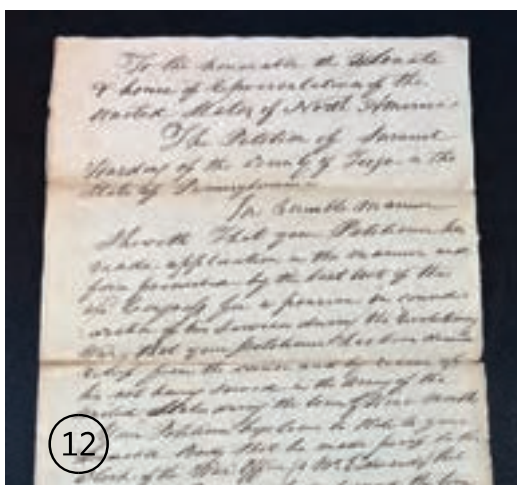
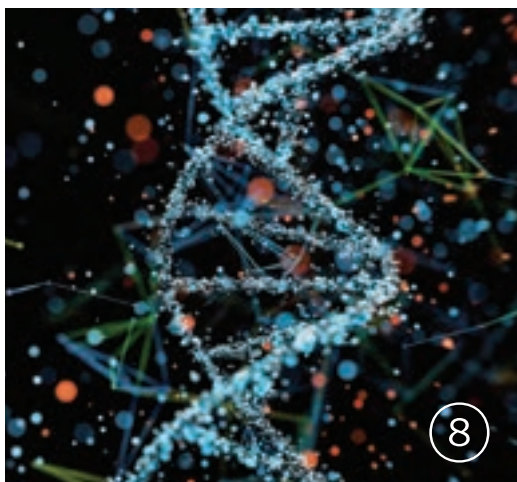
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out on a limb



Be more human: That's the advice we in the publishing industry nervously repeat back to each other whenever someone mentions AI.

Technology advances at an alarming rate and raises uncomfortable questions about both AI's usefulness and its potential to disrupt society. Will AI force people out of the workforce? Do we need to fear malevolent uses of AI? How will we know what's real and what isn't once AI has fully mastered "deepfakes"?

I can't write faster than ChatGPT. But I do have some things AI never will: humanity. A soul. Ancestors of my own who inspire me. And (I hope) an ability to connect with readers and share my own experiences. Time will tell if that's enough to stave off our potential AI overlords, but I like our chances.

We wrestle with the genealogical uses of AI in on page 14—both in terms of what chatbots like ChatGPT *can* and *can't* do well. In a similar way, we delve deep into the mechanics of finding ancestors in search engines on page 22.

In the spirit of "being more human," we also explore the personal side of family history. Our Stories to Tell column (page 12) shares a touching, real-life case study in each issue. And our articles on public land (page 42) and immigration (page 50) encourage you to think about not just your family's names and dates, but also their stories and the decisions they made.

Genealogy is nothing without a human connection—that's what attracted many of us in the first place. And I promise this note wasn't written by AI. ●

Letters to the Editor

FOLLOWING THE NORTH STAR

I am a part-time librarian in my hometown of Bourbon County, Kentucky. One of my job duties is helping people with genealogical research. Your September/October was most interesting because of the article “Cultural Icons” (page 14). People often share with me that they see symbols on gravestones but have no idea what they mean. Joy Neighbors’ article was very informative.

However, there were two symbols that were not mentioned or shown. As an African American, I have seen in some very old cemeteries the symbol of the “Big Dipper” on headstones and on others, the “North Star.” They usually mean that a slave or former slave was buried in that particular spot. Hope this is helpful.

Sharon F. via email

GRAVE MISTAKES

I enjoyed the web article on fact-checking Find a Grave memorials <www.familytreemagazine.com/websites/fact-check-find-a-grave> (see page 5). I would like to add to what was discussed: The difficulty in citing sources easily leads to the perpetuation of misinformation or unsupported info.

For example, memorial 75571255 for Richard Scruggs, son of Henry and Anne (Gross) Scruggs, has him as being buried in the New Pleasant View Baptist Church Cemetery in Cherokee



County, South Carolina. It doesn’t include a photo of the tombstone. There is no evidence that Richard and his wife ever left New Kent County, Virginia, and that only his son, Richard, did.

The person who created this memorial had Richard’s grandfather (also named Richard) being buried in Jamestown. All of his property was in New Kent County. Why would the family take him all the way to Jamestown for burial when his family members were members of St. Peter’s Parish in New Kent? Typical crowd-sourced garbage.

Bill K. via email

Letters may be edited for length, clarity and punctuation. Send your questions and comments to FamilyTree@YankeePub.com.



Correction: Page 16 of the September/October 2025 issue (“Cultural Icons”) included the photo at left of a tombstone with a clock icon. The caption correctly stated that clocks on gravestones generally symbolize death and display the deceased’s time of death.

But it failed to capture the meaning of the *specific* tombstone in the photo. The *BPOE* indicates connection to the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks. In that context, a clock displaying the 11th hour refers to the society’s “Eleven O’Clock Toast” tradition, in which Elks remember their deceased companions at that time.

Thanks to reader Tracy W. for bringing this to our staff’s attention.

Web Highlight: Find a Grave Fact or Fiction



Fact-Checking Find a Grave Memorials: Tips for Genealogists

<www.familytreemagazine.com/websites/fact-check-find-a-grave>

Crowdsourced tombstone database Find a Grave <www.findagrave.com> can be an immensely useful resource—especially if you can't visit an ancestor's gravesite in person. The site's 250 million virtual memorials make tombstones accessible worldwide and for free.

But that ease of use and popularity come at a price: *Anyone* can upload tombstone information. And because Find

a Grave doesn't offer a simple way to cite sources, many users don't.

Furthermore, Find a Grave tends to attract a wider audience than other family history websites—including users who aren't necessarily familiar with genealogy conventions and best practices.

But with careful consideration and a discerning eye, genealogists *can* confidently use Find a Grave. In this article, *Family Tree Magazine* Editor Andrew Koch offers three steps for fact-checking the (sometimes dubious) details on the site.

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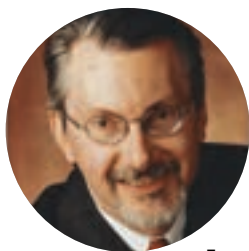


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Behind the Scenes: A Final Look at 25 Years



Founding Editor David A. Fryxell

THROUGHOUT 2025, we celebrated *Family Tree*'s 25th anniversary. Here's one more look back on 25 years of publishing, including some of the people who have shaped us over two and a half decades.



Former Editor Diane Haddad (left) and podcast host Lisa Louise Cooke select a raffle winner at the Federation of Genealogical Societies' conference in 2008.



In 25 years, *Family Tree Magazine* has had just four lead editors. Three of them are in this staff photo from 2018: Allison Dolan (née Stacy, sitting bottom right), Diane Haddad (sitting bottom left) and Andrew Koch (back, second from left).

Other staff members pictured, from left to right: Rachel Christian (née Fountain), social media manager; Vanessa Wieland, instructional designer; Julie Barnett, art director; Ashlee Peck, online content director.



Staff at the *Family Tree* booth at RootsTech 2025. From left to right: Tim Baldwin, advertising representative; Melina Papadopoulos, digital editor; Andrew Koch, editor; Amanda Epperson, eLearning producer; Katharine Andrew, digital editor; Jamie Trowbridge, publisher and CEO.



Family Tree Magazine's inaugural cover (January 2000, far left), plus commemorative anniversary covers for the 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th and 25th anniversaries.

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WHAT'S NEW

BY KATHARINE ANDREW

DNA Tool Roundup

MYHERITAGE DNA: WHOLE GENOME SEQUENCING

In October, MyHeritage announced its DNA tests had been upgraded to whole genome sequencing <blog.myheritage.com/2025/10/myheritage-upgrades-its-dna-tests-to-whole-genome-sequencing>. The upgrade represents a major shift in DNA technology and makes MyHeritage the first mainstream company to make the method widely available to consumers.

Most DNA tests for genealogy analyze only parts of the genome: small variations called single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). MyHeritage was among them until recently; its “genotyping array” test sampled about 700,000 base pairs.

By contrast, whole genome sequencing reads nearly all the genome (some 3 billion base pairs). This allows for more-detailed matches, ancestry insights, and ethnicity estimates—any of which could provide genetic genealogy breakthroughs.

Most test kits in progress at MyHeritage’s processing lab as of October were automatically upgraded to whole genome sequencing, and the company says it will soon be the exclusive method for processing all new kits moving forward.

Note that other kits in MyHeritage’s database will not be upgraded; those interested in whole genome sequencing will have to order and submit another test.



23ANDME: RECONSTRUCTED ANCESTORS

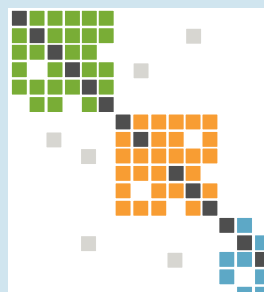


23andMe’s new Reconstructed Ancestors

tool <customercare.23andme.com/hc/en-us/articles/35757285869335-23andMe-Reconstructed-Ancestors-Overview> uses shared DNA between a test taker and their matches (as well as DNA relative data from tests matched to 23andMe’s Family Tree) to “rebuild” part of an ancestor’s genetic profile. This essentially shows what segments of an ancestor’s DNA have been passed down to you and other test takers.

As of this writing, Reconstructed Ancestors are available only to 23andMe+ Premium and Total Health members who have enrolled in the company’s beta-testing program. Its accuracy depends largely on the accuracy of the Family Tree; if relatives are misplaced in the Family Tree or left out of it altogether, Reconstructed Ancestors might blend the DNA of the wrong family members.

ANCESTRYDNA: CUSTOM CLUSTERS



Ancestry Pro Tools subscribers can now take advantage of Custom Clusters <www.ancestry.com/c/ancestry-blog/dna/using-custom-clusters-to-find-dna-matches>, a new advanced tool for grouping and analyzing matches.

Custom Clusters

automatically group DNA matches and present them in graph form, allowing the user to visualize the connections between them. Critically, the tool has customizable settings that allow users to refine clusters by adjusting centimorgan (cM) ranges and selecting specific matches of interest.

The tool is still in beta as of this writing. AncestryDNA expects all Pro Tools members to have access to Custom Clusters by December 2025.

2026 Genealogy Conference Preview

Name and URL	Date	Location	Virtual option?
Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy (SLIG) Virtual <slig.ugagenealogy.org/slig-virtual>	January 26–30	n/a (virtual only)	Yes
RootsTech 2026 <www.familysearch.org/rootstech>	March 5–7	Salt Lake City	Yes
National Genealogical Society 2026 Family History Conference <conference.ngsgenealogy.org>	May 27–30	Ft. Wayne, Ind.	Yes
GRIP Genealogy Institute [Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh] <grip.ngsgenealogy.org>	June 22–26 (virtual) July 12–17 (in-person)	Pittsburgh	Yes, as a separate event
Midwest African American Genealogy Institute (MAAGI) 2026 <www.maagiinstitute.org>	July 7–9	n/a (virtual only)	Yes
Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research (IGHR) 2026 <ighr.gagensociety.org/ighr-2026>	July 27–31	n/a (virtual only)	Yes
Foundation for East European Family History Studies (FEEFHS) Conference 2026 <www.feefhs.org>	August	To be announced	To be announced
International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) Annual Conference <www.iajgs2026.org>	To be announced	n/a (virtual only)	Yes
AAHGS Annual Conference [Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society] <www.aahgs.org>	To be announced		

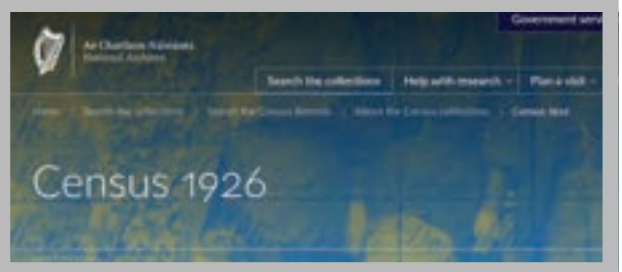
Find more events at ConferenceKeeper <www.conferencekeeper.org>; virtual events are collected at <www.conferencekeeper.org/virtual>.



NEW WEBSITE FOR FREEBMD

FreeBMD, the free, long-running resource for English and Welsh vital record indexes from the General Register Office, now has a redesigned website <freebmd2.org.uk>. Users can expect faster and more-efficient searches; autosuggest tools; refined filtering options; and improved citation and download capabilities. The site's design is also more accessible and responsive to mobile devices and tablets.

OUT SOON: THE 1926 CENSUS OF IRELAND



After 100 years, the Irish census of 1926 is expected to be released to the public in April. The count was the first conducted after the Irish Free State's creation and is also notable because the planned 1921 census was never taken. The National Archives of Ireland has digitized the census and created a landing page <www.nationalarchives.ie/collections/search-the-census/about-the-census-collections/census-1926>. Records of the nearly 2.9 million Irish counted in the census will be free to search. ●

Capturing Family Stories



▲ ON MY BOOKSHELF: *Buried Secrets*

Genealogists who relish unraveling family history mysteries will be captivated by *Buried Secrets: Looking for Frank and Ida* (New England Books). This memoir of author Anne Hanson traces her 20-year quest to uncover her grandparents' hidden identities, blending meticulous research with poignant storytelling. This page-turner reveals how love and loss reshaped a family's destiny, offering inspiration for your own genealogical sleuthing. Find it as a paperback, eBook and audiobook at <www.annehanson.com>.



Lisa Louise Cooke is the founder of the Genealogy Gems website and podcast <www.lisalouisecooke.com>.



▲ PRESERVING AND SHARING: *50 States, 50 Stories That Live in Us*

Every American family's history is part of *American* history, and Crista Cowan's "Stories that Live in Us" podcast beautifully illustrates that. With the 250th anniversary of America's independence on the horizon, host Crista Cowan has embarked on an ambitious project to share 50 intimate stories—one from each state.

I was honored to share my own Arizona-connected tale in Episode 71. Tune in on YouTube at <www.youtube.com/@CristaCowan> or your favorite podcasting app.



◀ RESEARCH TIP:

Create Better AI Prompts

The output you get from AI tools is only as good as the prompt you give them. Before you use AI to assist you with a genealogical task, use it to help you create the best prompt possible for that request. (See page 18 for more.) I like using Gemini's "Gems" feature <gemini.google.com/gems/create>, which includes a "magic wand" that rewrites and improves your prompt. If you use ChatGPT, try the AIPRM for ChatGPT browser extension <www.aiprm.com>, which adds a list of curated prompt templates and advanced features to the user interface.



▲ GET A GADGET:

Movo Wireless Microphone

Each of our living relatives holds a unique perspective on our family's history, and sometimes they're the last eyewitness to a pivotal event. With the Movo Wireless Microphone system <www.movophoto.com>, I'm ready at a moment's notice to capture their stories. It's so easy to use—just plug it into your phone and clip on the mics, then capture the conversation regardless of environment. It even comes with a handy carrying case and delivers professional-quality sound every time.

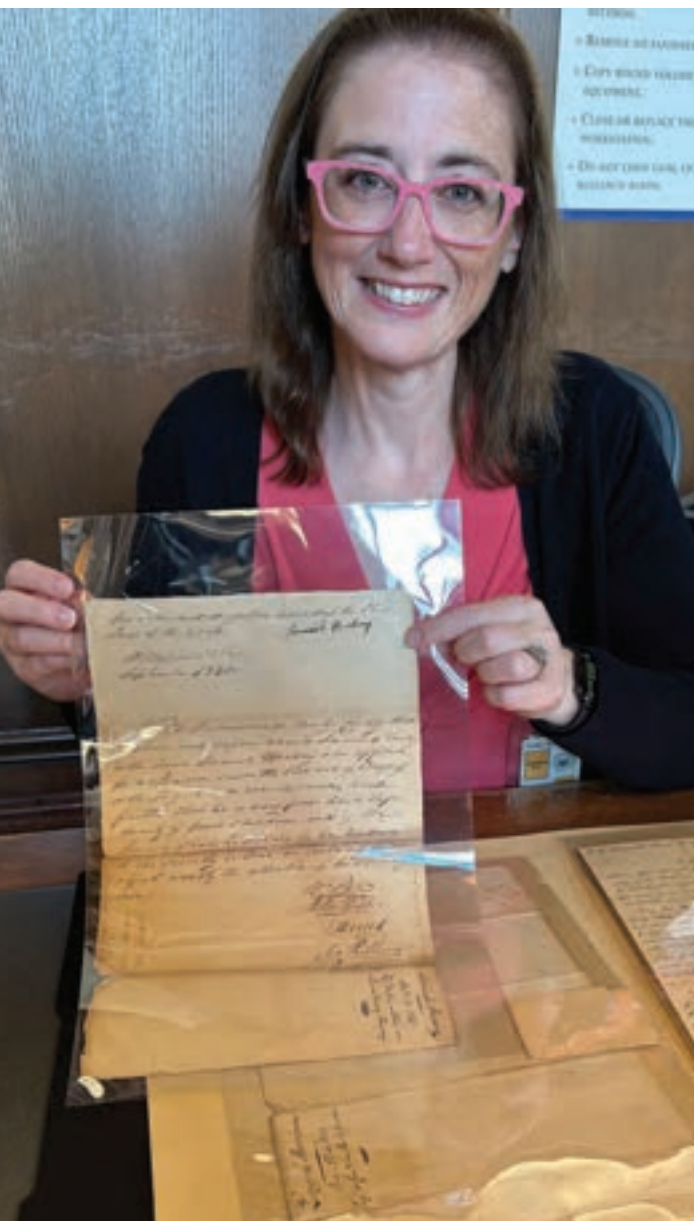


Photo digitally enhanced by Google Gemini, with a superimposed watermark disclosing and summarizing the edits

▲ TECH TOOLS: Adding Metadata to AI-Enhanced Photos

AI's power to revive and restore old family photos is certainly a game-changer, but it's important to be transparent about the edits we make and define the line between enhancements and originals. A small water mark is a helpful, simple option. But metadata embeds notes about restoration right in the file. Free, user-friendly tools include FastPhotoTagger <fastphototagger.sourceforge.net> (for PC and Android), the IrfanView Plug-in <www.irfanview.com/plugins.htm> and the intuitive Metadata++ editor <www.logipole.com/index.html> (for PC only). These keep your heirlooms honest, ensuring your family history endures with clarity and trust. ●

The More Glorious the Triumph



Jeanette Sheliga holds her ancestor Samuel Harding's affidavit asking the Committee on Military Pensions for pension approval, which included testimony to his financial need.

Pension documents uncover an untold story of strife in the life of a fabled Revolutionary War veteran.

As a teenager, Jeanette Sheliga saw a poster at a family dinner charting her ancestry back to the *Mayflower*. When she asked for details, her aunt shared a compiled family history of Samuel and Love Harding. It documented Samuel's Revolutionary War service and the Harding family's later connection to US president Warren G. Harding.

Sheliga was hooked—on both genealogy and her fifth-great-grandfather Samuel Harding. It was through his name that Sheliga's great-great-grandmother joined the Daughters of the American Revolution.

"My grandma told me about going as a child with her own grandma to DAR meetings," she says. "Her grandma would warn her ahead of time to behave herself."

Now a schoolteacher in Lockport, N.Y., Sheliga spends much of her vacation time on genealogy research and travel. She visited the DAR chapter house that her great-great-grandmother was a member of in Buffalo.

The Buffalo chapter scanned the original application to Sheliga—and she decided to join DAR herself. But getting accepted wasn't as simple as one might have thought.

"If someone in your direct line already joined, you usually only have to prove your lineage to her," she explains. "But earlier applications weren't as stringent with the rules, so I had to re-prove my lineage back to Samuel."

It was slow going. Sources for births, marriages and deaths are not always easy to find. But through dedicated work, she proved the line and was accepted.

However, Sheliga's most meaningful genealogical discoveries began *after* she successfully applied for DAR membership.

"Putting the pieces of Samuel's life in a timeline made me have a few a-ha moments," she says. "I didn't realize he was only 16 when he enlisted, and he went as somebody's substitute. I can't imagine someone going off to war at 16."

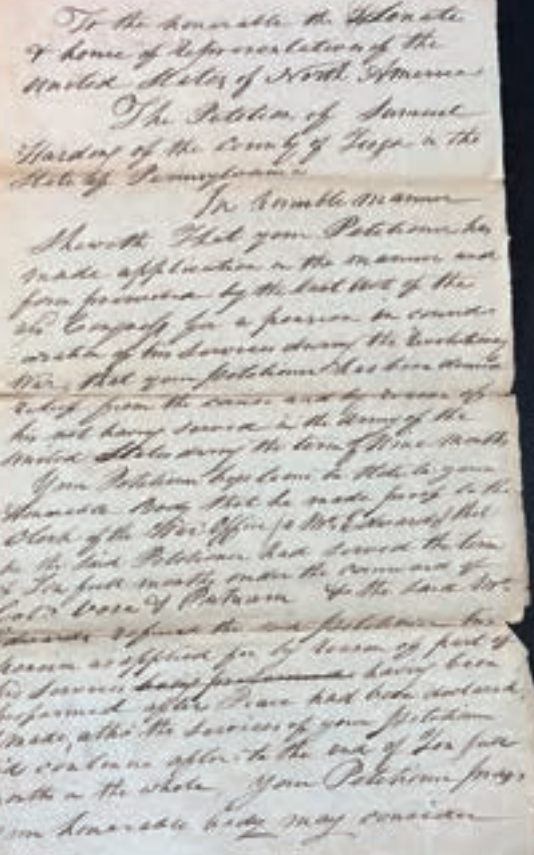
Samuel is well-documented because of his wide descendancy pool; nearly 40 women joined DAR under his name before Sheliga. But that doesn't mean everything that could be learned about him had already been found.



Sunny Jane Morton is contributing editor for *Family Tree Magazine* and editor of *NGS Magazine*.

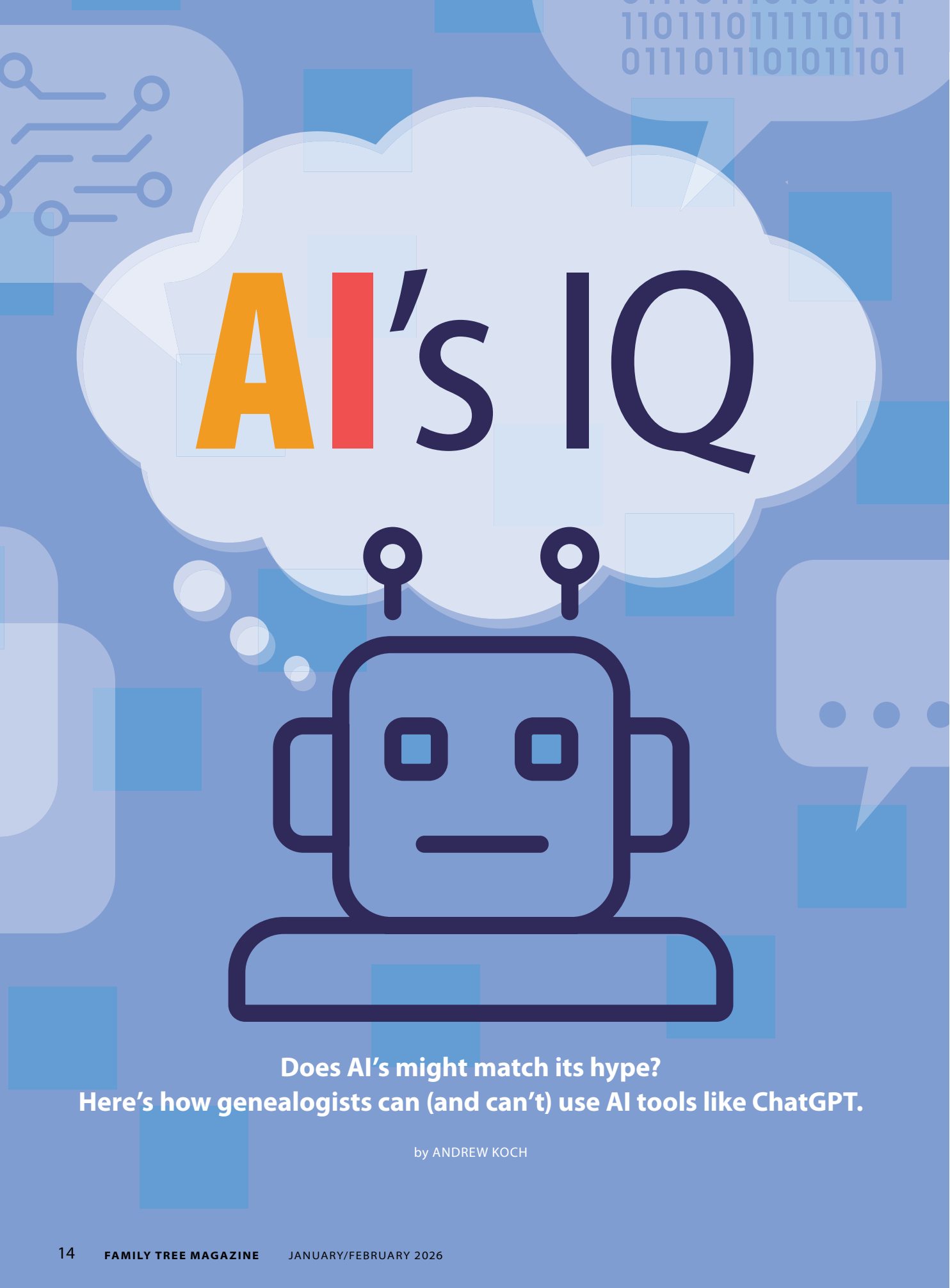


Below: Close-up view of Samuel Harding's affidavit to the Committee on Military Pensions, which Sheliga viewed at the National Archives



Apparently Samuel had been trying since at least 1818 to claim a pension. He enlisted very late in the war (February 1783) and was discharged months after its end. The committee denied his petition because pension legislation required nine months of service, and Samuel's months after the war weren't counted.

She'd romanticized Samuel as a successful farmer—not a poor man with 14 kids to feed. “Now that I have uncovered this portion of his story, I feel like I’ve really honored him and his legacy,” she says. ●



AI's IQ

**Does AI's might match its hype?
Here's how genealogists can (and can't) use AI tools like ChatGPT.**

by ANDREW KOCH

You can hardly watch the news, read an email, listen to a podcast, or open a newspaper without encountering a reference to artificial intelligence (AI). In fact, AI has changed how people get information—perhaps encouraging them to turn to chatbots instead of those more-traditional media sources.

The technology has even found its way into the genealogy community. I can't count the number of conference lectures, web articles, and Substack posts I've seen about the genealogical implications of AI. Social history research, image-generation and -editing, writing advice, organization—there's seemingly no limit to what AI can do.

But AI has been around for much longer than the recent hubbub would have you believe. Depending on how you define "AI," the tech has powered tools that genealogists have relied on for decades: record hints, optical character recognition, DNA matching, ethnicity estimates, and more.

It was the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT tool <www.chatgpt.com> in November 2022 that

AI has been around for much longer than the recent hubbub would have you believe.

captured the public's interest and signified chatbots' coming-of-age. The release of competing tools such as Claude <claude.ai>, Google's Gemini <gemini.google.com>, Microsoft's Copilot <copilot.microsoft.com>, Perplexity AI <www.perplexity.ai>, X's Grok <www.grok.com>, and even FamilySearch's AI Research Assistant reinforced how the technology can be used in a wide variety of settings for a wide variety of tasks.

How can genealogists, specifically, use ChatGPT and its competitors? We'll separate facts from fiction and its functions from fables. What follow are suggestions for how to use AI chatbots, plus specific genealogy prompts that will help you get the best results from them.

WHAT AI IS (AND ISN'T)

First, let's define some key terms. Most recent discussions about "AI" center on **generative AI** designed to create new content. That's one of the technologies that power **large language models (LLMs)**, tools trained on vast data sets with the goal of understanding human language and conversational tendencies.

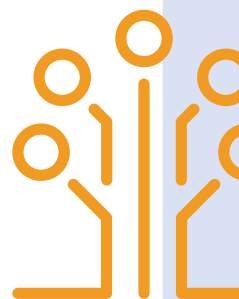
Once complete, an LLM such as ChatGPT is made available to users, who submit a **prompt** (usually as text) in an accessible, conversational-style **chatbot**. Then the tool uses its training in **natural language processing** to generate what it believes is an appropriate response.

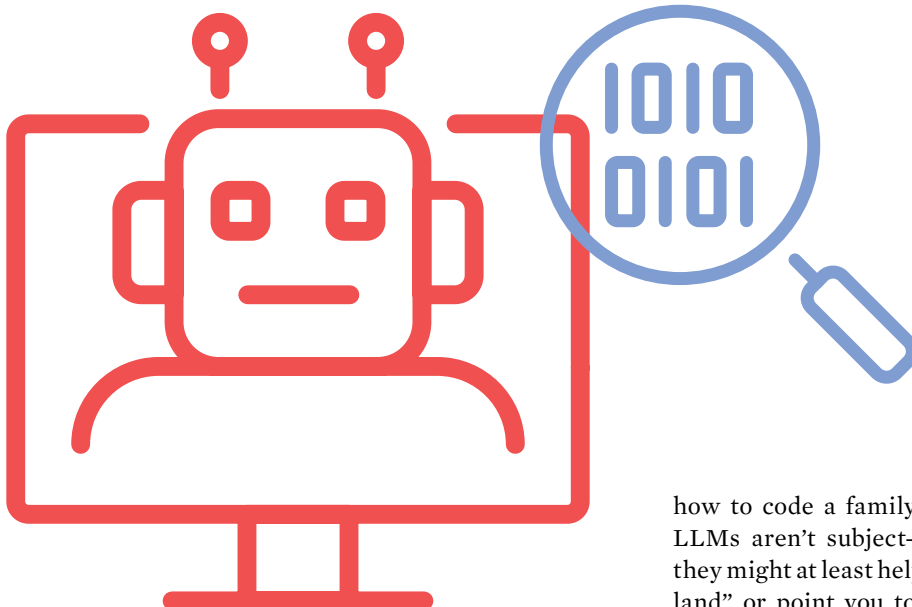
It's important to note that LLMs don't "think" to provide answers. (That would be **artificial general intelligence**, and remains out of reach at present.) Instead, they predict what a response to your query *should be* based on the billions of texts and conversations they've studied. LLMs have thus been described as "auto-complete on steroids."

WHAT AI CAN DO WELL

With that in mind, LLMs do well with tasks that are rote and don't require much creativity.

In a June 2024 interview with the Family Tree Magazine Podcast <www.familytreemagazine.com/podcasts/mastering-chatgpt-for-genealogy>, Steve Little (AI program director





for the National Genealogical Society) compared chatbots to really smart interns—they can’t do original research for you, but they’re useful assistants when given the right instructions.

Here are some tasks LLMs can perform reasonably well at the time of this writing:

- **Summarizing:** Review complicated documents (including those that are handwritten) and provide key points.
- **Extracting, organizing and curating data:** Sort items in a list, pull information from a long document, or create templated outputs such as timelines or source citations.
- **Looking for patterns:** Count how often a phrase appears, or compare the text of two documents.
- **Transcribing or translating:** Convert an image into searchable, editable text. Receive suggestions for what foreign-language or archaic words might mean; we discuss how accurate AI is when translating foreign-language records at www.familytreemagazine.com/resources/genealogy-translation-tools.
- **Brainstorming:** Get ideas for your next research project, family history craft, reunion giveaway item, or book outline. Not all of an LLM’s suggestions will suit your needs, but they may help you think more broadly or consider new perspectives.
- **Teaching the basics of a subject:** Learn surface-level information about a topic relevant to your genealogy: an unfamiliar term, a period of social history, or even

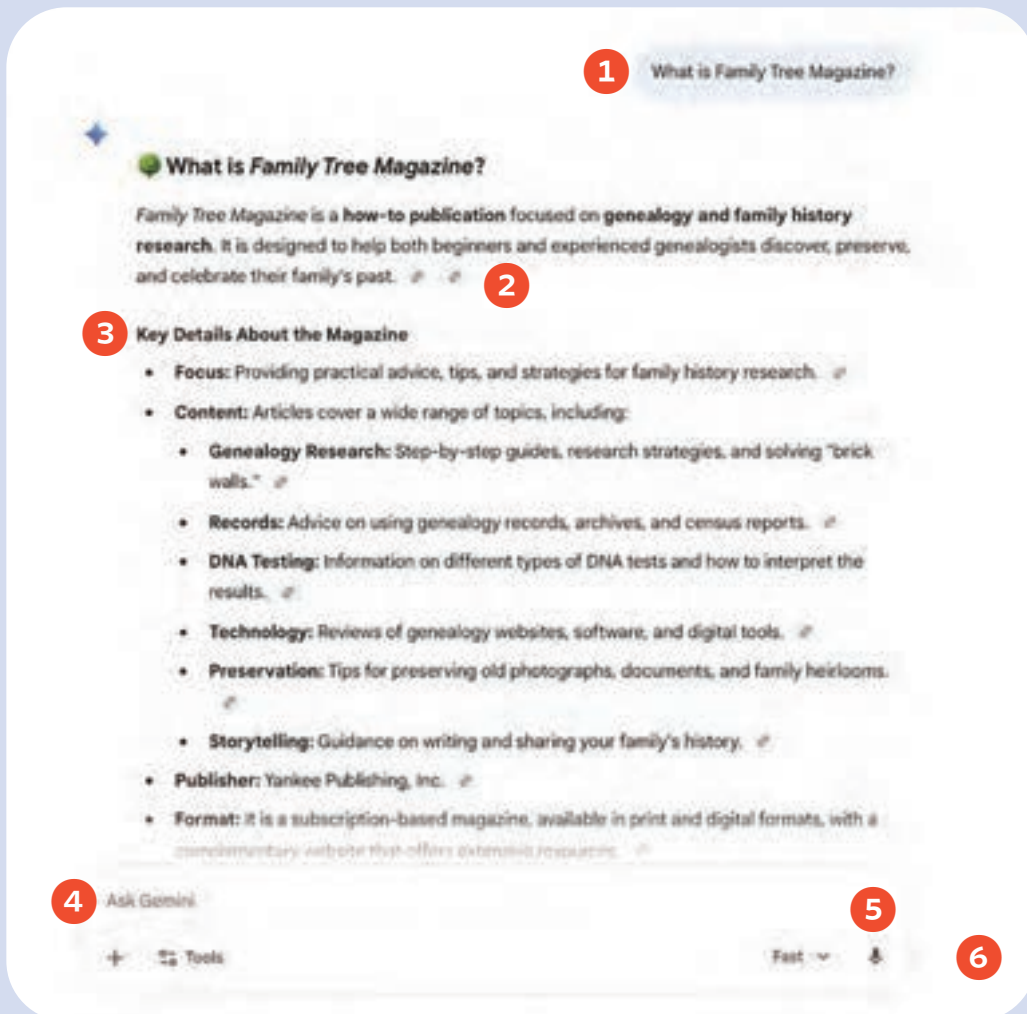
how to code a family website in HTML. LLMs aren’t subject-matter experts, but they might at least help you get a “lay of the land” or point you to more-authoritative resources. (As we’ll discuss later, be sure to fact-check any information you get from a chatbot.) In a similar way, AI can be used as a spelling- or grammar-check; some teachers and publishers even use it to check for plagiarism.

WHAT AI CAN’T DO WELL

As you might expect, AI still struggles with tasks that don’t fit into the aforementioned categories: those that require critical thinking or novel ideas. LLMs get “smarter” every year, but they still fall short at the following (as of late 2025):

- **Conducting original research:** You shouldn’t expect chatbots to provide new-to-you information about specific ancestors. They cannot access genealogy databases like Ancestry.com www.ancestry.com or FamilySearch www.familysearch.org, nor are they savvy enough to analyze online family trees. And because chatbots have a prime directive to answer your question, they’ll confidently give you detailed answers—even if they’re not based in reality.
- **Completing deep record analysis:** Chatbots are heavily text-based and haven’t been trained on genealogy record formats. As a result, they may struggle to make sense of records that aren’t simple blocks of text—for example, extracting details from the columns of a census page. They also don’t have the expertise to determine what individual facts in a record might mean. For

Sample AI Prompt: What is *Family Tree Magazine*?



Google Gemini chatbot interface, with prompt and response

1 Text prompts: Experts recommend more-specific wording than what we've included here. Prompts remain on screen, allowing users to review or even edit them.

2 Sources: Click nearby icons to review the LLM's sources for yourself. The top resource for this response was the University of Illinois Library, not *Family Tree Magazine's* actual website.

3 Accuracy: Don't take an LLM's word at face value—it has a tendency to "hallucinate" when not given adequate instructions. In this case, Gemini correctly identified key features about *Family Tree*. The Format bullet point, however, sourced the website of the UK publication of the same name.

4 Follow-up questions: You can ask an LLM to revise its answer (e.g., by getting more specific or more explicitly citing a source). Click the plus icon to attach files such

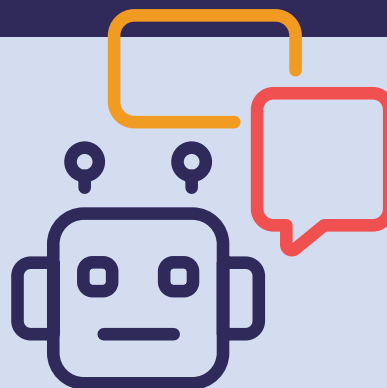
as PDFs, spreadsheets, or Word documents.

5 Voice-to-text: You can also speak a prompt and Gemini will transcribe it. Check that the tool didn't mishear you before you hit Submit.

6 More options: Scroll down to give the response a simple Like or Dislike. You can also have the LLM reprocess the prompt, share/export the response, or copy the response's text.

Genealogy Prompts for AI Chatbots

Chatbots can be immensely helpful family history tools—if you give them the right instructions. Below are chatbot prompts for various tasks that we tested using Google Gemini <gemini.google.com>. See <www.familytreemagazine.com/resources/apps/ai-genealogy-prompts> for more.



RESEARCH TASKS	PROMPTS
Summarize a long document	<i>Imagine you're a genealogist reviewing old land records for family history details. Analyze the attached record of a real-estate transaction and provide a summary of its key terms.</i>
Identify trends in data	<i>Say you're a statistician reviewing the open-response results of a survey of genealogy society members. Read the responses in the attached PDF and summarize 10 key recommendations from responses.</i>
Suggest a research plan	<i>Imagine you're a genealogist who has two hours to spend on research. You need to accomplish the following tasks: [list tasks]. Provide a suggested itinerary for a two-hour research session that efficiently completes these tasks.</i>
	<i>Say you're researching an ancestor who lived in 1800s New York City. You have already found him in census records. What other genealogy records should you look for him in?</i>
Define basic terms or provide an overview of a topic	<i>Imagine you're a high school science teacher preparing a lesson on genetics. Create a table that defines the different kinds of DNA (autosomal DNA, Y-DNA, and mitochondrial DNA).</i>
ORGANIZATION TASKS	PROMPTS
Sort data	<i>Sort the following names into alphabetical order by last name: Albert Smith, Joy Jones, Terrence Melchior, Roberto Flores, Victoria Jones, Sarah Woodson, Adam Jansen.</i>
Make a timeline or source citation	<i>Imagine you're a genealogist studying the history of the Smith family. Analyze the following obituary for Albert Smith and generate a chronological timeline of his life.</i>
	<i>Using the Chicago Manual of Style, generate a source citation for a 1950 census record of New York City found online at FamilySearch.org.</i>
CREATIVE and STORYTELLING TASKS	PROMPTS
Brainstorm ideas	<i>You're a family historian planning genealogy-related Christmas gifts for your loved ones. List 10 gift ideas that incorporate family history.</i>
Generate writing prompts or interview questions	<i>Say you're an aspiring author who wants to write and publish a memoir about your life. Create a list of 50 writing prompts that can serve as the basis for a memoir.</i>
Proof text for spelling, grammar, etc.	<i>Imagine you're a newspaper copy editor. Read the text in the attached document and list any spelling, grammar or punctuation errors.</i>

example: what other records to consult or what other people were involved.

- **Making something new:** Because it's trained on existing information, AI struggles to produce anything that's truly novel. AI-written text, for example, still usually reads as stiff and inhuman, though it's getting harder to distinguish it from text written by a human. And, as previously stated, LLMs are also not entirely up-to-date—their training only includes materials up to a certain date, so more-recent information might not register with them.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN USING AI

As we've seen, LLMs have their strengths and weaknesses. Based on the way LLMs are created and used, genealogists should keep the following in mind.

Trustworthiness

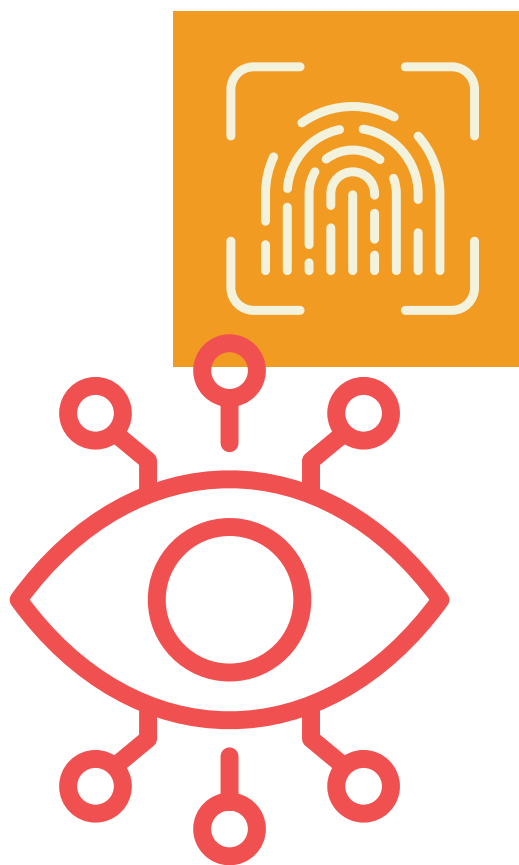
Chatbots aren't fonts of knowledge—not truly, anyway. They're large language models, and are primarily trained on the relationships between words. Unlike a search engine, their goal isn't retrieving information: it's predicting an answer to your question based on what words are likely to come next.

That means chatbots have a tendency to be overconfident when answering questions, presenting untrue information as fact (and even reneging on it if called out in a follow-up). Developers charitably call these **"hallucinations."** LLMs also reflect the biases of the data sets they were trained on; they can perpetuate racial or gender stereotypes, urban legends, or even political slant.

Fact-check any and all information you get from an LLM. Look for source citations the chatbot might have included, then use your own best judgment about where it supports an LLM's claim. Give an LLM specific, careful instructions to prevent it from going too far off base; the sidebar on page 18 includes sample prompts for genealogy tasks.

Privacy

Like genealogy websites, DNA companies, mobile apps, and a whole host of other services, LLMs retain the data you provide and use in



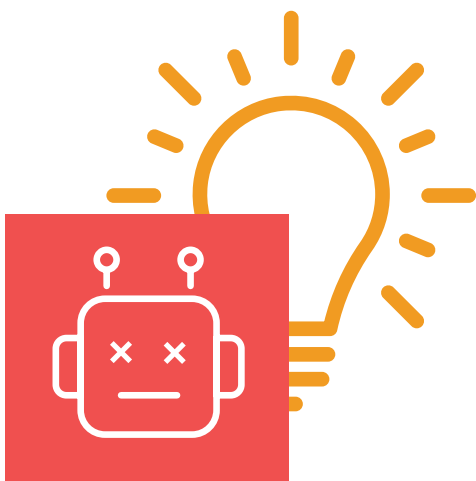
both obvious and unexpected ways. Many models, for example, save your conversation history by default—and even use it to further train.

Read an LLM's terms of service to understand what permissions you're giving the company. Look for ways to adjust your privacy settings to fit your comfort level: for example, by asking the model not to remember chat history.

In any case, it's wise not to upload personal, financial, or other sensitive information to LLMs. If asking a question about a living relative, try using a pseudonym or asking the chatbot hypothetical questions.

Copyright

LLMs are born in a legal and ethical grey area when it comes to intellectual property. By design, they study other people's work (usually without prior consent), then package and serve it up to users (with or without citing their sources). This often comes at the expense of the original website, book or article—web traffic from Google searches has fallen dramatically for many publishers and news organizations, for example.



AI still struggles with tasks that require critical thinking or novel ideas.

AI companies claim the material they train on is openly available to the public and that LLMs fall under the legal concept of “fair use.” But OpenAI and other companies are facing copyright lawsuits by individuals and publishers (notably the *New York Times*) over the unauthorized use of their intellectual property. Conversely, other organizations (such as the Associated Press and the *Wall Street Journal*) have cut content deals with LLMs.

What does this mean for you? Don’t try to pass off AI’s work as your own. For one thing, AI may borrow unfairly from a source, leaving your work open to charges of plagiarism. (This is especially true when generating images using AI.) For another, it’s best practice to cite any source—AI or otherwise.

Disclose when you’ve used AI in a project, especially if you’re hoping to get published. (Many publications, including *Family Tree Magazine*, have developed concrete rules about the use of AI.) And consider using LLMs only for general or administrative tasks that are less likely to run afoul of someone else’s hard work.

Environmental impact

Generative AI tools require vast amounts of electricity (to power servers) and water (to cool them down). Critics say data-processing centers strain

local energy grids, lead to increased greenhouse gasses, and threaten water supplies—outweighing any benefits of the technology.

Hard data on the environmental impact of generative AI is still hard to come by, partially because companies have no incentive to be transparent about their practices. But trends in energy consumption suggest generative AI and other emerging technologies such as cryptocurrencies are having a profound effect on energy needs. A study published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates that by 2026, data centers will require up to twice as many terra-watts of energy as they did in 2022. And sustainable, clean-energy infrastructure isn’t keeping up with the growing demand for electricity.

Ethics

We’re still in the “wild west” days of LLMs. Because laws haven’t caught up with technology, AI companies get to set their own rules about what their tools are used for. In the absence of guidance, bad actors have used AI to: create and share intentionally false or misleading content about sensitive topics, make “deep-fake” pornographic videos that have the likenesses of real people, and even tell users how to build explosives.

LLMs (like other innovations throughout history) also have the potential to disrupt the workforce, replacing human workers with machines. There’s little that a single user can do to reverse what could be an inevitable trend. But we shouldn’t be quick to dismiss the human cost.

GETTING AI TO WORK

A genealogist’s success with LLMs rests not just on realistic expectations, but also careful prompting. Little recommends

tip

Most LLMs are free to use as of this writing. Consider upgrading to paid plans to unlock more-advanced features. And know that AI companies may move features that are now free into paid plans in the future.

including five elements in any AI prompt; you can read more about them on his website <www.aigenealogyinsights.com/2023/09/05/crafting-a-genealogy-prompt-for-chatgpt-five-valuable-components>:

1. A **role**: Encourage the bot to “think like” a certain kind of person. This helps the LLM sort the prompt into a broad topic category and converse in relevant terms. For example: “*Imagine you’re a genealogist...*”

2. A **goal**: Clearly state what you’re trying to accomplish. e.g., “*Your goal is to collect information from a probate record...*”

3. A **text**: Provide what specific data set (if any) you want the bot to work with. This limits the scope of your inquiry and hopefully prevents the bot from reporting irrelevant or “made up” details. Most chatbots accept uploads of DOC and PDF files, or you can enter text into the prompt itself. e.g., “*In the attached PDF...*” with the file attached

4. A **task**: Tell the bot what you want it to do. Be explicit and break down any complex tasks into distinct steps. e.g., “*Extract names of the deceased’s family from the document, then alphabetize them...*”

5. A “**flask**”: In what “container” do you want the bot to put its response in? In other words: In what format do you want a response? In a list or table? In an image, spreadsheet or audio file? e.g., “*...and place them and their stated relationships to the deceased in a table.*”

Taken together, the elements create an AI genealogy prompt template that looks something like: *Imagine you’re a [Role] whose goal is [Goal]. Using [Text/attached document], do [Task] and report as a [Flask].* The prompts in page 18’s sidebar follow this format.

Specificity is key. Another genealogy expert, Lisa Lisson of “Are You My Cousin? Genealogy,” <www.lisalisson.com/ai-prompts-for-genealogy-framework> has a similar four-part method for creating prompts: role, context, specific requests, and follow-up questions.

“Think of working with AI as having a conversation with a genealogy colleague who needs clear context to help you,” Lisson writes. “The quality of information you receive directly correlates to the quality of your prompts. A vague request yields vague answers, while a strategic prompt delivers actionable insights.”

Roundup: AI Tools

Audio Transcription

- Otter <otter.ai>

Chatbots

- ChatGPT <www.chatgpt.com>
- Claude <claude.ai>
- Google Gemini <gemini.google.com>
- Grok <www.grok.com>
- Microsoft Copilot <copilot.microsoft.com>
- Perplexity <www.perplexity.ai>

Image Creation and Editing

- Adobe Firefly <www.adobe.com/products/firefly.html>
- Canva Magic Media <www.canva.com/help/using-magic-media>
- DALL-E <openai.com/index/dall-e-2>
- MyHeritage <blog.myheritage.com/category/photos>

Image Transcription

- Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>

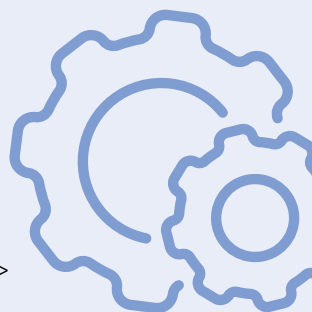
...

It’s important to think about the impact of using LLMs, both for your own research and the wider ecosystem. Are you using the technology in ways that infringe on someone’s privacy or steal someone else’s work? Are you deliberately trying to spread misinformation, either about your family or about history in general? What guardrails do you have in place for fact-checking information and disclosing when something is AI-generated?

You might even keep in mind Google’s former motto: Don’t be evil. ●



Andrew Koch is the editor of *Family Tree Magazine*. His favorite use of AI thus far is creating a logo for his fantasy football team, the “Cincinnati Bungles.”





Star Search

**Hit the big time with these
blockbusting record
search strategies.**

by DAVID A. FRYXELL

With many records liberated from dusty library shelves, modern genealogists can now search countless documents without the drudgery of scrolling through microfilm.

But it can still be frustrating to get too few—or too many—search results. Sometimes it seems your ancestors must be hiding from you!

The harsh reality is that, though microfilm research required little more than patience and a good chair cushion, today's online searches call for strategic smarts.

That's what we're bringing to you "live" in these pages: a dozen secrets to search success. Many of these shortcuts and hacks apply to any search engine or site, but some are specific to Google <www.google.com>, Bing <www.bing.com> or popular genealogy databases: Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>, Findmypast <www.findmypast.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com>.

Keep these tips in mind, and even those ancestors with "stage fright" might come out of hiding.



USE BOOLEAN TERMS: **AND, OR, NOT, QUOTATIONS AND PARENTHESES**

Most search engines offer certain "formulas" for more-precise queries.

Boolean operators are among the most-common. Named after 19th-century logician George Boole, they tell a search engine how to think about the terms you've entered in relation to each other. Here are the most widely used, with examples of each in action in *italics*:

- **AND:** Narrow your results to only those that contain *both* keywords (*Virginia AND cemeteries*, for cemeteries in Virginia). In many search engines, a plus sign (+) works the same (*Virginia + cemeteries*). Note that, by default, Google assumes your searches use *AND*.
- **OR:** In contrast to *AND*, this phrase broadens your search to include results that contain *either or both* terms (*John OR Jonathan*, to capture both versions of the name). Likewise, a bar symbol (|) works the same in many engines (*John | Jonathan*).
- **NOT:** Remove results that include an unwanted keyword (*"Orange County" NOT California*, for counties in other states). A minus sign (-) works the same in most places (*"Orange County" -California*).
- **Quotation marks:** Search for *exact* phrases—for example, complete names (*"George Phillips"*). Some records list the surname first, so you'd also need to try "Phillips, George" (*"George Phillips" OR "Phillips, George"*).

- **Parentheses:** Group parts of your search together, like you would in a math equation. This helps the engine determine how the pieces of your search terms fit together.

As we've seen, you can use most Boolean terms together in most search engines. And on non-genealogy websites that don't have relevant fields, you can use them to search for a person who had a certain spouse (*"George Phillips" AND "Mary Blair"*) or lived in a certain place (*"George Phillips" AND Virginia*).



ADD PROXIMITY: **NEAR**

Looking for two related terms that aren't necessarily next to each other? The *NEAR* operator helps you avoid the uncertainty of name order. A search for *"George NEAR Phillips"* for example finds both "George Harwood Phillips" and "Phillips, George."

Google also allows the operator *AROUND* and a number in parentheses that signifies the maximum number of words between search terms. (For example: *"George AROUND (2) Phillips"* for results in which George and Phillips are two or fewer words apart). Bing and most genealogy websites do not share this function.



SEARCH WITHIN A DATE **RANGE: YYYY..YYYY**

Most major genealogy websites allow you to narrow searches by date range: Ancestry.com by plus or minus 0, 1, 2, 5 or 10 years; those intervals plus 20 years at MyHeritage; and



Start searching with only a few key bits of information, then narrow your results if that first pass produces too many hits.

those plus 40 years at Findmypast. At FamilySearch, you can simply enter a year range.

Another way to narrow the time frame of your results in genealogy databases is to add a date for an “Other” or “Any” event. Search results sometimes seem to include individuals far outside the time frame when your ancestor lived, especially if you don’t know any vital-record dates. Adding an “Any” or “Other event” date in your ancestor’s lifespan—even if you just make it up—can eliminate these bogus hits.

You can even search using a date range in Google: Just add a start and end year separated by two dots (1854..1875). Note this operator isn’t officially supported, but worked when we tested it. Google also offers a *daterange*: operator, but that searches by when a result was indexed by Google (often, the date it came online) rather than the age of the content in it.

4 EXPLORE EACH SITE’S SEARCH OPTIONS

Many sites have stopped offering dedicated “advanced search” pages, presumably incorporating those tools into their basic search engine. Still, here are some additional fields you can search by at each site:

- **Google** bucks the trend and still has an Advanced Search page <www.google.com/advanced_search> (also available under Tools from the home page). There, you can essentially add Boolean terms, then narrow results by language, region and more.

- **Bing** doesn’t have a separate advanced search page. But it does integrate with Microsoft’s Copilot AI tool <copilot.microsoft.com>, which (as a chatbot) can handle complex search input.
- **Ancestry.com** lets you Show More Options (which vary by category) or switch to a new beta form called “Smart Search.”
- **FamilySearch, Findmypast** and **MyHeritage** let you add details respectively, where you can add life events, family members and record parameters.

Not advanced enough for you? Try searching a website using Google or Bing instead of the site’s on-page search box. Just develop a search and add *site:*—as in *site:familysearch.org* or *site:archives.com* (no space after the colon).

5 EXPERIMENT WITH WILDCARDS

Wildcard characters stand in for one or more unknown letters, allowing you to search for multiple spellings of a word. The question mark (?) takes the place of a single letter and an asterisk (*) takes the place of any number of unknown letters (including no letters at all). For example, “*Gust* Fryxell*” returns results for both Gustav and Gustaf Fryxell.

Genealogy websites vary in their compatibility with wildcards: Ancestry.com, the Ellis Island Passenger Search <www.statueofliberty.org/discover/passenger-ship-search>, FamilySearch and Findmypast support both the ques-

tion mark and asterisk, but MyHeritage supports neither.

Google doesn't support wildcards *within* words, but you can use an asterisk to take the place of one word (or multiple asterisks for that many unknown missing words). This is a handy supplement to name searches within quotation marks, which help catch instances with a middle name or initial: "*George * Phillips*" finds "*George Bagster Phillips*" whereas the non-asterisk search within quotation marks does not. (Google doesn't support the question mark, and Bing doesn't seem to recognize any wildcards.)



TRY MULTIPLE NAMES AND SPELLINGS

You're likely already searching any obvious name variants, such as "Olsen" and "Olson." But make sure to take it a step further by checking every oddball spelling variation or possible typo in your ancestors' names—first names as well as surnames. (Wildcards can of course help here; see No. 5.) Try nicknames and initials, alternate spellings, and middle names used as first names.

Though it's not as widespread in genealogy these days, the Soundex system helps make sure you cover all the spelling bases for surnames. Soundex partly replaces some letters in a name with numbers, so "Washington" becomes "W-252." The National Archives has an explanation of how it works <www.archives.gov/research/census/soundex.html>.

You can find a Soundex converter at <www.maineancealogy.net/soundex_converter.asp>, or try it in Ancestry.com by clicking the Exact box under a surname, then Soundex.



APPLY EXACT SEARCH—CAREFULLY

The "exact" search options at genealogy websites can be landmines, eliminating potentially useful results along with irrelevant ones. Searching for an exact first name, for example, will skip results with only initials or no first name at all—even hits that otherwise would match your ancestor.

Sometimes exact matches can scrub whole categories from your results. Unless you're specifically searching for death records, for example, don't check "exact" for death dates. Records of earlier events (such as births and marriages) will be omitted since they don't contain a death date.



BE SELECTIVE ABOUT FIELDS

Sites offer a bunch of blanks for search terms—but that doesn't mean you have to fill out all of them. (It's not a mortgage or passport application!) Start searching with only a few key bits of information, then narrow your results if that first pass produces too many hits.

You might be surprised how few fields you even *have* to fill at genealogy websites. At the "Big Four," you can search for a date and place *without a name*. That helps you side-step unexpected errors in a record's spelling or indexing to find a previously missing ancestor. For example, you could find everyone in your ancestor's hometown who was a certain age during the 1880 census, or all the babies born in a place in 1915.

Similarly, try searching with no surname. This can be useful for getting around spelling oddities, nicknames and transcription errors. My Rousseau ancestors, for example, often eluded my searches with mistranscriptions like "Rossaw." Until I caught on, the easiest way to find them was to skip the surname entirely.

When sites let you include parents' names, try adding those first names as well—still omitting the surname. Again, this works best with single collections (see No. 9) to avoid a deluge of results.

Another tactic, useful for finding an ancestor's siblings or overcoming transcription errors, is to search on a relationship field. Leave the main name and surname fields blank, or fill in only the surname but include the parents' names.

When you have ancestors who moved around a lot—as so many did in the expansionist years of the young United States—you might be able to find them by leaving place fields blank. If somebody staked a homestead claim or joined the Gold Rush, try searching only for names and dates; narrow an excess of results by adding back one place at a time.



DIVE INTO ONE COLLECTION AT A TIME

Though searching all of Ancestry.com or FamilySearch in a single pass is convenient, focusing on just one collection at a time has its advantages. For one thing, searching one collection will result in a smaller, more-manageable, and hopefully more-relevant batch of results.

In addition, most collections have customized search fields for that type of record—e.g., an enumeration district for a census collection. That gives you more-precise tools to work with.

When following a family backwards in time, for example, try searching each census separately, only jumping backwards once you've found

everyone in that year. This approach—also useful for birth, marriage and death indexes—lets you leave more fields blank, experiment with workarounds for transcription errors, and avoid an overwhelming number of results.

You can always return to a broader search form, then go back and forth. You might search an *individual* collection for one record type (say, censuses because you know when the document was taken) but switch to a *category* of collections for another to cast a wider net (say, vital records that could be from different times or places). You could even open another browser tab to search at both levels concurrently.

Back-and-forth searching works especially well in places with rich collections of both censuses and vital records, such as Scandinavia and the United Kingdom (post-1838). I used this approach to trace my Swedish ancestors, clicking back and forth between one collection of household clerical records (which are similar to censuses) and groups of church birth, marriage and death collections. The same technique traced my wife's English family back to her fifth-great-grandfather—literally in a single afternoon.

You can also work back and forth between *sites*. For example, you might Google a name in quotes paired with a possible location, then use the results to search a census in MyHeritage. Then you jump to Find a Grave <www.findagrave.com> to locate an ancestor's final destination.



TEST KEYWORDS

You're probably not using keywords very often—even though they're an option at most major genealogy sites. Try adding:

- ship names
- religious denominations or houses of worship
- occupations



Find guidance on using specific websites in each issue's Website Tutorial (page 64) and at <www.familytreemagazine.com/category/websites>.

Google Advanced Search form

- associations (e.g., “Mason,”)
- titles like “Reverend” or “Doctor”

You can also use keywords in a broad search like the surname-less tactics described in No. 8.

Another extreme approach involves using *names* as keywords, either in combination with a standard name search (a relative’s name, for example) or instead of any names at all. The latter trick can sometimes work on sites like Fold3 <www.fold3.com> that scan a lot of old documents lacking neat fields for names and other data.



RESEARCH CLUSTER AND COLLATERAL RELATIVES

You’ve probably heard of “cluster genealogy.” According to this principle, your family’s “clusters” (extended relatives, friends, neighbors and fellow worshippers) are all worth researching. After all, your ancestors didn’t migrate in isolation—they mostly did in groups.

Searching “sideways” for those in a missing ancestor’s “cluster” can often get around genealogical brick walls. Those neighbors in 1880, for instance, might also be found in the 1870 census—with your mistranscribed ancestors just around the block. And the “right” ancestor might identify himself from another man who had the same name because he lived next door to someone in your ancestor’s cluster.

A variation on cluster genealogy takes advantage of people with uncommon names—even if they aren’t your direct kin. Sorting through all the John Smiths might be impossible. But if he had a sister Zilpha you can search for her instead.

“Collateral relatives” refers to a similar concept, encompassing non-direct-line family members. These people also created records that might be missing for your ancestor—documents that mention either your target person or their shared family members.

For example, if your great-great-grandmother died before Illinois’ death index began in 1916, search for her younger brother instead. His death record might list their mother’s maiden name: your elusive third-great-grandmother.



ASK AI FOR HELP

Artificial intelligence is already transforming genealogy, with sites from FamilySearch to Sweden’s ArkivDigital <www.arkivdigital.net> using AI to make record images searchable. MyHeritage extracts data from old newspapers through AI, and Ancestry.com uses it to help guide the next steps of your research.

Why not try some AI searching yourself? We discuss the various applications of AI for genealogy beginning on page 14. No matter what tool you use, though, you’ll need to check the answers AI gives you. For example, I asked chatbots “Where was John Ashley Stowe in the 1900 US census?” This was a test; I already knew that my great-great-grandfather was enumerated in Opelika, Ala.

The bots served up quick, confident replies in full sentences. But not all of them had real answers (let alone accurate ones). ChatGPT and Copilot gave generic statements about sites that have census records. Gemini placed my ancestor in Alabama in 1876 but suggested he moved to Florida; it added a video about the unrelated “Ashley Gang” in early 1900s Florida.

Perplexity, on the other hand, found him in a flash, and even added helpful context: “This placement corresponds with his known life events and family records from that era ... Stowe was the parent of at least four sons and two daughters ... He passed away in 1903, so the 1900 census represents some of the last official documentation of his residence.”

Ancestry.com, by the way, put Great-great-grandpa at the top of search results in 1900, even without any other information.

Whether or not you try AI (and while we await our robot overlords), it’s still probably a good idea to try the non-AI search strategies we’ve discussed here. ●



Founding Editor **David A. Fryxell** is the author of *The Family Tree Scandinavian Genealogy Guide* (Family Tree Books).

BYTE BY BYTE

Take these five simple steps to digitize your genealogy.

by THE EDITORS OF FAMILY TREE MAGAZINE

It's no secret that most genealogy research these days is done online. Massive historical record databases, smart devices, intuitive family tree-builders, and artificial intelligence (see page 14) have all given genealogists unprecedented tools with which to study their ancestors.

But there are a host of materials that can still only be found in the physical world: family photos and heirlooms, records tucked away in archives or libraries, and boxes of unsorted ephemera inherited from relatives.

Digitizing these items to preserve them for future generations and incorporate them into the

rest of your research is no small feat. And, depending on the size of your collection, the task may feel overwhelming.

The tips that follow are taken from our Organize with Purpose master class that begins on January 13. In the course, you'll learn in detail how to digitize (then organize) your files, photos, records and heirlooms. The initials after each tip indicate which of our three experts shared that advice in the course: Rick Crume (RC), Amanda Epperson (AE) and Sunny Jane Morton (SJM).

Read on for a practical approach to digitizing your research—step by step, scan by scan, and byte by byte.

1 Gather Your Materials

Get everything in one place. Do a “master sort” that collects items from all over your home and/or storage space. This will help you visually assess the scope of your collection as well as find connections between items that were previously stored separately. (SJM)

Keep your legacy in mind. Think about the end-goal from the beginning. Unfortunately, future generations don’t want our messy boxes of disorganized documents, unlabeled photos, and half-finished research notes. Organize, digitize and share your research (e.g., online) to increase the chances that future generations will hang on to it. (SJM)

Be patient and trust the process. Digitization projects can feel overwhelming. And though your goal may be to tidy up your research space, your mess is going to get worse before it gets better! (SJM)



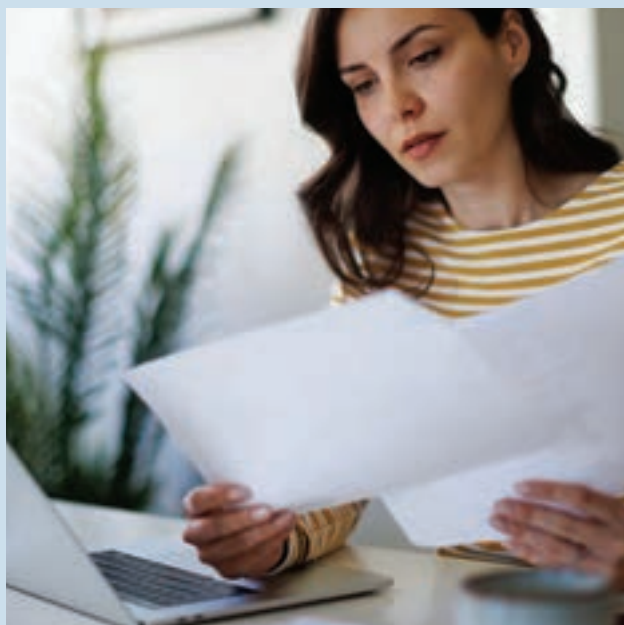
2 Take an Inventory, then Strategize

Do multiple rounds of sorting. Take a couple passes at your collection. The first look can be short and cursory: Put things in broad categories and take note of what formats your various items are in, but don’t do much more than that yet. Only during the second sort should you discern what to keep, what to digitize, and what to throw away. (SJM)

Save information, not necessarily records. You don’t need to keep every scrap of paper once it’s been digitized. Too much paper adds clutter and makes it harder for truly unique, important documents to stand out. Focus on keeping original documents that are hard or impossible to replace, reinforce a family story, or convey something intangible about your ancestor. (AE)

Prioritize one-of-a-kind items and those that are easiest to scan. Your time is limited, so it’s important to triage which items to digitize first is important. (RC)

Avoid doing any actual research. Focus on digitizing what you already have, not adding records to your

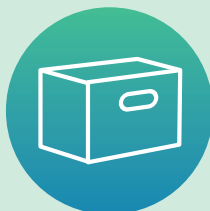


collection or making new discoveries. Instead, use a scrap of paper or a genealogy record checklist <www.familytreemagazine.com/freebie/free-genealogy-records-checklist> to keep track of to-do ideas as they come up. (AE)

At a Glance: Digitizing Your Genealogy

1

Gather your materials



2

Take an inventory, then strategize



3

Scan using your smartphone or scanner



4

Name and sort your digital files



5

Create a consistent backup system



3 Scan

Know your scanning options. Document scanners (either flatbed, sheet-fed, or overhead) are typically pricier than more-flexible options like smartphones, but they're also more

robust. Tailor your decision to the kinds of items you have, and see if a local library, FamilySearch Center, or genealogical society has specialized equipment you can use. (RC)

Scan the whole image, not just the most-interesting part. Make sure you capture both sides of photos and documents as well as any photographers' marks or captions. (RC)

Add labels as you scan. One challenge of digitizing materials is adding context. Consider writing or typing a small caption, citation, or note, then place it above or beneath a document or photo. When you take the scan, capture both the item itself and the note. (AE)

Note what you've already scanned. Keep a running list of what files have already been digitized. You could create a table that lists each folder, box or pile, as well as what you've decided to do with its physical counterpart. (RC)

Track your progress. Take before and after pictures to show the dramatic difference your digitization time has made. This will both motivate you to keep going and serve as inspiration for other researchers and family members. (SJM)



4 Name and Sort Your Digital Files

Create descriptive file names. Customized names will help you re-find important files and more easily sort them. (RC)

Design file-name templates to stay consistent. See below for sample templates. (RC)

Use photo-editing software to color-correct, repair, crop, caption or add tags to photos. Always make a separate copy to edit, leaving an original, unedited version. (RC)

Record type	Template with example	Notes (exceptions, etc.)
Census image	XXXX-US-census-surname-headofhousehold-STATE-city-source 1940-US-Census-Smith-Albert-OH-Cleveland-FamilySearch	Include copy of relevant censuses in each person's folder.
Photo	YYYY-MM-DD-surname-firstname-event 1985-12-25-Smith-John-Christmas-morning	If multiple subjects, list the oldest first. If no subject, list only the event or location.
Vital record scan	YYYY-MM-DD-surname-firstname-recordtype-source 1946-06-04-Smith-John-birthcertificate-OH-vital-stats	Create placeholder files for birth and death records that you don't have yet—visible reminders of your to-do items.

5 Back Them Up

Back up your files in multiple places. Experts recommend the 3-2-1 rule: three copies of your data, with two of them local and one of them offsite. Also use a variety of media—for example: your computer desktop, an external hard drive kept in a bank safety deposit box, and an online cloud service such as Google Drive. (RC)

Make your digital archive portable. This allows you to access and share materials while you're on the go—including when you're with potentially interested relatives. (SJM)

Attach files to software and online trees. One benefit of digitization is that digital files are easier to share with others. Incorporate your newly scanned files into your desktop software, upload them to online family trees, or share with family members. These steps will make your research more efficient and create another form of file-backup. (RC)



SAMPLE: Digital Genealogy One-Sheet

Create your own version of this worksheet to summarize the location, scope and structure of your digital genealogy files. Include a version of the one-sheet in the highest level of your file folder structure and print off a copy to keep with your physical research files or even your will.

Main folder name: Genealogy Research

Primary location with file path: Macbook 2025 desktop (Macintosh HD > Users > smithJ > Desktop)

Backup location(s): Seagate 8TB hard drive; Dropbox

FOLDER STRUCTURE

Folder name	File path	Notes	Subfolders
Family Tree Files	Genealogy Research > Family Tree Files	Family Tree Maker working files (including photos and document images), GEDCOM backups	Jones Family Smith Family Williams Family
Forms	Genealogy Research > Forms	PDFs of family trees, descendant charts, etc., generated in Family Tree Maker or typed in from FamilyTreeMagazine.com	Pedigree Charts
Heirlooms	Genealogy Research > Heirlooms	Photo/scan of item plus TXT file explaining provenance and current location	By object
Photos	Genealogy Research > Photos	Photos that have known dates, through 2025. Each file includes metadata plus standard file name: <i>YYYY-MM-DD-surname-firstname-event</i>	By year
Records	Genealogy Research > Records	See next line for template structure	By surname
----Smith	Genealogy Research > Records > Smith	Subfolders by first name if necessary	Birth and Baptism, Censuses [by year], Marriage [and Divorce], Other, z-Death and Burial

RESEARCH GUIDE

KANSAS

by BETH FOULK



AT THE HEART OF AMERICA'S HEARTLAND, KANSAS has played a pivotal role in shaping America's migration routes, the battle over slavery, and the cultivating of the nation's breadbasket. For those fortunate enough to have Kansas ancestors, a treasure trove of records and stories awaits your discovery.

JAYHAWKER HISTORY

Kansas became part of the United States along with the rest of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Prior to that, the area had been inhabited by various Native American tribes (including the Wichita, the Osage, the Pawnee, and the eponymous Kansa, or Kaw) but claimed for France, then Spain, then France again.

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act called for the forced relocation of Native American tribes from the east and southeast of the United States to designated federal lands across the Mississippi (notably in Kansas' neighbor, Oklahoma). But even before then, individual tribes such as the Delaware and Ottawa agreed to move from their ancestral lands into modern Kansas—often at the expense of tribes indigenous to the region.

Settlers were moving in even before treaties with the Native American tribes were signed, with the first permanent white settlement in Fort Leavenworth in 1827. As a result, the formal surveying process was delayed, and the Preemption Act of 1841 played an outsized role in the settlement of the state. Through it, settlers claimed preemptory rights to property long before the government could properly codify their land ownership.

It wasn't until the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed in 1854 (creating the Kansas and Nebraska Territories) that emigration

from the East Coast and Europe began in earnest. As the new territory opened for white settlement, Native American tribes were again forced off their lands, this time south to Oklahoma.

Notably, the Kansas-Nebraska Act also allowed for popular sovereignty to determine whether slavery would be legal in the territory. Waves of activists from both sides of the issue migrated to Kansas, eager to vote either for or against.

This set the stage for "Bleeding Kansas," a series of violent conflicts over the issue of slavery that some historians believe led directly to the Civil War. More than 50 people died in the well-publicized skirmishes between proslavery "Border Ruffians" and antislavery "Free-Staters." Kansas was ultimately admitted as a free state in early 1861, shortly before the Civil War began.

Emigration surged after the Civil War for two primary reasons. First, the Homestead Act in 1862 gave 160 acres to any settler who would remain on the land for five years and make improvements. Union Civil War veterans enjoyed an added bonus under the Homestead Act—they could deduct their years of service from the five-year occupation rule.

Second, the railroads were moving west—and fast. The Sante Fe Railway (officially the Atchison, Topeka and Sante Fe Railway) was chartered in 1859, and the Kansas Pacific Railway (originally the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division) broke ground in 1863. The railroads actively promoted settlement in Kansas to would-be pioneers in the East and immigrant-hopefuls in Germany and across Europe.

The railroad companies themselves also spurred migration. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 offered government incentives to railroads in the form of miles-wide land grants on either side of the

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD: 1861

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1860 (as territory); 1870 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1911 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1913 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
KS Dept. of Health and Environment,
Office of Vital Statistics

For those fortunate enough to have Kansas ancestors, a treasure trove of records and stories awaits your discovery.

tracks. The companies, in turn, sold this prime real estate to settlers to recoup the costs of laying the rails.

German-speaking emigrants (both those from Germany proper and German-speaking minorities from other countries) were among the frequent buyers. Whole towns of German-speaking immigrants from across Europe sprung up, with other notable communities including Russian Mennonites, Scandinavians, French, Italians, Bohemians, Hungarians and former denizens of the British Isles. William H. Carruth's linguistic study of the state shows the diversity in European settlements <www.kansasmemory.org/item/220778/page/1>, and the Kansas Heritage Project tells their stories <fhsu.edu/kansasheritage>.

Other notable migrant groups include the “Exodusters,” formerly enslaved African Americans who left the South during and after Reconstruction. One prominent destination was Nicodemus, a town founded in 1877 that became one of the largest majority-Black settlements west of the Mississippi.

Between 1854 and 1929, more than 250,000 children from Eastern cities were sent west on “orphan trains” to find new lives with pioneer families. Kansas became home to 5,000 to 6,000 of them. While records of individual placements are almost non-existent, their stories are recorded at the National Orphan Train Complex in Concordia <www.orphantraindepot.org>.

HOMES ON THE RANGE

Kansas first kept statewide births and deaths in 1911, but cities or counties may have kept them earlier. Pre-1911 birth and death registers were most often recorded in city or county clerk offices. Not all records have survived, but the Kansas Historical Society has microfilm records of



Kansas in 1927, from Cram's "Portable Washable" Map And Atlas Outfit

some <www.kshs.org/archives>; search *vital records* in the archive catalog.

Post-1911 records (i.e., those filed with the state) are not open to the public. However, the Department of Health and Environment does permit genealogy requests. Records created prior to 1940 can be requested by a close relative, such as a cousin; post-1940 records can be requested only by an immediate family member <www.kdhe.ks.gov/1196/Genealogy-Requests>.

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> each have birth indexes for

TIMELINE

1541

Spaniard Francisco Vázquez de Coronado visits Kansas during his search for the Seven Cities of Gold

1762

Spain acquires France's land west of the Mississippi River; it cedes the land to France again in 1800

1803

Modern Kansas becomes part of the United States in the Louisiana Purchase

1820s

Native tribes in Kansas are removed from their lands to make room for tribes forcibly relocated from other areas

1821

Missouri becomes a state; modern Kansas (formerly part of Missouri Territory) becomes “unorganized territory”



pre-1940 records; FamilySearch has digitized microfilmed images of some of them. Ancestry.com has an index of deaths and burials from 1885 to 1930 <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2570>.

Likewise, the state didn't record marriages until 1913, but earlier records were kept by the district courts. The Kansas Historical Society has many of these records on microfilm. The society also sponsors an index of marriages from the territorial period (1854–1861) <www.ksks.org/p/kansas-marriageindex/11315>, and Ancestry.com has an index of marriages 1854 to 1873 <www.ancestry.com>.

com/search/collections/3444>. Note that Kansas marriage licenses do not include the parents' names unless the bride or groom were underage.

The state began keeping copies of divorce records in 1951; the same privacy rules apply. Earlier records were kept by the territorial legislature's Sessions Laws (1855–1861) or the individual county district court (1861–1951).

COUNTING THE PEOPLE

Kansas first appeared in the 1860 federal census as Kansas Territory, then as a state in its own right in 1870. But

1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act creates the separate territories of Kansas and Nebraska; conflict over slavery leads to "Bleeding Kansas"

1861

Kansas becomes the 34th state to join the Union; western portions of the Kansas Territory become part of the new Colorado Territory

1868

Construction begins on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway

1893

Finney County annexes Garfield County, the last major shift in Kansas' county boundaries

1935

"Black Sunday": A massive dust storm crosses the southern Great Plains, typical of the Dust Bowl

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Kansas <www.cyndislist.com/us/ks>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Kansas

<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Kansas,_United_States_Genealogy>

Kansapedia

<www.kansashistory.gov/kansapedia/kansapedia/19539>

The Kansas Collection <www.kancoll.org>

Kansas Memory <www.kansasmemory.org>

KSGenWeb Project <www.ksgenweb.org>

Linkpendium: Kansas

<www.linkpendium.com/ks-genealogy>

Publications

A Guide to Genealogical and Historical Research in Kansas by Mary Clement Douglass (Historical Matters)

Historical Atlas of Kansas by Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self (University of Oklahoma Press)

History of the State of Kansas by William G. Cutler (A. T. Andreas) <www.kancoll.org/books/cutler>

Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas by James R. Shortridge (University Press of Kansas)

Archives & Organizations

Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library

<spencer.lib.ku.edu/collections/kansas-collection>

Kansas Historical Society <www.kshs.org>

Kansas State Library <www.kslib.info>

Mid-Continent Public Library:

Midwest Genealogy Center

<www.mymcpl.org/genealogy>

Midwest Historical and Genealogical Society

<www.mhgs wichita.org/wp>

National Archives at Kansas City

<www.archives.gov/kansas-city>

Wichita State University Library

<libraries.wichita.edu/home>

genealogists interested in searching their early Kansas roots are fortunate to have other rich enumerations draw upon. Start looking in Ancestry.com's collections of voting registers and elections lists from the mid-1850s.

Kansas also took state censuses every 10 years from 1865 to 1925, making them nice complements to the decennial federal census. While state censuses are not as comprehensive as their federal counterparts, genealogists will still find excellent information in them: name, age, gender, race, relationship to head of household, marital status, birthplace, and (of course) place of enumeration. You can search these (as well as the territorial voting lists, which are sometimes called "territory censuses") in one Ancestry.com collection <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1088>.

Don't be surprised if you find a Missourian in these early voting lists and censuses! Many crossed the Missouri-Kansas border specifically to vote in Kansas elections in the hopes of swaying Kansas' vote on slavery.

A BREADBASKET OF RECORDS

Check out these other great records and documents for finding your Kansas ancestors:

● **Newspapers:** The Kansas Historical Society boasts a nearly complete collection of every paper published in the state <www.kshs.org/p/newspapers-in-kansas/11528>—fitting, since the society was founded by early Kansas newspaper men. More than 300,000 pages are available free through the Library of Congress site, Chronicling America <www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america>. And subscription site Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> has more than 20 million pages of Kansas papers.

● **Land Records:** Since Kansas is a public-land state, early land sales there were made by the government. You can obtain patents (first title records)—including for homesteaders—on the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records website <glorerecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>. Federal land entry files (the purchase application files) may be obtained from the National Archives using Form 84 <www.archives.gov/files/forms/pdf/natf-84.pdf> for a fee. Records of transactions between railroad companies and settlers are in county land track books or railroad company records, some of which are at the Kansas Historical Society.

● **Cemeteries:** In addition to massive sites Find a Grave <www.findagrave.com> and BillionGraves <www.billiongraves.com>, you can find Kansan tombstones at the Kansas Gravestones project <kansasgravestones.org>.

Beth Foulk is a Kansas native and proud descendent of Kansas pioneers. Stop by her website <www.genealogydecoded.com> if you're ever in the neighborhood.

RESEARCH GUIDE

MISSISSIPPI

by KIM RICHARDSON



GET READY TO EXPLORE THE MAGNOLIA STATE'S genealogical and historical treasures! Mississippi's history is a blend of native peoples, Africans, and immigrants who shaped a unique culture. The state endured French, British, and Spanish rule; Native American removal; slavery; the devastation of the Civil War; and the upheaval of the civil rights movement—yet Mississippians remained resilient.

This guide will help you uncover your ancestors' stories through the state's rich records and resources.

MISSISSIPPIAN HISTORY

The Magnolia State has long been home to diverse peoples and cultures. Native tribes including the Natchez, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Biloxi, Pascagoula, Tunica and Yazoo shaped the region for centuries before European settlement.

French missionaries arrived in 1699, establishing Fort Maurepas on the Gulf Coast and later Fort Rosalie at Natchez in 1716. Their presence spurred conflict with neighboring Native Americans.

Rival empires soon followed. France lost the Seven Years' War to Britain and ceded its territory east of the Mississippi River. The southern portion of present-day Mississippi was incorporated into British West Florida. More settlers moved into the area beginning in 1766, when the English gave land grants to individuals for their service in the war.

Spain sided with France against Britain in the Revolutionary War. So after the British defeat, West Florida was relinquished to Spain. The young United States argued with Spain over the border between Georgia and West Florida, ultimately leading to Spain surrendering the disputed land in 1798.

Georgia originally claimed the American Southeast, extending its borders to the

Mississippi River. But the Peach State eventually gave up the territory to the federal government, which organized it into the Mississippi Territory in 1798. (At the time, it included both modern Mississippi and Alabama.) Mississippi achieved statehood a few decades later in 1817.

By the 1830s, Native American lands (notably, those of the Chickasaw and Choctaw) were ceded under federal pressure. Most tribal members were forced westward to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears, and nearly all were removed by the mid-1840s. The later Dawes Commission (1893) addressed lingering land claims; the "Dawes rolls" remain important genealogical resources <www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/rolls/final-rolls.html>.

Slavery was legal in the new state, and Mississippi became a top cotton producer largely because of enslaved labor. Large plantations prospered, but most farmers lacked the resources to participate in the system. On the eve of the Civil War, a majority of Mississippians were enslaved.

Mississippi seceded from the Union in 1861 alongside the other slave states, and Mississippian Jefferson Davis became president of the Confederacy. Key battles at Corinth (1862) and Vicksburg (1863) marked turning points in the war.

Residents of Jones County, joined by some from Jasper, Covington, and Smith Counties, famously resisted the Confederacy in what became known as the "Free State of Jones."

In 1870, Mississippi returned to the movement. Reconstruction lasted for 12 years and reshaped political life, bringing both white and Black legislators into state government. In 1870, Senator Hiram R. Revels became the first African American to serve in Congress.

But the civil rights gains of Reconstruction were short-lived. Jim Crow laws

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1817

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1820

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
varies (county); 1912 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
from foundation (county); 1926 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
MS Dept. of Health, Vital
Records Office

enforced racial segregation and restricted African Americans in various aspects of public life. Facing discrimination and stalled economic opportunities, many left during the Great Migration (1910s–1970s), moving to cities in the North and Midwest. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mississippi and Alabama, became the center of national attention during the civil rights movement.

Today, Mississippi's multicultural history is documented through efforts such as the Lantern Project <thelantern.net> (which digitizes records of enslaved Mississippians) and oral history collections through Delta State University <www.deltastate.edu/library/departments/archives-museum/guides-to-the-collection>. The latter documents African American, Chinese, Italian and Jewish communities in the state, along with WWII German POWs.

DELTA VITALS

Mississippi started keeping official records of births and deaths in 1912. Anyone can order a birth certificate that is over 100 years old or a death certificate that is over 50 years old. But more-recent certificates require proof of a qualified relationship and can be ordered from the vital records office <msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/31,0,109.html>.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) holds copies of death certificates from November 1912 to 1943, which can be ordered through the department's website <www.mdah.ms.gov/research>. Reclaim the Records <www.reclaimtherecords.org> secured an index to these records, which it's made available for free at the Internet Archive <www.archive.org> and FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3583821>.

Marriage records were first kept statewide in 1926. Most counties began earlier, but many records were lost in local courthouse fires or due to poor preservation. MDAH has a pre-1926 statewide index to county circuit court records, plus copies of local marriage books. Some marriage records are available on FamilySearch; use the location search to find specific counties. Records of marriages between the recently emancipated were facilitated by the Freedmen's Bureau and are available at MDAH.

The vital records office has marriage information statewide from 1926 forward (except for mid-1938 to 1941, when

record-keeping duty temporarily returned to the circuit courts). You can order records from the vital records office or from the county circuit court clerk's office directly.

The state legislature decided divorce cases until 1859; those cases are listed in the *Index of Mississippi Session Acts, 1817–1865* available online at HathiTrust <hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.35112103319820>. Later divorces are held at the chancery court in the county where the divorce occurred. The vital records office can conduct a five-year statewide search from 1926 forward to determine the county.

COUNTING MAGNOLIAS

Mississippi's earliest federal territorial enumerations from 1800 and 1810 were lost. Look for Mississippians in US federal census schedules beginning in 1820, the first after statehood. Except for the destroyed 1890 census, these records are mostly complete, though a few counties are missing from 1830 (Pike) and 1860 (Hancock, Sunflower, Tallahatchie and Washington). Censuses are widely available on websites like FamilySearch, Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> and Findmypast <www.findmypast.com>.

Supplementary schedules to the federal census can also be helpful. Ancestry.com has mortality schedules for the state (1850–1880), and slave schedules (1850, 1860) are available at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch. In addition, the 1890 Union veterans schedule survives for Mississippi (though, of course, most Mississippians who served did so for the Confederacy).

Mississippi took its own censuses in various years, too, both as a territory and as a state. FamilySearch includes them in its collection of state archive records <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919687>, and MDAH has browsable images of state censuses from 1818 to 1880 <da.mdah.ms.gov/series/sos/100>. Ancestry.com has all surviving state and territorial censuses (including a Spanish 1792 census of the Natchez area) in a single collection <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1125>.

Overcome gaps between censuses using substitutes like the "Enumeration of Educable Children, 1850–1957" <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1856425>, county voter rolls <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3308840>,

TIMELINE

1699

The French Fort Maurepas ("Old Biloxi") is founded

1763

France cedes its land east of the Mississippi River to Britain

1783

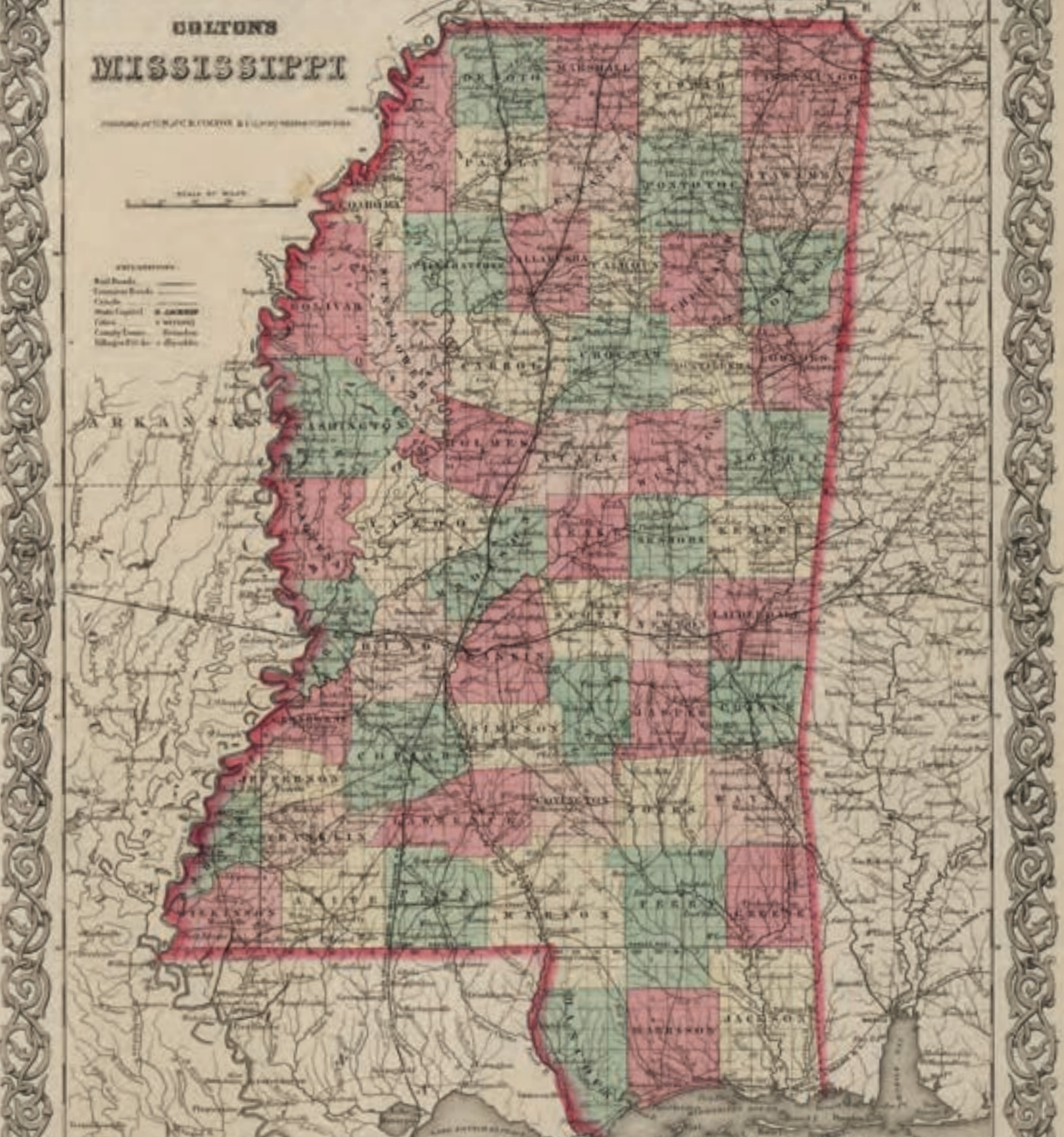
The United States takes control of Britain's land east of the Mississippi; southern Mississippi is part of Spanish West Florida

1798

The Mississippi Territory is incorporated, including both modern Mississippi and Alabama

1817

Mississippi becomes the 20th state to join the Union



Mississippi in 1869, from *Colton's General Atlas*

1830

The Indian Removal Act authorizes the forced migration of native tribes from the Southeast to Kansas and Oklahoma

1861

Mississippi secedes from the Union; it's readmitted in 1870

1910

The first Great Migration begins as thousands of African Americans leave the South for northern and western states

1918

Humphreys County is created in the last major change to Mississippi's county boundaries

1962

James Meredith becomes the first Black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi ("Ole Miss")

TOOLKIT

Websites

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Mississippi <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mississippi,_United_States_Genealogy>

Mississippi Digital Archives <da.mdah.ms.gov>

Mississippi Digital Library <www.msdl.org>

Mississippi History Now <www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov>

Mississippi Libraries Directory
<mlc.lib.ms.us/mississippi-libraries-directory>

**Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness:
Mississippi Counties and Historical Facts**
<www.raogk.org/counties/mississippi>

Publications

Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi
(Goodspeed Publishing Company)
<www.archive.org/details/biographicalhist11good>

Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi edited by Barbara Carpenter (University Press of Mississippi)

Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi: The Twentieth Century
edited by Shana Walton and Barbara Carpenter
(University Press of Mississippi)

**Genealogical Research Methods and Sources:
Mississippi** by Richard S. Lackey, edited by Kenn Stryker-Rodda (American Society of Genealogists)

History of Mississippi: The Heart of the South, two volumes by Dunbar Rowland (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company)

Tracing Your Mississippi Ancestors by Anne S. Lipscomb and Kathleen S. Hutchison (University Press of Mississippi)

Archives & Organizations

Historic Natchez Foundation <www.natchez.org>

Mississippi Civil Rights Museum
<www.mcrim.mdah.ms.gov>

Mississippi Department of Archives and History
<www.mdah.ms.gov>

Mississippi Genealogical Society <www.msgensociety.org>

Mississippi Historical Society <www.mississippihistory.org>

Museum of Mississippi History <www.mmh.mdah.ms.gov>

National Archives at Atlanta <www.archives.gov/atlanta>

and tax rolls (part of the state archives collection <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919687>). These are especially valuable for bridging missing years.

GREAT RIVER, GREAT RECORDS

Here are places to find some other kinds of records from Mississippi:

● **Land Patents:** These documented the sale of land from the federal government to individuals. Images of patents are freely available at the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office website <www.glorecords.blm.gov>, and the original case files can be ordered from the National Archives <www.archives.gov/research/land/land-records>. HistoryGeo's <www.historygeo.com> subscription-based First Landowners Project plots land patents on modern, interactive maps and links to patent images. Subsequent land sales and transfers were recorded in county chancery courts.

● **Naturalization Records:** Before 1906 (when the federal government centralized the naturalization process), immigrants in Mississippi applied for citizenship through local courts. Most counties filed these early naturalization records within their general court records. The *Index to the Naturalization Records of Mississippi Courts, 1798–1906*, by the Works Progress Administration is on FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/650056>. FamilySearch also offers three sets of browsable images: one for Biloxi (1906–1945), one for Jackson (1911–1958), and one for the whole state (1936–1941). Likewise, Ancestry.com hosts a collection of post-1906 naturalization records (with an excellent explanation of them) at <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2502>.

● **Newspapers:** MDAH holds various Mississippi newspapers among its collections <koha-public.mdah.ms.gov/cgi-bin/koha/opac-main.pl>. *Chronicling America* <www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america> offers free access to Mississippi newspapers as early as 1820, and subscription sites Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> and GenealogyBank <www.genealogybank.com> also have Mississippi listings.

● **Civil War Pension Records:** Mississippi's Confederate pension applications (1900–1974) contain valuable genealogical information and are available on FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1936413>. Mississippi was the first Southern state to extend pension benefits to African Americans; Black veterans' applications are available at MDAH.

Kim Richardson created the Brick Wall Buster Cards <www.brickwallbustercards.com> and founded Southern Heritage Genealogy <www.southernheritagegenealogy.com>. She enjoys serving others in their quests to break down brick walls and find Mississippi ancestors.

Find Your U.S. Ancestors

Each state-by-state guide includes:

- **How-to tutorials for finding records**

Notes on how and when key documents were kept in the state, including vital records, state censuses and land records

- **Historical summaries and timelines**

Narrative history with special emphasis on events that affected your ancestors, including year of statehood, large migrations, and major border changes

- **Links to key resources**

Websites, books, and archives and organizations for further research

1 READ AS PART OF FAMILY TREE MAGAZINE

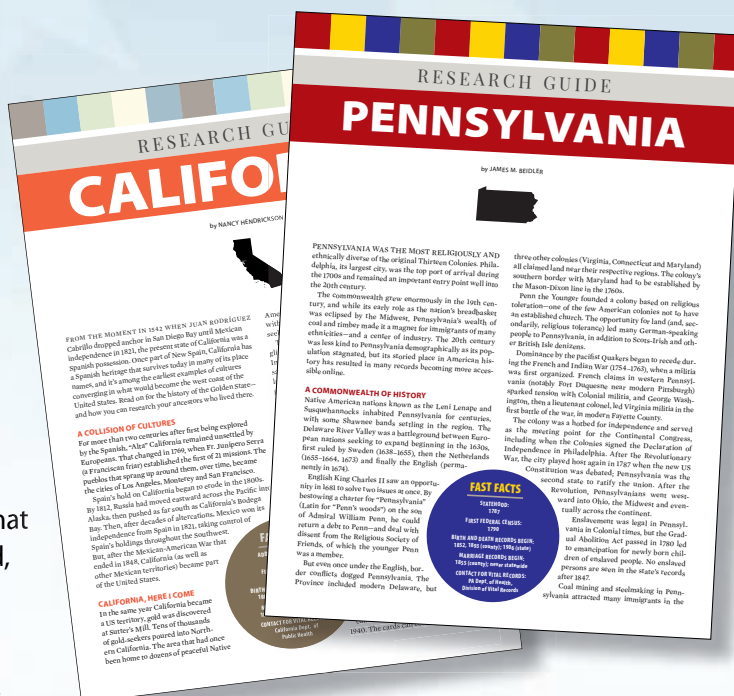
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RESEARCH GUIDE PUBLICATION HISTORY

State/territory	Most recent issue
Alabama	Jan/Feb 2023
Alaska	Sep/Oct 2022
Arizona	Nov/Dec 2025
Arkansas	May/Jun 2022
California	Jul/Aug 2025
Colorado	Nov/Dec 2023
Connecticut	Nov/Dec 2021
Delaware	Sep/Oct 2024
Florida	Jan/Feb 2022
Georgia	Jan/Feb 2025
Hawaii	Sep/Oct 2023
Idaho	Sep/Oct 2025
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New York	Mar/Apr 2024
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North Dakota	May/Jun 2024
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Oklahoma	Nov/Dec 2024
Oregon	Jan/Feb 2023
Pennsylvania	Nov/Dec 2025

State/territory	Most recent issue
Puerto Rico	May/Jun 2025
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Virginia	Nov/Dec 2022
Washington	Mar/Apr 2025
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West Virginia	Mar/Apr 2023
Wisconsin	Jul/Aug 2024
Wyoming	Mar/Apr 2024

UP NEXT*

Connecticut, South Dakota	Mar/Apr 2026
Missouri, Florida	May/Jun 2026
Rhode Island, Texas	Jul/Aug 2026

*Schedule subject to change



THIS LAND IS

Learn about your intrepid ancestors who received land from the federal government through homesteading, bounty-land warrants, and more.

by KATIE MERKLEY

“Land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for,” says Gerald O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. “Because it’s the only thing that lasts.” Though fictional, Gerald (father of protagonist Scarlett O’Hara and an immigrant from Ireland) could have spoken for any number of our ancestors for whom land was everything.

The abundance of land in the United States—and the ability for common people to own it—attracted immigrants from around the world. In some European countries, land ownership was unheard of, and it was sometimes more expensive to rent land in Europe than it was to buy land in America. Land out West also drew Americans from the East, spurring waves of migration.

Land virtually guaranteed wealth and was a hot commodity. That made land records of the utmost importance: land grants, deeds, probate records, and other documents that proved ownership and transactions.

In this article, we’ll discuss the ways that intrepid pioneers could have obtained public land from the US government. We’ll cover three specific programs: bounty-land commissions, homestead applications, and railroad grants.

WHAT IS FEDERAL LAND?

For genealogical purposes, there are two types of land in the United States:

- **Public land** (or federal land) is land owned by the US government, which acts as its original owner. The federal government



YOUR LAND

sold or otherwise distributed parcels in the 20 “public-land” states.

- **State land**, by contrast, is land owned and distributed by government entities besides the federal government. The 30 “state-land” states are thus places in which the state or colonial government was tasked with selling land.

In this article, we’re focusing on public land grants. Individual states and colonies had their own systems for land-distribution.

The map at on page 44 shows public-land states in green and state-land states in gray. One easy way of remembering which are which: State-land states are the original 13 Colonies plus four states created directly from them (Maine, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia) and the former republics of Hawaii, Texas and Vermont.

Public-land states are the rest: All states west of the Mississippi (except Hawaii and Texas) plus the “Old Northwest” (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin) and

most of the “Old Southwest” (Alabama, Florida and Mississippi).

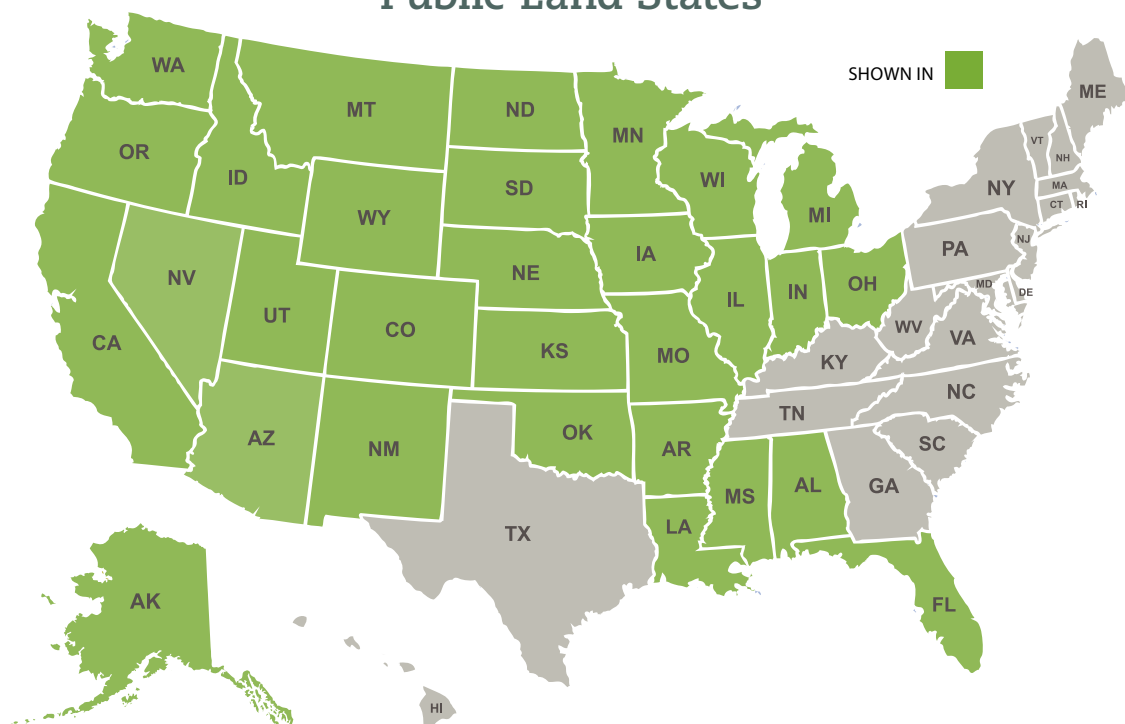
PURCHASING LAND

Federal land was often available for sale directly to individuals, in addition to via the grant programs we’ll discuss throughout the article. These transactions created substantially fewer records.

Whether grantees purchased land directly from the government or received it through a specialized program, they’d file a **land-entry case file** through a local office. If successful, they’d receive a **land patent** that proved their purchase. Subsequent sales of the land parcel between individuals were recorded in **deeds**, usually kept at the county level.

Land-entry case files can be ordered through the National Archives <www.archives.gov/forms>. Land patents are more accessible, available online through the Bureau of Land Management’s General Land Office Records website <glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>.

Public-Land States



BOUNTY LAND: HONORING MILITARY SERVICE

For millennia, bounty land has been used by governments as a reward for soldiers who served under certain circumstances. Dating back to Ancient Rome, the system has been a handy way to compensate veterans without having to use gold or cash—while also placing them in newly conquered areas that they had incentive to protect.

Where bounty land was awarded

The U.S. offered bounty land to veterans of a handful of conflicts: the American Revolution (1775–1783), the War of 1812 (1812–1815), the Indian Wars of the early 1800s, and the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). Altogether, the federal government distributed 61 million acres through more than 500,000 warrants.

Note: Bounty land wasn't awarded to Civil War veterans, but years of military service to the Union were deducted from the Homestead Acts' residency requirement. (See the next section for more on homesteading.)

During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress lacked funds to adequately pay its veterans. But it did have access to vast land

holdings west of the Appalachians, claimed by the new United States but largely unsettled by Europeans by order of King George III.

The system had the added benefit of encouraging loyalty to the Patriot cause. After all, Congress could only grant bounty land if the U.S. won independence. This encouraged soldiers to fulfill their commission—especially important when morale was low.

Most Revolutionary War bounty land was awarded in the “military district” of what is now Ohio. In fact, Ohio became the “training ground” for the rectangular survey system that would later be used in other territories. (See pages 46 and 47.)

Later bounty-land warrants from the federal government were granted farther west. War of 1812 grants, for example, comprised 6 million acres in Michigan, Illinois and Louisiana.

Nine of the Thirteen Colonies granted their own Revolutionary War bounty land as well:

- Connecticut (which had some claims to the Ohio Country)
- Georgia
- Maryland
- Massachusetts (both in the colony proper and in Maine)



The abundance of land in the United States —and the ability for common people to own it— attracted immigrants from around the world.

- New York
- North Carolina (including in what is now Tennessee)
- Pennsylvania
- South Carolina
- Virginia (including in its claims to what is now Kentucky and Ohio)

Each state had its own criteria for who was eligible. For example, even some *British deserters* qualified for land in Georgia.

Of course, some colonies were too small to offer bounty land. And some colonies had overlapping territory claims that resulted in offering the *same* land parcels as bounty to multiple individuals. In such cases, the federal government had to step in to distribute the disputed land.

The application process

To apply for bounty land, a veteran submitted affidavits from his commanding officers or fellow soldiers, along with his discharge papers. The application includes the soldier's name and age, residence at the time of application, and service details.

A deceased veteran's widow or heirs could apply for bounty land on his behalf. Along with the proof of the soldier's service and death, they had to prove they were his legal heirs. This means the application would include proof of relationship, which is especially valuable for genealogists.

When an application was approved, the government issued a bounty-land warrant that included what legislation governed the award and the number of acres in the parcel. (Early land allotments scaled by rank, meaning higher-ranking officers received larger tracks of land.)

The veteran would then bring the warrant to a land office to receive a patent.

The War Department first processed bounty-land warrants, followed by the Treasury Department. The General Land Office (GLO), established in 1812 as part of the Treasury Department, introduced a central, standardized process and is now part of the Bureau of Land Management <gloreCORDS.blm.gov/default.aspx>.

Many who were eligible for bounty land (especially from Revolutionary War service) claimed it but didn't actually settle there. Veterans or their widows often sold their warrants to third parties. As a result, speculators or other buyers would move to the frontier instead of the veteran's family.

Accessing records

Today, the National Archives hold surviving bounty-land warrants and application files, which may be combined with pension records. You can request them using NATF Form 85 or view them through digitization partners such as Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, Fold3 <www.fold3.com> and FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>.

Bounty-land claims filed through *state* governments are generally in the custody of the state archives. Many of them have been digitized at FamilySearch or Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49315>.

HOMESTEADING: LIVING ON THE LAND

The 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the 1848 Mexican Cession added vast tracks of land to the United States. But settlers on those new frontiers faced several challenges: harsh weather,



Measuring Public Land: The Rectangular Survey System

In 1785, the federal government established the **Public Land Survey System**, a standard process for surveying, planning, and selling land west of the Appalachians. Also known as the **Rectangular Survey System**, the methodology is still used today. And understanding it is key to deciphering land records.

Through the Rectangular Survey System, land is described by its position on a grid. This results in even plots of land that are (as the name implies) a patchwork of square and rectangles; maybe you've noticed such a pattern while looking out a plane window.

STEP 1: Define Meridians, Baselines, Townships and Range

The survey begins by establishing a **principal meridian** (a fixed, imaginary line that runs north-south) and a





baseline (which runs east-west) in each of the 30 public-land states. Many meridians and baselines stretch across multiple states; for example, the Fifth Principal Meridian runs from the Arkansas River in Arkansas north through Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota, then cuts to North Dakota and the eastern part of South Dakota. View a map of principal meridians and major baselines at <commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meridians-baselines.png>.

Next, surveyors add more lines at six-mile intervals parallel to the meridian and baseline. The north-south lines are called **range lines** and the east-west are called **township lines**. The places they intersect are 36-square-mile parcels of land called **townships**.

STEP 2: Determine Townships

Townships are named based on how far they are north or south of the baseline and how far they are east or west of the meridian. For example, "Smith Township" (in green at left) is the second township north of the baseline and the third east of the meridian (i.e., between the second and third range lines). As such, it's described as *T2N R3E*.

Put another way: The meridian and baseline form an X-Y axis, and township lines and range lines serve as the coordinates.

STEP 3

"Jones Township" T3S R2W

6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

STEP 3:

Subdivide Townships into Sections

Townships are broken into 36 one-square-mile units called **sections**. Sections are numbered consecutively according to their placement in the township; section 1 is always the northeastern-most. Note the system uses a "snake" pattern when numbering sections, rather than a more-conventional counting method.

Sections were also usually subdivided into fractions and labeled according to their direction: north, south, east or west.

"Jones Township" in blue at left is *T3S R2W* because it's the third township south of the baseline and the second west of the meridian. The dissection shows how it's divided into 36 sections, then how section 12 is subdivided into fractions.

STEP 4:

Create a Land Description

The legal land description puts these pieces together. The dissected section 12 shows some ways a section may be subdivided. If your ancestor owned the piece of land highlighted in orange, it would be described as:

The southern half of the northwest quarter of section 12, Township 3S, Range 2W.

You might also see the land described from largest denomination to smallest: *Township 3S, Range 2W, Section 12, NW1/4, S1/2.*

STEP 4

Section 12 T3S R2W

NW 1/4	NE 1/4
SW 1/4	SE 1/4



Squatters: Not (Necessarily) Their Land

Those who settled land before making any legal claims were called squatters. Also called vagabonds or land pirates, squatters usually began building on the land and growing crops without prior authorization. Living this way had risks: The land could be sold out from underneath them.

Governments handled squatters in various ways. Congress and some states passed preemption acts, essentially giving squatters the initial right to purchase land if they could prove their residence and improvement (even in military districts). But the government could also forcibly remove squatters if petitioned by other landowners.

conflict with Native Americans, and isolation from community and supply lines. The federal government needed a way to encourage people not just to move west but also invest in the land they found there.

Congress' solution was the Homestead Act of 1862. Under the legislation, applicants could move to a piece of public land and come to own 160 acres for free if they lived there and improved it for five years. Most fulfilled the latter requirement by growing crops or raising livestock.

Between the first grant in Nebraska Territory on 1 January 1863 to the last in 1988 in Alaska, the United States awarded more than 270 million acres of land to homesteaders (10% of the total land area of the country).

Who was eligible

Any person who was head of their household or at least 21 years old was eligible to apply—regardless of gender or race. That meant women could own land in their own name, and African Americans (especially the formally enslaved) had greater opportunities than they did in the East or South.

Immigrants, too, were attracted to the program. Though the number of new arrivals stagnated during the Civil War, it rebounded in the late 1800s as immigrants from Europe and the Middle East poured in.

Applicants did not need to be citizens when their five-year period began, though they did have to be naturalized by the time they *proved* their claim. The application materials of recent immigrants thus often include naturalization papers.

Of note, Confederate veterans and others who took up arms against the United States were ineligible. As previously discussed, Union veterans could count their military service toward the five-year residency requirement; their applications had to include military affidavits and other document supporting their military service.

The application process

Applicants visited local land offices and paid a fee (usually \$10) to begin their claim. After their five years had passed, they could prove their residency on the land and improvement of it via paperwork and witness testimony. If approved, they'd receive a land patent.

Alternatively, homesteaders could purchase their land for \$1.25 per acre if they'd lived there at least six months; this was known as commuting.

The homestead process was easier said than done. Only about 40% of those who applied for a homestead claim actually completed it. Homesteaders faced:

- Crop failures due to bad weather (such as fierce winds, fires and severe droughts) or pests (such as grasshoppers)
- Tough living conditions, including inclement weather and meager, sod-built homes
- Lack of funding, as farmers were expected to provide their own seeds and tools
- Fraud and abuse, largely due to speculators and corporations looking for loopholes

Many gave up their claims (which were often taken by others) or declared bankruptcy. Some



Read case studies about veterans applying for bounty land at www.familytreemagazine.com/records/land/bounty-land-records.

went back East; others couldn't afford to and stayed despite the hardship. Applicants who died could have a widow or heir complete the claim on their behalf.

Successful claimants may have stayed on the land for generations. Others sold the land and moved on.

Congress made several changes to the Homestead Act over time. An 1866 law, intended to make it easier for African Americans to participate, opened up 46 million acres for homesteading in the South. Other amendments awarded extra acreage to applicants who planted trees on the land (1873), accepted "marginal" tracts in certain states (1909) or used the land for ranching (1916). The residency requirement was shortened from five years to three for all applicants in 1912.

Accessing records

The National Archives has custody of homestead applications. Not all of them have been digitized; see <www.nps.gov/home/learn/history/culture/requesting-homestead-records.htm>. Learn more at <www.familytreemagazine.com/records/land/a-guide-to-homesteading>.

RAILROAD GRANTS: LINING THE TRACKS

From the 1850s to the 1870s, the government granted millions of acres to railroad companies to encourage construction across the West. Distributed in 20- or 50-mile strips for each mile of track constructed, these parcels were meant to encourage the rapid development of rail lines that connected the Eastern U.S. to the young state of California and its newly discovered gold. In addition to facilitating American settlement of the West, rail lines were a military necessity (and became a significant advantage for the Union during the Civil War).

By many metrics, the grant program was a large success. Companies sold land they didn't use for tracks or stations to settlers, creating funds for the companies to re-invest in construction. Railroad mileage in the U.S. doubled between 1865 and 1873, and the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869.

Settlers, too, benefited from the resale of railroad grants. The companies typically offered better land at more favorable terms than land

Land Records Websites

The **Bureau of Land Management General Land Office website** <glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx> has a database of several important land records: patents, survey plats, field notes, and tract books from certain states and territories. Click Search Documents, then select a state and county and enter an ancestor's name.

Subscription website **Ancestry.com** <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60593> and its sister site **Fold3** <www.fold3.com> each have homesteading records, plus an assortment of bounty-land warrants.

FamilySearch holds various land records (including homestead applications and some bounty-land warrants) from across the country. Notably, it's digitized tract books from various states; the collection is browsable and (in some cases) searchable <www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2074276>. Find additional collections through the FamilySearch Research Wiki <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Land_and_Property> and Catalog <www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog>.

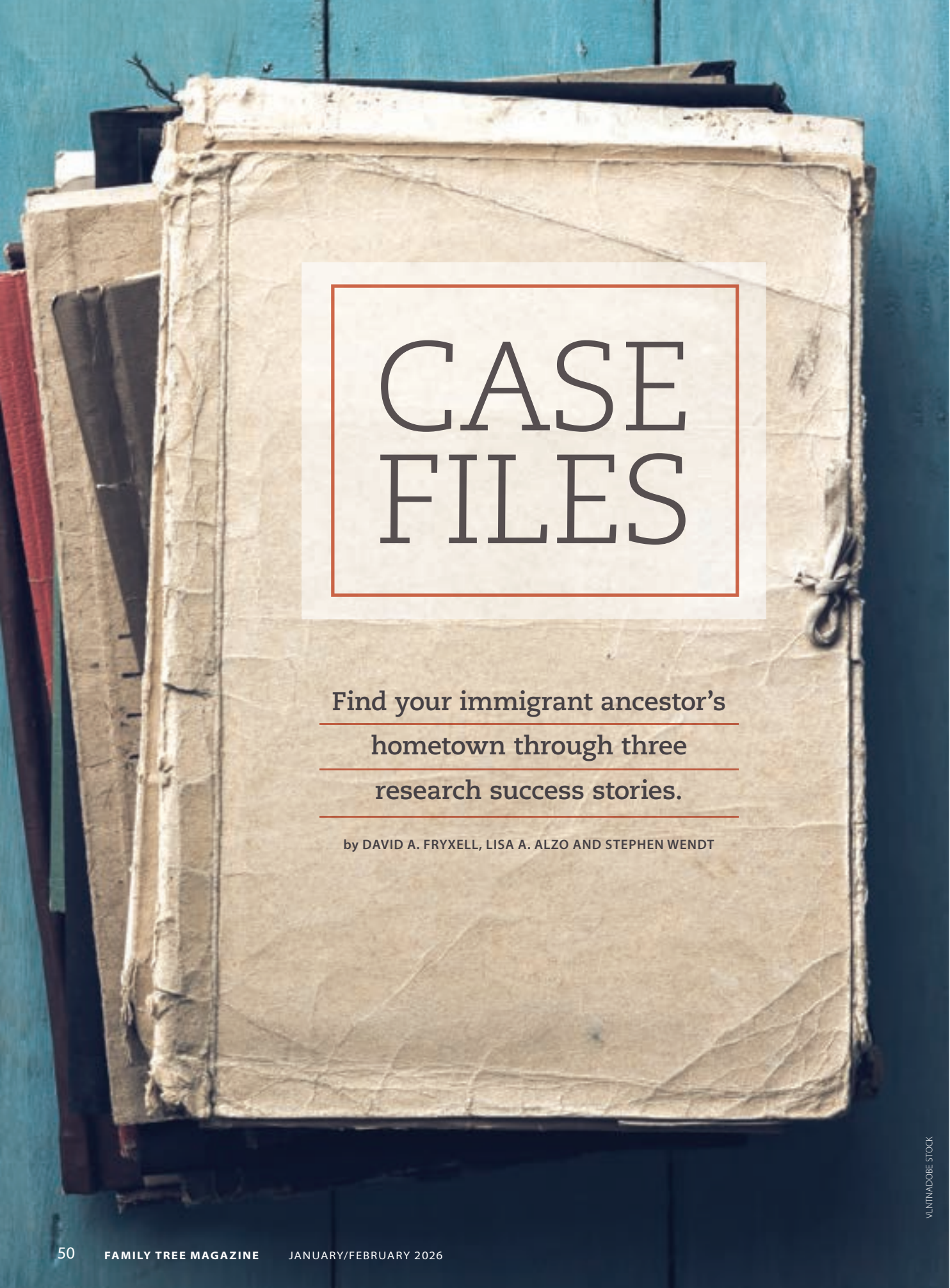
The **National Archives** ("NARA") <www.archives.gov> hold many original land records, including land-entry case files and homestead records. Bureau of Land Management records are in Record Group 49. Many NARA collections have been digitized by partner sites like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch; those that aren't should be requested from the National Archives <www.archives.gov/forms>.

State land offices also have their own websites. Run a Google search for *[state]+land office* to start. By exploring an office's website, you may find additional record collections.

offices or the Homestead Act, though the land itself was more expensive. Immigrants (especially German and Scandinavian farmers) took advantage of the program. ●



Katie Merkley was introduced to genealogy through volunteering at FamilySearch. She has an Associate of Applied Science degree in Family History Research from BYU—Idaho, specializing in US research. She is currently pursuing an Accredited Genealogist credential with a specialty in Mid-Atlantic research. Katie writes articles for blogs, magazines, and wikis, and is working on her first novel (a genealogy ghost story).



CASE FILES

Find your immigrant ancestor's
hometown through three
research success stories.

by DAVID A. FRYXELL, LISA A. ALZO AND STEPHEN WENDT

Nearly every American

has ancestors who came to the United States from somewhere else. Their stories capture our imaginations: penniless families enduring perilous journeys on crowded ships in the hopes of a better life. Many genealogists share the goal of documenting those stories and following all their ancestral lines back to the Old World.

Every immigrant's story was different. But the strategy for learning about them is largely the same. The instructors of our recent online master class "Find Their Hometown" <store.familytreemagazine.com/collections/courses> emphasized the importance of homing in on three details about immigrant ancestors: their birth name, a birth or marriage date, and (as

the title of the course implies) the *name of their hometown*.

Put another way: Simply knowing that your ancestor came from "Sweden," "Poland," or "England" isn't enough. To find records back in the old country, you'll need to drill down to the county or (preferably) town level.

These three case studies, adapted from presentations given by instructors during the course, show how expert researchers were able to overcome challenges to identify specific hometowns—then find records of their ancestors in them. Together, they underline the importance of deliberate research and share some of the most-effective strategies for documenting immigrant ancestors.

ASKING AROUND:

How Interviewing Relatives Saved My Research

BY DAVID A. FRYXELL

For years, my Swedish great-grandfather Oscar Lundeen and his wife, Mary (Maria) Eckstrom, presented a brick wall for me. I couldn't find the Lundeens anywhere in Swedish records, despite family lore asserting that country as their place of origin.

Fortunately, I asked just the right questions of just the right people to capture family knowledge before it was lost.

Dual surprises

Shortly before my aunt Ginny passed away, I explained my predicament to her. What she



The Lundeen family, with the author's great-grandfather Oscar on the left, middle row

II	Personen som skickades	Införskott betalt för riksskatten	FFI	II	Införskott betalt
253	Anna Pettersson	Stockholm	25	1	Stockholm
254	W. Maria Ingelman	Stockholm	25	1	Stockholm
255	Anna Ingelman	Stockholm	25	1	Stockholm
256	W. Maria Ingelman	Stockholm	25	1	Stockholm
257	W. Maria Ingelman	Stockholm	25	1	Stockholm

Passenger list for E. Oscar Ingelman (line 2; later Oscar Lundeen)

said next changed the course of my research: "Oh, didn't you know they were *Inglessons* back in Sweden?"

No, Aunt Ginny, I did *not* know that. That would have been helpful information to have a long time ago—and it would have saved me a lot of trouble!

Sure enough, I found an arrival list with an (E.) Oscar *Ingelman* alongside a Maria Eckstrom. (Throughout his life, he went by Lundeen, Ingelman and Inglesson.) From there, I was able to flesh out the family after they arrived in the United States.

After Ginny passed, I reached out to my second cousin Pat, with whom she had been close. I



The cover (left) and interior (right) of a family Bible in the custody of the author's second cousin

explained my research to her, and after a while she broke down and said something *else* that changed my research: “Well, maybe I should just send you the family Bible.”

That was another “Say what?!” moment—We have a family Bible? And I happened to reach out to its keeper?

Pat shipped the book to me. Though its binding needed repairs (and it was printed in Swedish), the Bible contained exactly the kind of information you hope for: a handwritten record of births.

Dual spellings

One page listed details of younger members of the family, most of which I already knew. But I was hopeful the opposite page (on older members) might have that critical place name I was searching for.

Sure enough, Oscar and Maria were listed in the page's first two entries. But I couldn't make out the handwriting in Maria's birthplace. Did it say Hackvad? Hackvard? Harvard? (Surely, she didn't come from Harvard...)

Using wildcards (see page 22), I searched for a place name similar to that in online gazetteers. The eventual result was *Hackvad*, the place name that would unlock everything.

From the FamilySearch Wiki <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Sweden_Gazetteers>, I found a digitized gazetteer titled *Sveriges församlingar genom tiderna* (*Swedish Parishes Throughout Time*). In it was an entry for Hackvad that included not just the town name but also the county (*Län*) and the name of an associated parish: Edsberg.

In Old Sweden, the state Lutheran church recorded all vital events—whether the celebrants were professed Lutherans or not. With a parish name, then, I was able to unlock a variety of church and civil records for the Eckstrom family.

Dual places in records

ArkivDigital <www.arkivdigital.net> is the central hub for Swedish genealogy records, though sites like Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> continue to grow their Swedish collections.

With the Hackvad place name in tow, I browsed ArkivDigital's collections for the town. These included household examination records (a kind of census) and birth registers. I started with the former to make sure I was tracing the right family unit, then cross-checked against the birth registers in the collection.

Sure enough, household examination entries for Maria's family track their movements in the early 1860s. In it, her birthplace is listed as the parish of Edsberg, not technically Hackvad.

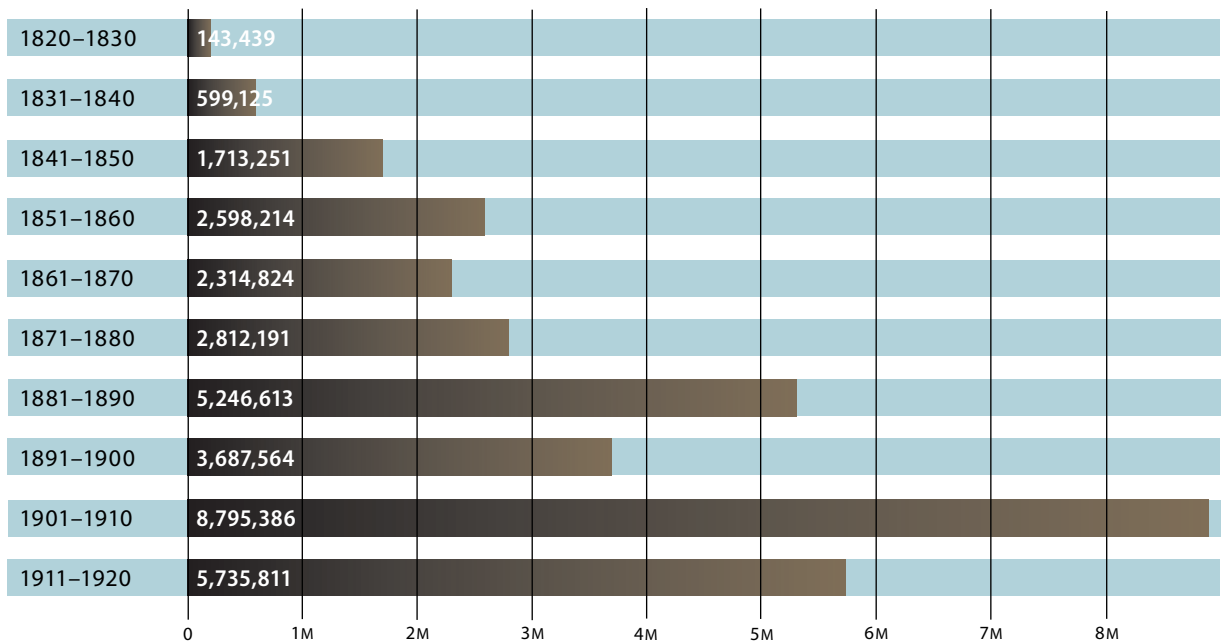
As a result, it's a good thing I looked for Maria in the household examination records first. I might never have found her if I'd looked just at vital records for Hackvad. And I wouldn't have found *anything* if I hadn't thought to talk to Pat and Aunt Ginny in the first place.



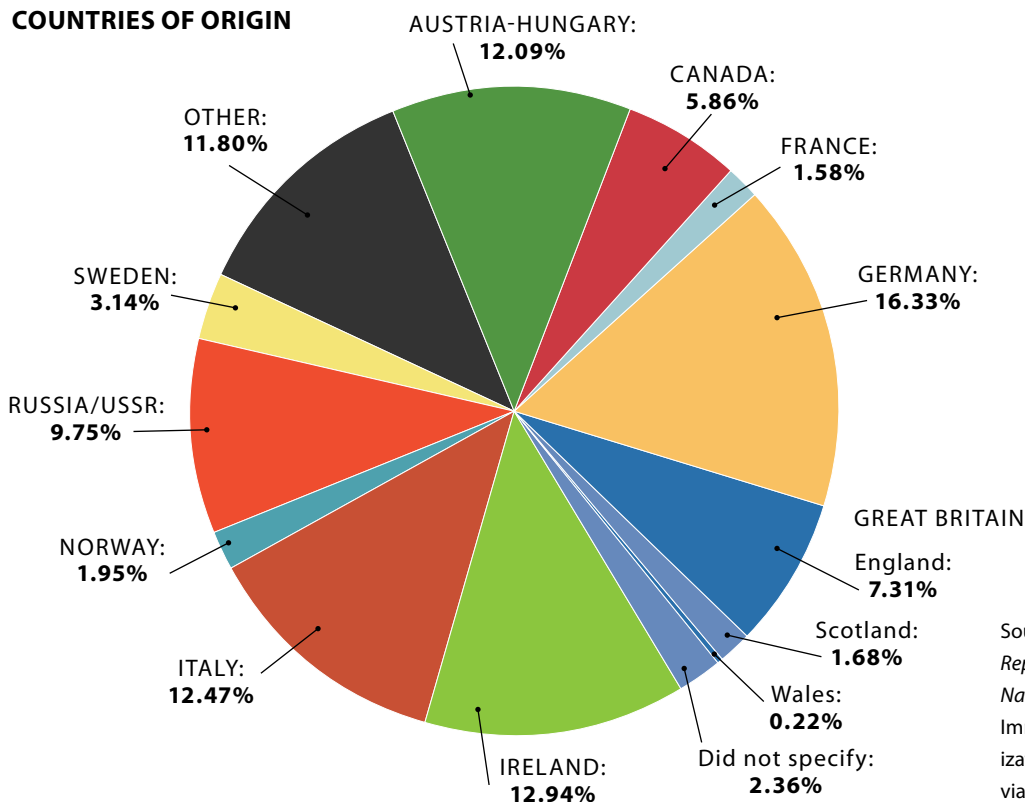
Swedish gazetteer with entry for Hackvad highlighted

A Century of Immigration: U.S. Arrivals, 1820–1920

NUMBER OF ARRIVALS BY DECADE



COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN



Source: 1974 Annual Report: Immigration and Naturalization Service, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, accessed via HathiTrust <babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/mb>

CHANGING NAMES: Mapping Out Places

BY LISA A. ALZO

In 2019, my cousin Jack asked for help finding the hometown of his grandmother, Mary Cizik Berta. Like many genealogists just starting out, Jack didn't have much information about her. He knew she died on 27 April 1940 in Rankin, Pa., just days before the 1940 US census.

Beyond that, Jack knew only that she came from somewhere in Slovakia. But together (and with help from some gazetteers), we were able to piece together many more details about Mary's life.

Finding US records

We began by finding as much as we could about Mary in the United States, working backward in time:

- A **Find a Grave memorial** <www.findagrave.com> matched Mary's death date and gave her birth year as 1890. Critically, she was buried in a Roman Catholic cemetery—we'll come back to this detail later.
- Her **death certificate** was digitized at Ancestry.com. It gives her birth date as 15 April 1890 in "Czecho Slovakia." Her father

is listed as Ladislaus Cizik, but the field for her mother simply reads "Unknown." Notably, Cizik was misindexed in the online collection, which is common for Eastern European names.

- The **1930 census** includes an entry for Mary, her husband (John), and their children. However, as is typical in censuses, her birthplace is given only at the country level.
- **Naturalization documents** showed that John applied for citizenship in 1923. Mary is listed on his application, but doesn't seem to have naturalized with him or in her own right.
- A 1908 **marriage register** confirmed Mary's maiden name as Cizik and gave her former residence as "Zemplin" County, Slovakia. John's hometown is more specific: Vojcice.

Now that we knew Mary and John married in the United States, we turned our attention to finding Mary's **passenger list**. In a MyHeritage collection, I found a Maria Csiszik arriving in New York City in 1907. She was on her way to Pennsylvania to join her brother (Laszlo) and listed as Hungarian. (At the time of Mary's departure, Slovakia was part of Austria-Hungary.) And the record finally specified a hometown: Csicsoka, Zemplin County, Hungary.

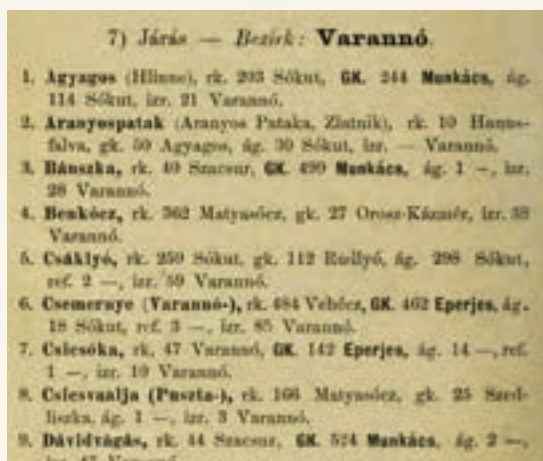
Getting gazetteers

I turned next to the FamilySearch Catalog <www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog>, which functions as both a gazetteer and a finding aid for FamilySearch's holdings. A match for *Csicsóka* indicates the village was in Hungary's Zemplén County until about 1918, when it became part of the new state of Czechoslovakia. Today, it's known as Čičava in Slovakia's Vranov nad Topľou District.

The catalog also shows the village on a modern, interactive map and links to FamilySearch's one collection of church records from the village. Unfortunately, the Čičava records there were from Greek Catholic churches; Mary was buried in a *Roman Catholic* cemetery.

Death certificate for Mary Cizik Berta, which lists her birthplace as "Czecho Slovakia"

To find records back in the old country, you'll need to drill down to the county or (preferably) town level.



Entry in the 1877 Dvorszák Gazetteer of Hungary

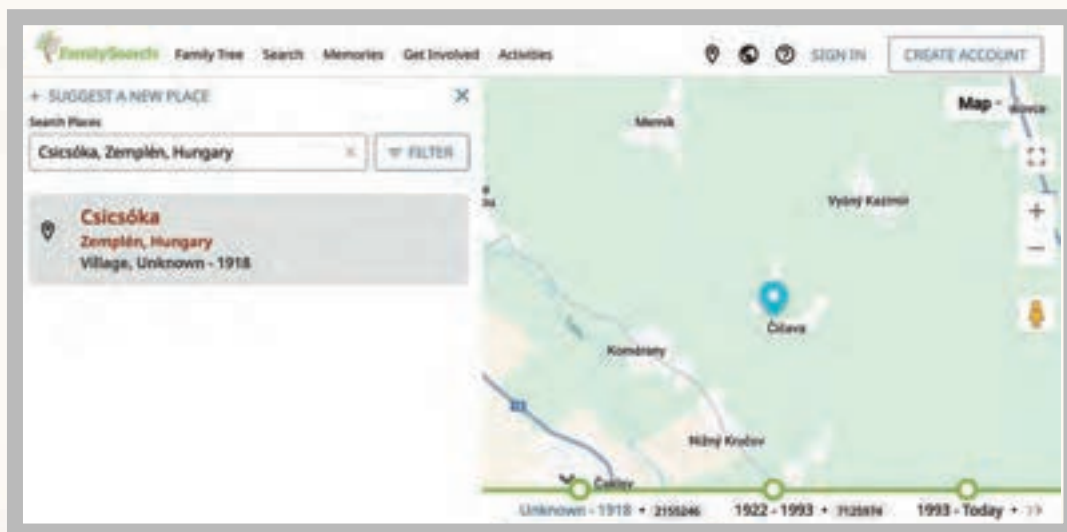
The FamilySearch Wiki's entry for Slovakia <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Slovakia_Gazetteers> includes links to several gazetteers, including the well-known *1877 Dvorszák Gazetteer of Hungary*. Entries there and at JewishGen's Gazetteer <www.jewishgen.org/

communities/loctown.asp> confirm the name change and the town's location relative to Slovakia's capital. Most helpfully, the town's Wikipedia page <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Čičava> indicates Roman Catholic records are available from the state archives in Prešov.

Finally, I found a book titled *Názvy obcí Slovenskej Republiky (Names of Villages, Slovak Republic)* by Milan Majtan. The publication (available at the FamilySearch Library) traced the village's name history back to 1808: Csicsóka or Čičowka in 1808, Csikóka in 1863, Csicsóka from 1873 to 1913, and Čičava from 1920.

Back to the old country

Jack and I visited Čičava in October 2019. While there, we hired a guide who helped us translate as we traveled around the village. And we hired a professional genealogist—who finally found Mary's baptism in Roman Catholic registers. Despite changing place names, the dissolution of empires, and language barriers, we'd found Jack's grandmother in her homeland.



Entry in FamilySearch's Catalog for Csicsóka, Hungary

BON VOYAGE: Researching History and the Point of Departure

BY STEPHEN WENDT

My great-great-grandfather Christian Wendt immigrated from Europe to New York, then settled in Minnesota and Nebraska. According to information my family already had, Christian came to the U.S. either from northeast Germany or Poland. Fortunately, his death certificate gave a birth location (Stettin), but we didn't have more detail than that.

A series of simple but crucial breakthroughs helped me follow Christian back to his hometown—and my whole Wendt line back in time to the old country.

Prussian or German?

I'd assumed that my German-speaking Wendt ancestor had come from Germany. But the 1850 US census indicated otherwise: His family's entry from Niagara County, N.Y., gives 16-year-old Christian a birthplace of Prussia.

In the census, Christian's parents are listed as Martin and Maria. He has three siblings, including another "Christian" (actually, an older sister named Christine). Notably, the family's surname is misspelled as *Went* and *West*, and their household is spread across two pages.

At the time the census was taken, Prussia was just one of many German city-states throughout Eastern and Central Europe. "Germany" as a country didn't exist until 20 years later, when Prussia (which had become the largest and most powerful of the states) united them. Today, the



The *Howard* that carried Christian Wendt to the U.S.

region is split among a handful of countries, notably Germany and Poland.

Revolutions swept Europe in 1848, leading some dissidents to emigrate. Indeed, I found a family of Wendts in a list of Old Lutherans leaving the Prussian city of Brandenburg in search of religious freedom. They were led by 48-year-old Martin Wendt, who traveled with his wife and four children from Damme.

I didn't yet know where Damme was in Prussia. But the index helped me start making connections between my immigrant Wendts, the Old Lutherans, and the Kingdom of Prussia itself.

Into emigration records

I wanted to take this knowledge about my Prussian roots to the next level. Within seconds of searching on Ancestry.com, I found an index of

SCHEDULE I.—Free Inhabitants in <i>Whitfield</i> in the County of <i>Niagara</i> State												
of New York enumerated by me, on the <i>4th</i> day of <i>Oct</i> 1850. <i>S. Clapp</i> Ass't Marshal												
1	2	3	4			7	8	9	10			
			5	6	6				11	12	13	13
		The Name of every Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	Sex and Age			Color, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate	Place or Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or County.	Whether blind, deaf, idiot, insane, pauper, or convict.			
		<i>Christian West</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>20</i>			<i>Prussia</i>				
		<i>Wilhelmina</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>15</i>			<i>"</i>				
		<i>Frederick</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>10</i>			<i>"</i>				
		<i>Elizabeth</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>3</i>			<i>"</i>				
		<i>Christian</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>16</i>			<i>Prussia</i>				

1850 US census for the Wendt family; 16-year-old Christian with a birthplace of Prussia is on line 5

emigration records that mentioned Christian's *Auswanderung* (emigration).

With just one search, I'd made an unforgettable genealogical epiphany that I later called my "Brandenburg breakthrough." The Ancestry.com emigration index entry matched the birth date I already had for Christian *and* gave his full name: Christian Friedrich Wilhelm Wendt.

Critically, it gave both an immigration year and a place of last residence: Damme, the same town name I'd seen in the Old Lutheran records. The entry specified the *Kreis* (county) as Prenzlau—a development that took me across the pond.

The county detail is important because you want to make sure you're researching the *right* town. When I first started my Prussian genealogy, I came across the town name Falkenwalde. I was elated to find that FamilySearch had a microfilmed collection of Protestant church records from there, only to realize (after I ordered the microfilm to my local FamilySearch Center and spent several hours browsing it) that I had the wrong place. The Falkenwalde I wanted was in a different county!

I didn't want to make that mistake again. I tracked down a microfiche image of the original emigration card to confirm the details on it. And I found the original source: the permission-to-leave record created in Hamburg, held by an archive in Brandenburg. The names of Christian's parents and siblings matched the 1850 census and hinted at their journey from Hamburg to New York aboard the ship *Howard*.

Stepping into history

What was that trip like for young Christian? We can fill in some details using other contemporary sources.

According to the *New York Herald*, the *Howard* traveled across the Atlantic for 38 days. And an 1853 map (printed just a few years after Christian's journey) hints at the long and sometimes perilous routes immigrants took from Europe to the Northeast United States.

Back over in Europe, I was able to use the online Meyers Gazetteer <www.meyersgaz.org>

For more on starting immigrant ancestor research, see <www.familytreemagazine.com/records/immigration/beginner-immigration-records>.



Indexed emigration record for Friedrich Wilhelm Wendt



Meyers Gazetteer entry for Damme, Prussia

to map Damme in relation to both other contemporary villages and their modern equivalents. Today, the Wendts' ancestral hometown is in northeast Germany.

That led me to Lutheran records from the region, held by church archives in Berlin. I hired a professional genealogist, who found a genealogical jackpot: Christian's baptismal register. (The record wasn't online at the time of my search, but I later found it on the Archion website <www.archion.de/en>.)

From the baptism record, the pieces came together. My ancestor Christian Friedrich Wilhelm Wendt was born 2 January 1834 to Martin Wendt and Maria Sprenger in the village of Damme, Prenzlau, Prussia. He had a whopping *eight* sponsors at his baptism—including an uncle I'd never known about.

What a fantastic find! Within a short period of time, I was able to search for and obtain church records back to the homeland. The details in them allowed me to trace my Wendt line farther back in time than I could have hoped. ●

Voter Records

Voter and election records are often-overlooked tools that documented identity, residency and citizenship.

But not everyone could vote, and access to the ballot changed dramatically over the nation's history. Laws shaped voting eligibility by property-ownership, race, gender, age and citizenship, so not all of your ancestors will appear in voter records. Understanding that history helps you interpret what you'll find—and what you won't.

This guide walks you through key types of voter records, how voting rights evolved, and how to locate these overlooked documents.

A HISTORY OF VOTING RIGHTS

Before US independence, voting rights in the Thirteen Colonies were based on English law. Rules varied by colony, but generally limited voting to Protestant men over the age of 21 who owned property.

The Constitution gave states the ability to set their own eligibility requirements. But most stuck to the status quo: white male property owners (or taxpayers). Most states removed the property requirement by the mid-1800s.

From there, voting rights expanded gradually and unevenly, affecting who will appear in historical voting records. A few landmark civil rights laws (which we'll discuss later) changed voting laws for the whole country. But individual states—not the federal government—continued to dictate whether or not people became eligible to vote.

Here are some factors that determined voting status.

Registration status

In 1800, Massachusetts became the first state to require registration as a prerequisite for voting. Today, all US states and territories except North Dakota mandate registration.

Voter registration traditionally requires that the voter: be a US citizen; be a permanent resident of the area; not have been judged as mentally incapacitated, not have a felony conviction (without their civil rights being restored); and able to prove their name, date of birth, and place of residence.

Age

For most of US history, there wasn't a federal standard for voting age. Most states set it at 21 years old. But pressure to lower the voting age increased during the Vietnam War; young men could be drafted into military service as young as 18. The 26th Amendment (adopted in 1971) set the voting age at 18 years old, where it remains today.



Race and ethnicity

Historically, only white men over the age of 21 could vote. Access opened for people of other races in fits and starts throughout the mid- to late 1800s.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) nominally gave Mexicans living in land recently acquired by the United States citizenship. But in practice, Mexican Americans weren't afforded the right to vote. Many faced intimidation, violence and literacy tests designed to prevent them from voting.

Likewise, a few states temporarily granted voting status to free African American men. But until the 1860s, free African Americans were unable to vote in most places.

The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1870 in the aftermath of the Civil War, prohibited states from limiting the right to vote based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." And because the 14th Amendment extended citizenship to all males born or naturalized in the U.S., this effectively gave non-white men the right to vote.

In theory, that is. Former Confederate States passed a series of "Black Codes" (including the infamous "grandfather clause") that restricted newly emancipated African Americans. These, coupled with threats of violence, discouraged Black Southerners from political participation. Later "Jim Crow laws" added more restrictions such as poll taxes and literacy tests.

In addition, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882, repealed in 1943) barred all Chinese immigrants already in the country from naturalization; this also excluded them from the electorate. People of Japanese descent faced similar restrictions from 1922 to 1952, and Indian Americans from 1923 until 1946.

Various legal challenges to these rules culminated in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which required the federal government to approve voting law rule changes in states that had historically discriminated by race.

Native American voting rights followed an especially complex path. In 1884, the Supreme Court ruled that Native Americans were not entitled to citizenship until the 14th Amendment because they were subject to tribal law and not federal law, thus barring them from voting. Even treaties between tribes and the federal government that were supposed to grant US citizenship to tribal members,

didn't. Those who lived on tribal land weren't granted the right to vote until 1924, and some states continued to restrict Native American voting rights through the 1960s.

Gender and sex

Universal, unrestricted voting rights for women weren't guaranteed until the 19th Amendment in 1920.

But some places implemented women's suffrage earlier. Wyoming, for example, became the first territory in which women could vote without restrictions in 1869. (The Equality State even refused Congress' attempt to drop suffrage as a condition of its statehood.) Other states granted women the right to vote in specific types of elections: for example, school boards or library boards.

However, the 19th Amendment didn't guarantee *all* women the right to vote:

- **Women who married noncitizens** between 1907 and 1922 lost their citizenship (and, thus, their right to vote). They later had to naturalize to regain it.
- **African American women in the South** still faced the aforementioned barriers to voting until 1965.
- **Puerto Rican women** (despite being US citizens) couldn't vote until 1929. And widespread access to voting didn't come until 1935.

TYPES OF VOTING RECORDS

For Colonial and early American elections, most voting was not done in private. Voters publicly cast their vote out loud at the local courthouse. These oral votes were tallied as **poll lists** by sheriffs or court clerks. Some have been preserved online or in archives.

Voting later became private and conducted on paper ballots. As a result, you won't definitively know how your ancestor voted. But you can find evidence that they voted (or, at least, that they registered to vote).

Such records were kept and maintained at the local level. (US elections are administered from the "bottom up," not the top down.) Most are organized by county, municipality, township and (in cities) precinct or ward.

Fast Facts

Coverage: Varies by place, time, and laws about voting eligibility; voting restrictions generally loosened over time

Jurisdiction where kept: County or municipal level, then held by local archives

Key details: Name, age, race, address, citizenship status

Alternates and substitutes: Vital record registers, censuses, tax lists, city directories

Registration records

Registering to vote could generate two different types of records: **registration lists** of those who had already registered (usually kept at the polling place for reference during an election) and the original **voter registration records**.

These are among the most useful records for genealogists, as they can help place an ancestor in a specific time and location between censuses. You may find:

- Name
- Age or birthdate
- Place of birth (usually state or country, if the individual naturalized)
- Occupation
- Residential address or precinct/ward
- Party affiliation
- Notes on eligibility (e.g., moved, died, disqualified)
- Hints on naturalization status, including if naturalized and where/when the petition was approved
- Physical description: race/color, gender/sex, weight and height

Voting records

Voting rolls are registers kept by the precinct to list those eligible to vote at a precinct. They often include information about when the person registered in that place and if they were later deemed ineligible to vote there for a variety of reasons (moving, dying, or becoming disqualified). **Poll books** similarly recorded the name of all the people who voted at a specific precinct.

Other records reflect prerequisites for voting. **Poll taxes** were required in many states until the 24th Amendment was ratified in 1964; they were used to disenfranchise poor white voters and African American voters after Reconstruction. Those tax records can also be used as substitutes for missing censuses, as they might include name, date of payment, address, race, age/date of birth, and remarks about voting status.

Some states required voters to take oaths of loyalty. **Registration oath books** were kept at the polling place and filled out on election day by the voter, who swore to uphold the constitution and laws of the United States before casting their ballot. These records usually only contain the signature of the person who voted, as well as information on where they voted (and, presumably, lived).

Election returns

Election return books document the results of elections, including: number of votes cast, vote totals by office/candidate, and precinct-level reporting. You won't typically see individual voter names, but pairing the timeline with registration lists can give you a sense of who your ancestor was voting for if they were engaged in politics. These are

At a Glance: Voter Registration List

A List of the Names (arranged alphabetically) of all Persons Registered in *Pigeon* Township, *Haywood* County, North Carolina, under Chapter 350, Public Laws 1901.

NAME	AGE	FROM WHOM DESCENDED UNDER A VOTE HIMSELF JANUARY 1, 1865, OR FROM THEREIN	IN WHAT STATE HE OR HIS ANCESTOR WAS A VOTER JANUARY 1, 1865, OR FROM THEREIN	DATE OF APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION
Burnett Thomas L.	60	Alfred Burnett	North Carolina	OCT 11 - 1902
Burnett Joseph G.	21	A. L. Burnett	do do	OCT 11 - 1902
Burrell John S.	43	W. M. Burrell	South Carolina	OCT 11 - 1902
Burrell William S.	22	W. M. Burrell	South Carolina	OCT 11 - 1902
Burnett Agnes M.	43	Hyler Burnett	North Carolina	OCT 14 - 1902
Burnett Robert L.	36	A. L. Burnett	do do	OCT 14 - 1902
Burnett Esther L.	24	A. L. Burnett	do do	OCT 15 - 1902
Blaylock John S.	31	Walter Blalock	do do	OCT 17 - 1902
Burnett William	32	A. L. Burnett	do do	OCT 17 - 1902
Jailes Charles	36	Hyler Thompson	do do	OCT 18 - 1902
Burnett Emmett	31	D. Spruigt	do do	OCT 18 - 1902
Blaylock W. B. Sayer	46	E. A. Blalock	do do	OCT 18 - 1902
Burnett David W.	92	do	do do	OCT 16 - 1902
Burchfield Joseph L.	55	Sam Burchfield	do do	OCT 21 - 1902
Blaylock John C.	44	E. A. Blaylock	do do	OCT 21 - 1902
Burnett D. Henry	41	Alfred Burnett	do do	OCT 22 - 1902
Blaylock Wm. S.	47	E. A. Blaylock	do do	OCT 22 - 1902
Burnett John R.	31	A. L. Burnett	do do	OCT 22 - 1902
Blaylock James T.	65	do	do do	OCT 22 - 1902
Blaylock Wm. S.	26	James T. Blalock	do do	OCT 22 - 1902
Burnett Geo. B.	51	Hyler Burnett	do do	OCT 23 - 1902
Burnett E. Fred	33	D. Spruigt	do do	OCT 24 - 1902
Blaylock James B.	23	E. A. Blalock	do do	OCT 25 - 1902

Citation: North Carolina, Haywood County, 1900s voter registration list. "North Carolina, Voter Registers and Certificates of Registration, 1843–1965," digital images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org>; accessed 20 November 2025).

1 Eligible voters who registered are listed by surname. (In 1902 North Carolina, all of them were men.) Look also for jurisdiction (here, Pigeon Township, Haywood County, North Carolina). This example includes a column for age; in 1902, the minimum age for voting in North Carolina was still 21.

2 This register asks about an ancestor's voting status as of 1 January 1867. This is the nefarious "grandfather clause" in action, negating voting rights for people who couldn't (or whose ancestors couldn't) vote as of that date. The names listed here are qualifying ancestors—either a father or grandfather.

3 Don't overlook any information about the state laws relevant to voting rights or processes. These differed by state and time, and affect who you can expect to find in the registers.

4 The far column lists what date the person registered to vote. Most applied in 1902, but the document also lists registrations throughout the decade (not pictured). Most of these dates are in mid- to late October, which is apt: 1902's Election Day was on November 4.

also useful if your ancestor was himself involved in local politics and ran for office.

Canvass books

Despite the similar labeling in online catalogs, **canvass books** are not voter rolls. Instead, they document canvassing done by political campaigns to record the number and demographics of eligible voters and who they think they will vote for in an upcoming campaign.

LOCATING VOTER RECORDS

Because voting was administered locally, these records are scattered and stored in a wide range of repositories and aren't often centrally indexed.

Online services

The best place to start is with major genealogy and archives platforms:

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> has one of the broadest online collections, especially of county-level registers. Use the Catalog instead of the main search page and try keyword combinations like *voter*, *election*, *poll* or *register* alongside the county name. Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> also has valuable collections, including California's Great Registers and select state and city voter lists.

Note that many of the statewide collections on major genealogy websites don't, in fact, cover the whole state. They only contain records from counties that have been digitized—sometimes, only two or three counties.

You can broaden your search using WorldCat <www.worldcat.org>, which locates books and select microfilm series at libraries and archives nationwide. Some of these records may have been transcribed by genealogy societies or researchers and published as books.

Archives

Not all voter records are digitized. When online searches fail, turn to

the county clerk's office, the county board of elections, the county archives or the state and local historical societies. These repositories often hold the original records that have not made it online.

Calling ahead is helpful, as older records might be stored offsite and require staff to retrieve them. Local genealogy societies can also point you towards published transcriptions in journals and county histories.

Note that archives and courthouses may have filed election materials under less-obvious terms: clerk records, county registers, election abstracts, or even miscellaneous county records.

TIPS FOR USING VOTING RECORDS

Understand the legal context:

Voting rights, and the documents that were created during elections, changed depending on the time period, state rules, local practice, and requirements like property, race, gender, naturalization and poll taxes. Always check state election law history to interpret records correctly and figure out who would have been registered to vote.

Track movement and migration: Because eligibility depended on residency in a precinct, voter lists can help track movements within counties (precinct changes), migration between states, and the naturalization progress. They can essentially fill in gaps between census years and city directories.

Read notes in the margins: Notes like "removed," "moved," "dead," or "denied" can provide leads to: date and place of death, migration dates, felony convictions, loss or restoration of rights (especially with women). ●



Katharine Andrew
is digital editor of *Family Tree Magazine*.



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A Colonial Keepsake

An unusual “frame” and throwback imagery suggest an origin for this hand-tinted photo.



1 Beth Snyder owns a 2x3-inch hand-tinted photo that hung on a wall in her grandparents' house. It depicts a woman sitting in a chair in front of a Colonial-era fireplace with a clock on the mantel.

2 The handles suggest that this is a small tray for bureau keepsakes, not a photo suitable for framing. As such, it's likely not a

family photo. Beth's grandmother Mary Lucille Pickard Sutton (1895–1976) lived in a house previously occupied by the parents of her husband, Benjamin Franklin Sutton (1838–1897). During the early decades of the 20th century, people frequently collected photos in this style. Mary apparently loved it enough to display it on a wall rather than use it as a tray.

3 Some details are hand-tinted: a Delft plate on the mantle in blue; the fireplace bricks, the chair and her hair in brown; and the braided rug with hints of blue and gold.

> Have a photo mystery you'd like Maureen to investigate? Email FamilyTree@YankeePub.com with your photo, any details you know about it, and *Photo Detective* in the subject line, and your question may be selected for a future issue.

4 The fireplace suggests the photo is done in the style of Wallace Nutting, a minister, photographer/artist and antiquarian who produced pictures that romanticized the Colonial period. His work popularized the “Colonial Revival,” which featured other photographer-artists such as Fred Thompson and David Davidson.

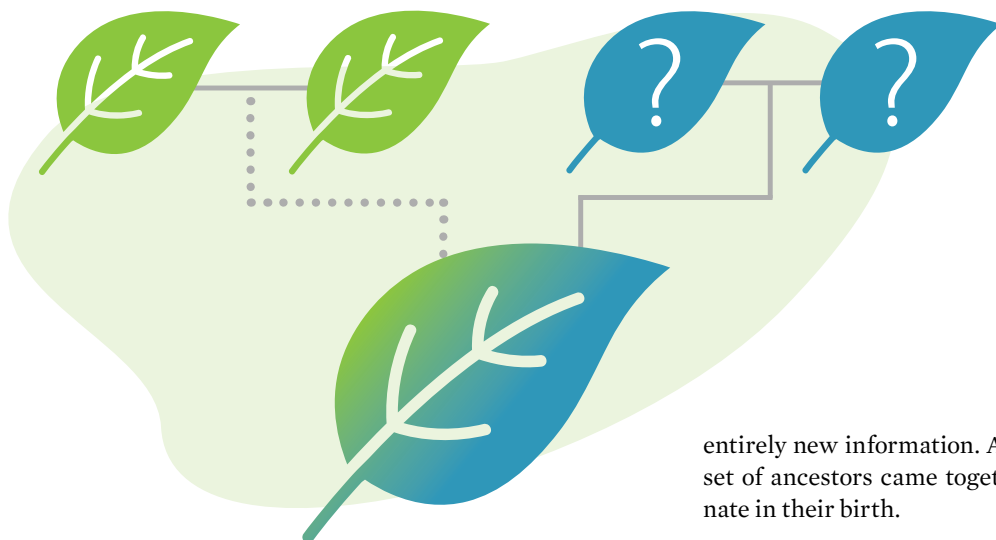
5 An embossed letter C in the lower-right corner (difficult to see here) might be a clue to who created the photograph. Handwriting on the reverse (not pictured) looks like *Mrs. Gray*, perhaps an original owner perhaps (but not a relative to Beth's grandmother). ●



Maureen A. Taylor is the author of *Family Photo Detective* (Family Tree Books).

DNA Q&A

DNA and Adoptees



entirely new information. Adoptees can see how a diverse set of ancestors came together in a unique way to culminate in their birth.

Q How can DNA help an adoptee find their birth parents?

A DNA has gained a reputation for making family connections that paper records just can't.

Some people hear of DNA's usefulness and go looking for those connections, which tend to be personal and sensitive. Others take a DNA test on a whim and unearth family secrets about their parentage that have been kept for decades. Either way, *anyone* embarking on a DNA discovery needs to be crystal clear on the emotional component of this kind of search.

DNA can (and will) help you make discoveries about your family—and yourself. What can DNA do for adoptees, who may have struggled finding birth families using traditional research strategies? Let's find out.

REVEAL YOUR "WHERE"

"Where did I come from?" Your DNA ethnicity results can at least begin to give you an answer.

Reports tell you where your ancestors were thousands of years ago. And they give more-specific and -targeted information about your ancestors' movements and migrations over the last 200 years. Indeed, today's "origins" technology can paint quite a detailed picture of your heritage.

These maps and percentages often resonate with deeply held (but as of yet unexplainable) connections to places and cultures—especially for adoptees, for whom they might be

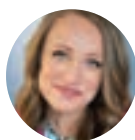
FIND YOUR PEOPLE

Every person who tests today finds at least one DNA match through their results. For my mom (an adoptee), the DNA match list was the first time she saw the name of a biological family member. She knew nothing about this person or the way they were connected, but felt the impact of knowing (in reality, not just in theory) that she wasn't alone.

Taking a potentially long list of strangers and turning them into the names of biological relatives is not always easy. In fact—and this is important—*unless your close relatives themselves take a DNA test, you'll still need to combine test results with paper research.* And it may not be possible to identify your exact birth parents.

Instead, adoptees can focus on identifying the *family groups* they belong to. Using careful, methodical analysis, they can connect themselves to great- or great-great-grandparents. Other relatives (or strangers on the internet) may have shared their stories online. That creates some sought-after grounding: in a family and in a culture. An anchor and bearings when the adoptee previously felt adrift.

While DNA cannot guarantee the discovery of your birth family, it can take you a long way down the road to understanding yourself. ●

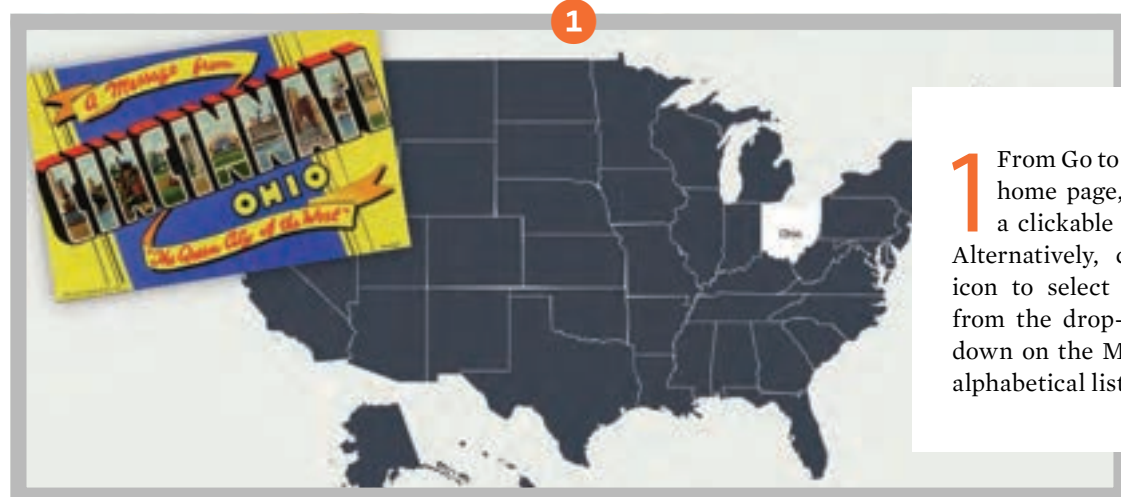


Diahan Southard is founder and CEO at Your DNA Guide <www.yourdnaguide.com>, where she makes DNA education fun and accessible.

Tracing Borders with the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries

The **Atlas of Historical County Boundaries** <publications.newberry.org/ahcb> is a priceless, comprehensive reference guide to that peskiest of geographical challenges: changing borders. The tool (which just got a facelift in 2025) logs how county borders changed over time and is just one of the many resources offered by Chicago's Newberry Library <collections.newberry.org>. Here's how to tap the powerful free website.

Melina Papadopoulos



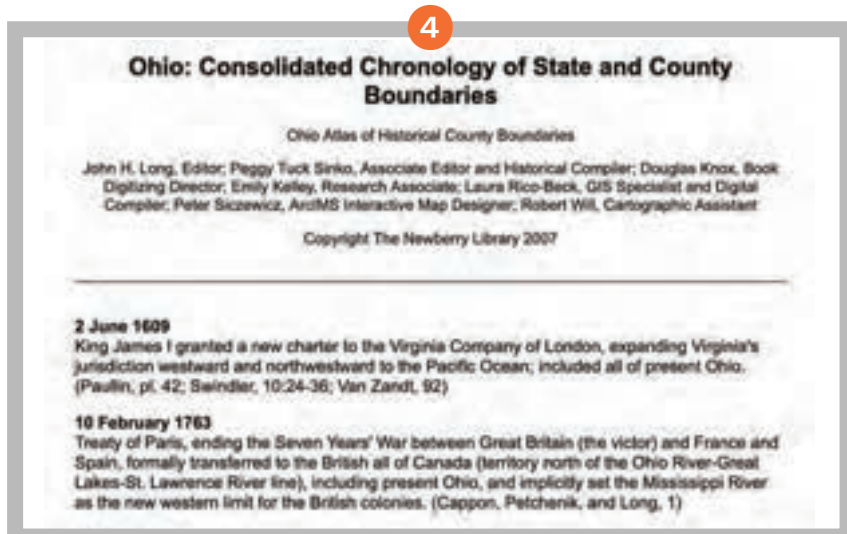
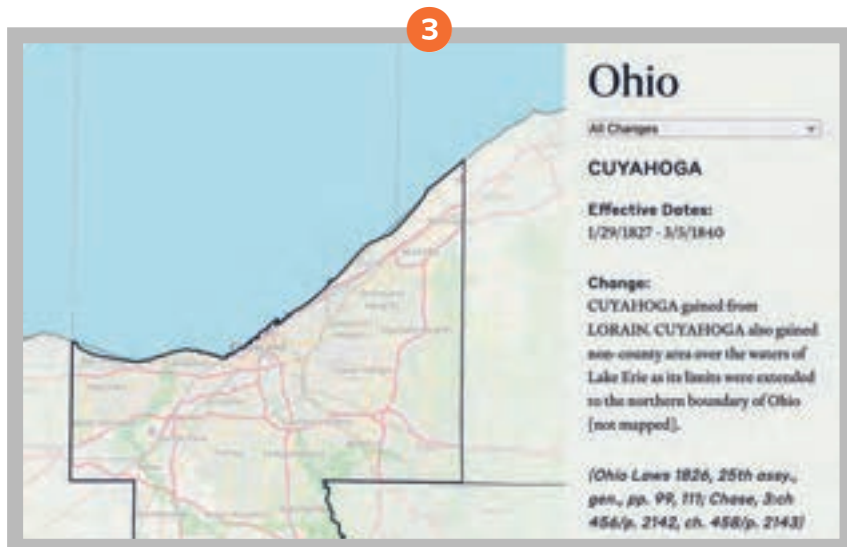
1 From Go to the Maps on the home page, you can access a clickable map of the U.S. Alternatively, click the menu icon to select a specific state from the drop-down, or scroll down on the Maps page for an alphabetical list.



2 Click a state to view an interactive map of county boundaries. Use the drop-down at right or the slider below to select a date and view how the state was subdivided at that time. These are shown over a modern map, making it easy to see how historical counties match up with contemporary places. Cleveland, for example, has been part of at least three counties throughout its history: Trumbull, Geauga and (today) Cuyahoga County.

3 Select a county to see the time frame it existed and a summary of its border changes over time. Toggle between different years to note border changes, which might affect where your ancestor will be found in records.

4 Click All Changes from the drop-down to see a plain-text page that offers a comprehensive breakdown of county border changes. This acts as a kind of written state history, with key dates and source citations listed in chronological order. Hit control-F (or, on a Mac, command-F) to search the page for specific terms (such as a county name). ●



Antique Linens



IRYNA KALUKINA/ISTOCK



1 Remember the basics, and have no fear. Linen is a centuries-old fabric, woven from flax and thus durable. That makes it surprisingly simple to use and care for—so long as you adhere to some basics.



2 Give linens a good soaking. Long-term storage may result in linens having darkening and weak or brittle folds. Don't force the fabric to lay flat—instead, gently immerse the cloth in a kitchen sink filled with cool, clean water and allow the fibers to rehydrate and relax. Soak for several hours or overnight, then drain. (Repeat as necessary until the water runs clear.) The same goes for handkerchiefs and garments.

If you notice stains, use some of the various commercial products that are safe for cleaning dirty vintage linens. Instead of plain water, fill a tub or sink with a mix of mild laundry detergent and powdered bleach such as OxiClean or RetroClean. Then add the linen and stir. Once the fabric has soaked for several hours, rinse in clean water.

3 Air dry. Avoid wringing water from the cloth or squeezing too tightly. Carefully lift the cloth from its soaking, squeeze out as much as possible, then roll in a large clean towel. Linens are best dried over a clean sheet in fresh sunshine, on a large patio table or lawn. (Avoid drying fibers by hanging them over a clothesline.) Use an acid-free garment bag for smaller items.



4 Store rolled. Use a gift wrap tube covered with a piece of clean cotton sheet, polyester fiberfill, or acid-free tissue. If the fabric is too large to roll, cushion folds with crumpled tissue or strips of clean cotton. Avoid blue paper or regular tissue paper; as with other heirloom items, linens require acid-free materials.

5 Find the right storage space. Place linens in a drawer or acid-free box away from harmful UV light, dust and pests. Prevent acid stains from food by sealing wood with polyurethane varnish or lining wooden drawers with a sheet.

tip

Dry cleaning may or may not be appropriate for heirloom linens. The process can't remove impurities as effectively as the water-washing we've discussed here. Some services specialize in antique or other vintage textiles; ask local museums or historical societies for recommendations.



6 Make minor repairs. If you're handy with needle and thread, it's worth repairing torn hems or small holes. Check with a local tailor or dry cleaner for repairs that are beyond your skill level.



7 Use them! A table set with heirloom linens makes any meal a special occasion—not just Thanksgiving dinners or other holiday feasts. Break out the embroidered cloth placemats, lace tablecloths or cutwork napkins. ●



Denise May Levenick collects vintage calendar and souvenir tea towels to use as picnic napkins. She is the author of *How to Archive Family Keepsakes* (Family Tree Books) and The Family Curator Blog <www.thefamilycurator.com>.

Q My grandmother was committed to the state's mental institution. She passed away in 1973. Is there any way to get her records to shed light on her diagnosis?

A Commitment proceedings would typically be held in local courts, often the county probate court. If these records are no longer at the courthouse, try state archives, libraries and historical societies. FamilySearch has a handy reference to probate court records <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Probate_Records>. Or read our guide at <www.familytreemagazine.com/records/courthouse/finding-genealogy-information-probate-documents>.

Federal HIPAA laws allow the release of medical records for individuals who have been deceased for at least 50 years. But state or private hospitals might have different rules—possibly requiring a court order or proof of relationship. You can consult the Asylum Projects site <www.asylumprojects.org> for information on specific institutions.

Records of patients committed to state hospitals would be held either by the state archives or a state mental health department. If you know the name of the hospital where your grandmother was committed, run a Google search for it along with patient records. A search for Anoka State Hospital in Minnesota, for example, leads to the Minnesota State Historical Society <libguides.mnhs.org/sh/anoka>.

Other sources to learn more about institutionalized ancestors include old newspapers (especially before modern privacy concerns), state legislative reports, and even hospital employee publications.

Winter is the perfect time to find great grandma in photos!



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Q Family stories have claimed we're connected to Sir Walter "Beardie" Scott and "Auld Wat" Scott, ancestors of the author Sir Walter Scott. Are they true? A DNA test matched me with Scott descendants' Y-DNA. I have a Thomas Scott ancestor (born about 1787 Virginia and died in Georgia in 1849), but can't make the jump to Scotland.

A The good news about researching famous ancestors is that someone has likely been there before you.

A few clicks turn up a site devoted to the author Scott's descendants <www.scottsassbottsford.com/history/the-descendants-of-sir-walter-scott> and family trees such as this one <en.geneastar.org/genealogy/scottw/walter-scott>. This WikiTree starts with the author's famed Jacobite great-grandfather, "Beardie" Scott <www.wikitree.com/wiki/Scott-211>. (Online trees, of course, should always be taken with a grain of salt.) The author's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* <www.archive.org/details/dictionaryofnati019324mbp/page/80/mode/2up> is also informative.

You've probably already realized that your Thomas was born 10 years before the author's 1797 marriage. As a result, Thomas can't be a *direct* descendant of the famous author—but they still might share an ancestor. You'll need to start by identifying Thomas' father, working backwards until you find an immigrant ancestor. Bible records at the Library of Virginia <lva-virginia.libguides.com/bible-records> might help. Since Thomas moved to Georgia, it's possible his father did, too, and could be recorded there; land records might offer clues.

As for DNA: Y-DNA testing doesn't provide concrete relationship estimates. It only suggests whether the test taker and their matches share a direct-line male relative *at some point* in the past several hundred years. So matching with men who are associated with the Scott Y-DNA line can't confirm much. You match with those test takers via autosomal DNA, meaning you could be related to them along many possible lines. Having a brother, father or paternal uncle test (if available) could shed more light on how you're related to those Y-DNA test takers. ●



Sir Walter Scott, painted in 1844



David A. Fryxell is the founding editor author of *The Family Tree Scandinavian Genealogy Guide* (Family Tree Books).

Have a question you'd like David to answer? Email FamilyTree@YankeePub.com with **Now What** in the subject line, and your question may be selected for a future issue.



Begin Your DNA Journey

Test with FamilyTreeDNA and break down brick walls while connecting with relatives in our Autosomal, Y-DNA, and mtDNA databases.



17 Genealogy Habits for the New Year

New year, new you? For many, January means resolutions: tangible to-do items that will improve your quality of life or help you reach big-picture goals.

What does that look like for family historians? In our January/February 2017 issue, author Dana McCullough shared 17 possible genealogy resolutions—one for each year of the century. They're still relevant in 2026.

Cover of the January/February 2017 issue of *Family Tree*



With the new year comes a list of resolutions. Whether or not you make (and keep) them, now is a great time to plan what you want to do differently or better in the coming year.

Don't spend another year feeling like you barely have a handle on your research. Follow these tips to make you a better genealogy researcher this year.

1 RESEARCH REGULARLY

Schedule a session each week or month to enjoy the hobby you love. For example, make the last Saturday of the month your “genealogy day” when you go to the library or search online for the morning, afternoon, evening or all day—whatever fits into your busy life.

2 CITE YOUR SOURCES

It's easy to lose track of where you learned what—and it's important to be able to retrace your research steps.

On some genealogy websites, you can save source documents for later reference to a virtual “shoebox.” You also can cite sources for individuals in your online tree by attaching records to their personal profiles. Remember to download an image of each historical record you find online, so you'll still have a copy even if you don't have access to that site in the future.

Most family tree software has built-in tools to help you fully document your sources. If you're not sure how to cite sources, consult *Evidence Explained* by Elizabeth Shown Mills (Genealogical Publishing Co.).

3 SCHEDULE TIME TO ORGANIZE

After my daughter was born in 2015, my husband and I took what seemed like hundreds of new digital photos

every month to document her first year. Having the photos is great, but it's also overwhelming to keep up with organizing them.

I began setting aside about 15 minutes each week to sort through photos, identify the best ones and rename them so we can easily find them when working on photo projects.

Old family photos (plus digital images of records and other genealogy documents) can pile up just as quickly as the photos and videos you take on your smartphone. Make time to regularly rename and sort your saved records, using a consistent file naming and organization system. If you don't yet have an organization system, choose one that works for you. Setting it up may take an initial investment of your energy, but in the long run you'll save time and be able to retrieve the files you want when you want them.

4 SUBSCRIBE TO NEWSLETTERS AND BLOGS

How do you stay up-to-date on new genealogy websites and other happenings in the genealogy world (other than reading *Family Tree Magazine*)? Subscribe to RSS feeds or newsletters from the genealogy sites you use most frequently, as well as to research experts and industry insiders. A few of our favorites are Genealogy Gems <www.lisalouisecooke.com>, Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter <www.eogn.com> and, of course, the *Family Tree Magazine* newsletter. Simply go to the website and look for options to sign up.

5 INTERVIEW ELDERLY RELATIVES

Too often, genealogists wait to interview older generations. But before they know it, relatives take ill or pass away, or their memories begin to fade with time or age.

Make it a priority this year to interview relatives—perhaps starting with the most senior or those in declining health. Before each interview, prepare a list of questions.

Record in-person interviews with your smartphone's audio or video recorder, or use the free companion apps for genealogy websites to record and save interviews directly to individual profiles on your online trees.

6 DIGITIZE OLD PHOTOS— ONE BATCH AT A TIME

Avoid overwhelm in tackling family photos by breaking digitization into smaller chunks: by topic, family, time period or event. (See page 28.)

First, choose a scanner that's best for your situation. If you want the flexibility to scan photos wherever you go (even if it's just while sitting on the sofa watching TV), a free photo-scanning app such as Pic Scanner (for iOS) or Shoebox from Ancestry.com (for Android or iOS) might suit your needs. The image quality won't be as good as using a flatbed scanner, but it's better than not capturing the image at all.

7 SUBSCRIBE TO YOUR DREAM WEBSITE

What genealogy website subscription is next on your wish list? This year, subscribe to one new website and focus your research efforts there to make your investment worthwhile. Continue the subscription if you're still getting a lot out of it. Or cancel it (follow any cancellation instructions to avoid auto-renewal) and choose the next dream website on your list.

8 HEIGHTEN YOUR ONLINE PRIVACY AWARENESS

Read the privacy practices of genealogy websites before you use them. For example, the FamilySearch content submission agreement essentially gives FamilySearch license to use your uploaded documents and images in any way it chooses. Other genealogy websites have similar terms in their fine print.



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American Ancestors

In addition to knowing how a company or website uses information you contribute, it's important to know what information the site shows publicly (such as username and/or contact information). Look in the site's account or privacy settings to see what you can change or opt out of sharing publicly.

9 PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR DNA MATCH MESSAGES

Many in the genealogy community complain that people who take DNA tests seem to ignore their messages from matches. If that's you, log into your account to see if you have any messages. Update your contact information as needed, especially your email address if it has changed. As new people get tested and their data is added to the DNA database, it's possible you could have new matches waiting—pay attention and stay connected.

10 CREATE AND MAINTAIN A MASTER FAMILY TREE

Having one master family tree will keep your research organized and make it easier to check and share your information. It also can help you see where you're missing key data (or the sources that support it). Consider keeping your master tree in software on your computer, which secures your information, as well as posting copies of your tree online.

11 SET UP A GENEALOGY-ONLY EMAIL ADDRESS

You probably already maintain separate email accounts for work and personal communication, but it's helpful to have a dedicated address for genealogy, too. That keeps those genealogy website notifications, your correspondence with potential cousins, and responses to your record requests from getting lost. Whatever email accounts you set up, protect against hacking with strong, unique passwords.

12 SEARCH OFFLINE

It's easy to get into the habit of limiting your researching to historical records that are online, but many important records aren't. Make a list of the records you want to find and order. Set goals for how many to check off your list each month (or year)—and a budget for ordering copies.

13 SEEK HELP

Look for expert knowledge to save time, advance your research and learn the idiosyncrasies of various records and repositories. Attend genealogy conferences and seminars; take an online class through Family Tree University <store.familytreemagazine.com/collections/



courses> or attend the meetings of a local genealogical or historical society.

14 ORGANIZE YOUR FAMILY HEIRLOOMS

Photos, jewelry, furniture, wedding gowns, scrapbooks and newspaper clippings are a few of the items you might inherit from relatives. Start keeping better track of them by writing down information about the history behind each item as you receive it. Store items properly so they don't deteriorate over time. Attach images—and anything you learn about the family from them—to personal profiles in your family tree software.

15 BACK UP YOUR RECORDS REGULARLY

You never know when your computer hard drive is going to crash or succumb to disaster or theft. Back up your digital genealogy files and photos at least once a month—and immediately after you make a lot of additions or changes to your files. Save copies to an external hard drive and to a second medium that's in a physically different location from your original files and primary backup.

16 RECORD YOUR OWN STORY

Genealogists focus so much on the past, but sometimes forget to record history *as it's made* in the present. Start writing down your own life story, a little at a time, in regular intervals. Use a book such as *Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy* by Sunny Jane Morton (Family Tree Books) to prompt memories and keep them all in one place.

17 PLAN A FAMILY GET-TOGETHER

One of the best parts of researching your family history is sharing it with relatives. If your family doesn't currently have a reunion or regular get-together, consider planning one—or offer to share your family history if someone else will plan the event. Consider creative ways for imparting what you know: photo displays, slideshows, games, and foods from your family's heritage. ●

Dana McCullough, January/February 2017

AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGY

Tips for Studying Black Ancestors and History

Compiled by Sunny Jane Morton and Diane Haddad

6 Keys to Tracing
African American Ancestors

1 REMEMBER IT'S NOT IMPOSSIBLE.

After the Civil War, researching African American ancestry is similar to that of other heritage groups. Tracing enslaved relatives is difficult, though, due to the scarcity of historical records naming slaves and the practice of giving slaves only first names. But with help from the resources described in this guide, it is possible to learn more about enslaved ancestors.

2 TRACE YOUR FAMILY BACK TO THE CIVIL WAR.

Start with yourself and work back in time using typical genealogical sources and methods. Ask relatives what they know and search for ancestors in censuses, vital and other records to confirm births, marriages, deaths, parents' names, and other family relationships. You may need to search for segregated government records, such as a "colored" marriage register, or records from segregated institutions such as schools, churches, funeral homes and cemeteries.

3 STUDY MIGRATIONS.

During the 20th century, millions of African Americans in the South moved to other parts of the United States. If yours did, ask older relatives why the family moved and where the family lived previously. Use censuses and city directories to track migrating families.

4 FOLLOW THE FREEDOM TRAIL.

About 90 percent of African Americans were enslaved at the time of the Civil War. They weren't named in censuses or government vital records. Civil War-era African American ancestors who don't appear in the 1860 or 1850 censuses likely were enslaved. Freedmen often do appear on census schedules and may appear in other records, as well.

5 IDENTIFY SLAVEHOLDING FAMILIES.

Enslaved people didn't have legal surnames. Freed slaves sometimes (but not always) took the surname of a former enslaver. If this was the case for your family, the name may lead you to their enslaving family.



Senator Henry Hall Falkener and his family, c. 1906

Follow tips later in this guide to using an ancestor's name in the 1870 census to trace them back to the slave era. Then it may be necessary to use records of the enslaving families, such as wills and estate inventories, to trace your enslaved ancestors' whereabouts.

6 GO OFFLINE.

You'll almost certainly need to research in records that aren't available online and use more-advanced research techniques to learn about African American ancestors before 1865.

GENETIC GENEALOGY Q&A

Q Can a DNA test tell me where in Africa my family came from? Which type of test is best?

A It's possible that a DNA test can identify likely African origins, but there's no guarantee it will. Here's how this works for each type of test:

Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA): This type of DNA is passed unbroken except for rare mutations from a mother to her children. An mtDNA match could be a first or a 20th cousin, making this test useful for learning about your ancient maternal origins. Testing companies analyze your sample and assign your maternal haplogroup. Most Africans fall into subgroups of the L haplogroup. Because some mtDNA subgroups occur in high numbers in certain populations, this test can suggest likely geographic origins of a direct-line maternal ancestor in Africa.

Y-DNA: Men pass Y-DNA, with occasional mutations, to their sons. A woman wanting to test her male line could have a known male-line relative, such as a father or brother, take this test. Testing companies use Y-DNA to assign a paternal haplogroup. Those most common in Africa include A, B and E, with subgroups for each. If your subgroup is one that's common in specific African populations, it can suggest the origins of your male-line African ancestor—your father's father's father's (and so on) father.

Autosomal DNA: An autosomal test analyzes your 22 autosomes (all your chromosome pairs except for the sex chromosomes). Your results include estimated percentages of your ethnic makeup (called admixture), as well as a list of other test takers whose DNA the testing company has found to match yours. This type of DNA is most useful for learning about your recent ancestry. Beyond five to six generations, you didn't inherit enough of any one ancestor's autosomal DNA for the test to be informative. Your admixture is reported in terms of broad regions, rather than specific places or population groups, so the results aren't gen-

erally useful in determining African origins. In addition, testing companies use different reference populations for comparing results, so it's common to get different admixture results from each company you test with.

Q My DNA test shows I have European origins. Why is this?

A On average, African American individuals have about 24 percent ethnic admixture from European populations, according to a study in the January 2015 *American Journal of Human Genetics*. Researchers examined the genetic data of thousands of 23andMe <www.23andme.com> customers, including more than 5,000 self-identified African Americans. That's not surprising, due to enslavers fathering children with their female slaves. For that reason, European heritage is more likely to be present for your Y-DNA haplogroup than for your mtDNA haplogroup.

Q Can my DNA help me break through the brick wall at slavery?

A It is possible. Your autosomal DNA matches may have identified enslaved ancestors that you both share, or you may match European-descended individuals whose slaveholding ancestors are in your own lines. This could lead you to your paternal-line enslaved ancestor's location prior to the Civil War. If the slaveholding ancestor was along your direct male line, the link between



Y-DNA and a surname will be helpful. If your Y-DNA results match those of a European-descended individual, chances are that match has the same last name as your ancestor's slaveholder.

Q My grandma always said we have Cherokee blood. Could a DNA test tell us if this is true?

A Stories of American Indian heritage are common for African American families. Although not all of these stories have merit, some do: The Cherokee and other Five Civilized Tribes did have African slaves.

It's true that DNA testing is useful for discovering Indian heritage, but usually in a limited way. Geneticists can analyze your DNA for markers characteristic of American Indian populations.

If you have an Indian ancestor along your direct male or female line, your Y-DNA or mtDNA haplogroup will reflect this. An autosomal DNA admixture is likely to show American Indian ancestry within the past five or so generations. But because of the way autosomal DNA recombines at conception, you could have a distant American Indian ancestor whose DNA you didn't inherit.

A DNA test likely won't link you to a specific tribe or to any one ancestor, unless you discover you're biologically related to a documented tribal member.

Q What companies offer DNA testing?

A Of the three types we've mentioned here, autosomal DNA testing is the most widely available. Major companies that offer it are 23andMe, Ancestry DNA <www.ancestry.com/dna>, Family Tree DNA <www.familytreedna.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com/dna>.

Family Tree DNA is the only of these major companies to offer Y-DNA and mtDNA tests. AfricanAncestry <www.africanancestry.com> offers Y-DNA and mtDNA haplogroup tests, but doesn't provide match information.

KEY RECORDS AT A GLANCE

RECORD TYPE	WHO, WHEN AND WHERE	RECORD CONTENT	TIPS FOR READING
Newspapers	- as far back as 1820s, but most available for 20th century - urban centers, some rural coverage	Obituaries, birth notices, local news stories, court cases, marriage licenses, ads and more	Search collections of newspapers specifically published for and by African Americans on subscription sites such as GenealogyBank < www.genealogybank.com >, Newsbank's "America's Historical Newspapers" and ProQuest's "Historical Newspapers" (the latter two available through participating libraries). Search for papers using the Newspaper Directory at Chronicling America < www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america > (under Ethnicity, select African American).
College and university records , especially for historically black schools	- since 1830s, but mostly late 1800s and after - records may cover students, professors and employees	Information varies widely, but you may find biographical data; student or employee status or performance; mentions in newspapers, yearbooks or other campus publications.	Contact school or university archives. See the HBCU Library Alliance digital collection < hbcudigitallibrary.auctr.edu >, sourced from archives at historically black colleges. Search for digitized yearbooks at Ancestry.com < www.ancestry.com >, Classmates.com < www.classmates.com >, MyHeritage < www.myheritage.com >, and university websites.
Records of African American-focused organizations: cemeteries, churches, schools, funeral homes and more	varies	May include vital event data, relatives' names, residences and more	Consult city directories (African American businesses may be listed in their own section) or check local histories to identify organizations in places where your family lived. Contact the institution if it exists. Or, to identify records housed in historical archives, search ArchiveGrid < researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid > for institution name, location and type.
Slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project	1936–1938 - more than 2,000 former enslaved	Interviews may include former slave's birthdate and place; relatives' names; memories, experience of and feelings about life in slavery	Find digitized narratives and photos through the Library of Congress' project < www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938 >.
Freedman's Bank records: registers of signatures of depositors, indexes to deposit ledgers, dividend payment records	1865–1874 15 mostly Southern states, plus Washington DC 61,000+ bank account holders and their families	Depositor name; application/deposit date; employer, former enslaver, residence and/or plantation; age; birthplace; height; complexion; marital status; names of relatives	Records survive for 29 of the original 37 bank branches. Surviving indexes to deposit ledgers for 26 branches and other original records are at The National Archives in Record Group 101; learn more at < www.archives.gov/files/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/freedmens-bank.pdf >. Search and view records at FamilySearch < www.familysearch.org > or Ancestry.com < www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8755 >.
Freedmen's Bureau records (Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands)	1865–1872 - African Americans and poor or displaced whites in the South who received aid	Marriage records, labor contracts and legal aid for former slaves; relief aid records for poor Southerners; hospital patient registers and more	Search and view records for free at FamilySearch and Ancestry.com < www.ancestry.com/cs/freedmens >. Learn about these records at The Freedmen's Bureau Online < www.freedmensbureau.com >, Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau < www.mappingthefreedmensbureau.com >, and the National Archives < www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau >.
County and state cohabitation records	- after the Civil War - formerly enslaved couples in several Southern states seeking legalization of marriages	May include names of couple, residence and length of time cohabiting	In addition to marriage records created by the Freedmen's Bureau, states and counties may have documented marital relationships originating under slavery. Records aren't widely available online; ask at county offices and local societies and repositories.

RECORD TYPE	WHO, WHEN AND WHERE	RECORD CONTENT	TIPS FOR READING
Southern Claims Commission applications and case files	- post-Civil War 12 states of the former Confederacy - Southerners who filed property losses	Names of applicants, witnesses and neighbors; accounts of events leading to losses; military records of claimants or relatives; letters, diaries and family Bibles; proof of property ownership including wills, property inventories and estate records.	An index to claims, indexed images of disallowed and barred claims, and partial collection of indexed images of allowed claims are at Ancestry.com. Fold3 < www.fold3.com > has at least partial collections of both disallowed and allowed claims. Learn more about these records at the National Archives < www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/southern-claims-commission >.
Deeds of sale and manumissions	- slavery era - Southern states - slaveholders and the enslaved	Name and residence of enslaver; first name, age and description of enslaved individual(s); previous or subsequent slaveholder name and residence. In deeds of sale, the price paid.	These court records may be kept separately or in deeds at county government offices. Search for collections and published indexes in the FamilySearch catalog < www.familysearch.org/search/catalog >. Use ArchiveGrid to search for registers of manumissions in libraries; enter the place with the keyword <i>manumission</i> . Some manumission requests made to state legislatures are indexed at the Digital Library on American Slavery < dlas.uncg.edu >.
US Colored Troops compiled service records	1863–1865 - African Americans who served in the Union army	Name, rank, unit, age, residence, physical description, enslaver, enlistment/discharge details, injuries, details of manumission and more.	Search an index of soldiers and African American sailors at < www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm >. Find U.S. Colored Troops compiled service records at Ancestry.com, FamilySearch and Fold3. Learn more at < www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/compiled-service-records.html >. Look for veterans and widows listed in surviving 1890 census veterans schedules, searchable at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.
Free Black registers	- slavery era - states and counties requiring free African Americans to register	Name(s) of individual/family; may also include age, birthplace and occupation.	Check county offices and historical archives. Identify repositories by searching ArchiveGrid with the name of county or town and <i>free black register</i> .
1850–1860 US census slave schedules	1850 and 1860 - Southern states, Washington, DC and (in 1850) New Jersey - slaveholders and enslaved people	Slaveholders are listed by name; the enslaved aren't named but only tallied by age, gender and color.	Search by slaveholder name and view records at Ancestry.com, FamilySearch and HeritageQuest Online.
Wills and probate records of slaveholders	- slavery era - states and counties where slavery was legal - slaveholders and enslaved people	Names and descriptions of enslaved individuals and their disposition (manumission or transfer to another holder) at the slaveholder's death.	Search for records in county probate, orphans' or other court where the slaveholder lived and/or held property. Many wills and probate records are online at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.
Runaway slave notices	- slavery era - newspapers in cities across the United States - slaveholders and fugitive slaves	Name and residence of slaveholder; first name, age, gender, physical description and occupation of fugitive slave; date of escape and possible destination.	Search digitized newspaper databases for the slaveholder's name or slave's first name plus the word <i>runaway</i> . Look online for databases by searching for a state or county and <i>runaway slave notice</i> . Use Chronicling America to identify local newspapers to search on microfilm. Freedom On the Move < https://freedomonthemove.org > is building a database of fugitives from North American slavery.
Plantation, business, correspondence and other records of slaveholding families	- slavery era - states and counties where slavery was legal - slaveholding families and slaves held	Details vary, but may include enslaved person's name, mother's name, age, physical description, skills and sales/ownership history.	Few of these records have survived and they're not generally digitized or easily found. When a possible slaveholder is identified, search for the name and location in ArchiveGrid. Ask about records pertaining to that family at local and regional archives, libraries and societies.

The Great Migration

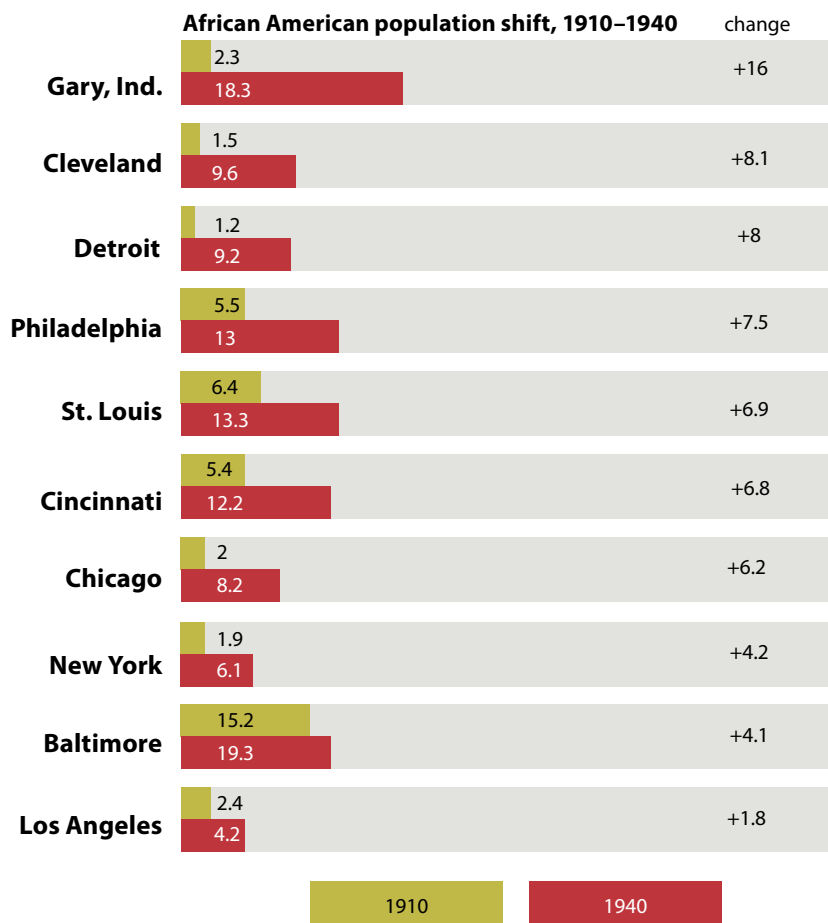


If you've noticed a northward trend in the birthplaces and residences of your African American ancestors, there's a reason for it. In 1910, 89 percent of the country's African American population lived in the South. In 1940, that number had dropped to 77 percent, while the Black population grew in the North. Urban areas such as Chicago, Philadelphia and St. Louis saw their Black populations double or triple.

A variety of factors prompted this mass migration, including harsh Jim Crow laws in the South, a boll weevil infestation of Southern cotton crops and ensuing loss of work in the early 1900s, and job opportunities—especially with the onset of World War I—in the North and West.

The population shift continued after 1940, with a larger proportion of African Americans heading to West Coast cities for WWII-related jobs. By 1970, only 53 percent of African Americans lived in the South.

To trace the migrations of your 20th-century ancestors, use records such as US censuses (open for research up through 1950) and city directories, available on websites such as Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> and FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>.



SOURCE: US CENSUS BUREAU, HISTORICAL CENSUS STATISTICS ON POPULATION TOTALS BY RACE, 1790 TO 1990, AND BY HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1970 TO 1990, FOR LARGE CITIES AND OTHER URBAN PLACES IN THE UNITED STATES <www.census.gov/vlib/library/working-papers/2005/demo/pop-twp-s0076.html>

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY: TIMELINE

- 1619** The first African captives to arrive in mainland British America are sold into slavery in Jamestown, Va.
- 1662** Virginia makes slave status hereditary, passing from mother to child.
- 1781** Elizabeth Freeman and Quock Walker, both enslaved, successfully sue for their freedom in Massachusetts courts.
- 1787** Slavery is forbidden in the newly established Northwest Territory.
- 1788** The U.S. Constitution is ratified, and its terms count the enslaved as three-fifths of a person for Congressional representation.
- 1793** The Fugitive Slave Act makes it a federal crime to help those escaping slavery, even in territories where slavery is illegal.
- 1804** New Jersey is the last Northern state to outlaw (or legally provide for the outlaw of) slavery.
- 1808** The United States officially bans the slave trade.
- 1822** The American Colonization Society helps found Liberia in West Africa as a destination for free Blacks.
- 1831** Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion in Southampton County, Va., then is executed.
- 1833** Abolitionists establish the American Anti-Slavery Society; Britain abolishes slavery except in areas in possession of the East India Co. as well as Sri Lanka and Saint Helena.
- 1857** The Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision denies citizenship of free Blacks.
- 1861** The Civil War begins; the U.S. Army initially rejects many African American volunteers.
- 1862** The Homestead Act qualifies African Americans to claim public lands; discrimination bars many farmers from taking advantage of the law.
- 1863** The Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in areas "in rebellion against the United States"; the Bureau of Colored Troops forms.
- 1865** The Civil War ends; the 13th Amendment to the Constitution prohibits slavery in the United States except as punishment for a crime; the Freedmen's Bureau and Freedman's Bank are founded.
- 1866** Former Confederate Army officers form the Ku Klux Klan; Southern states pass Black Codes thwarting African American civil rights.
- 1868** The 14th Amendment to the Constitution grants African Americans citizenship.
- 1870** The 15th Amendment grants voting rights to African American men.
- 1877** Reconstruction ends with the removal of federal troops from the South.
- 1879** As many as 40,000 African American "Exodusters" leave the South for Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado.
- 1896** *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalizes "separate but equal" segregation.
- 1905** Robert S. Abbott launches the influential *Chicago Defender* newspaper.
- 1909** The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded.
- 1910** The Great Migration of about 6 million African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North, Midwest and West begins.
- 1948** The U.S. Army integrates racially.
- 1954** *Brown v. Board of Education* overturns *Plessy v. Ferguson*, making racial segregation in public schools illegal. It forms the basis of later rulings about civil rights.
- 1955** Rosa Parks is arrested after refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, sparking the Montgomery bus boycott and the wider civil rights movement.
- 1964** The Civil Rights Act provides sweeping racial equality reforms.
- 1968** Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tenn.
- 1977** An estimated 130 to 140 million Americans watch the "Roots" miniseries, based on a novel by Alex Haley about generations of an African American family. Interest in genealogy (especially in Black communities) soars.
- 2008** Barack Obama becomes the first African American to be elected US president.

FINDING THE ENSLAVED IN US CENSUSES

Using the 1870 census and the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules can help you trace your ancestors into the slavery era. Follow these steps:

1 Research your family back to the 1870 census. Try finding these relatives in the 1860 census. If you can't find them, proceed under the assumption they were enslaved. Keep watching, though, for clues your relatives were among the 10 percent of African Americans who were free.

2 Identify a group of relatives from the 1870 census who were at least 10 years old and who lived together or near each other. List their names, along with their birthplaces and their ages in 1860.

3 Scroll through your ancestor's neighborhood in the 1870 and 1860 censuses. Look for white families of the same surname, as many (but not all) freed slaves took the surname of the former enslaver.

4 If you don't find white families of that surname, broaden your scope to the entire county or even beyond (especially for an unusual surname). Remember to consider spelling variations. You might go back to the 1850 census, or check the county's marriage and deed records.

5 Make a list of the white families with the right surname. Look up each family in the county's 1860 and 1850 slave schedules. (Both are available at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.) Determine which of the families owned slaves in 1860 and 1850.

6 Under a slaveholder candidate's entry in the 1860 slave schedule, look at the list of those enslaved. They're tallied by sex, age and color. Compare your ancestor's household list in 1870 with the ages in the 1860 slave schedule. Do any match? Mothers and young children were often together, but some 1870 family members might have been held by neighboring enslavers in 1860. Prioritize

1870 POPULATION CENSUS, SPENCER BURTON FAMILY

41	Spencer Burton	50	M	Ala
42	Annie	18	F	Ala
43	Wilson	15	M	Miss
44	Elija	13	M	Ala
45	Jack	10	M	Ala

In the 1870 census for Sumter, Bluff Port County, Ala., the household of Spencer Burton, a Black man, includes Spencer, 50; Annie, 18; Wilson, 15; Elija, 13; and Jack, 10. Records of these individuals could provide their location during slavery.

1860 POPULATION CENSUS, D.S. BURTON FAMILY

10	D.S. Burton	42	M	Ala
11	Thomas Burton	42	M	Ala
12	W.D. Burton	33	M	Miss
13	S. Burton	16	M	Ala
14	J. Burton	15	M	Ala
15	H. Burton	13	M	Ala
16	L. Burton	11	M	Ala
17	E. Burton	8	M	Ala

The birthplaces of the (white) D.S. Burton family in the 1860 population census mirror those recorded in 1870 for the Spencer Burton family. D.S.'s entry in the 1850 slave schedule didn't include a 30-year-old male. But the 1850 population schedule shows 33-year-old D.S. living near 42-year-old Thomas Burton—perhaps a brother—who *did* have a 30-year-old male. Could this be Spencer, later deeded by Thomas to D.S.? County court records might have the answer.

1860 SLAVE SCHEDULE, D.S. BURTON

23	D.S. Burton	1	M	40
24		1	F	8
25		1	M	6
26		1	M	4

The 1860 slave schedule for Southern Division, Sumter County, Ala., lists D.S. Burton's slaves, including a male, 40; female, 8; male, 6; and male, 4. Research in the white Burton family records could reveal whether these individuals are Spencer, Annie, Wilson and Elija. Jack probably wouldn't have been born yet.

the likeliest slaveholder candidates as those who held slaves that match the ages and genders of your ancestors.

7 Repeat this process with the 1850 slave schedule, especially if your ancestors' ages indicate they were a family before 1850. But remember that slaves might have been acquired or sold in the intervening years.

8 If you've identified a likely slaveholder candidate, research that person or family. Look for county records such as wills, probate and estate records, deeds showing the sale or transfer of slaves, and manumissions. Search for the family's plantation

or business records. Watch for references to slaves, especially any matching your relatives.

9 Don't try to make your ancestor fit an obviously unlikely match. If your search for a slaveholder is unsuccessful, consider that your family or the slaveholding family may have moved. Also consider other slaveholders who lived near your family in 1870 or in the same neighborhood in 1860. Examine your ancestors' obituaries and any records from the Freedman's Bank or the Freedmen's Bureau: These may mention an employer or former enslaver.

Websites

10 Million Names Project <www.10millionnames.org>

Access Genealogy: Black Genealogy
<www.accessgenealogy.com/black-genealogy>

African American Lives <www.thirteen.org/wnet/aalives/2006>
and <www.thirteen.org/wnet/aalives>

African Ancestry <www.africanancestry.com>

Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy
<www.ibiblio.org/laslave>

Ancestry.com: African American Genealogy \$
<www.ancestry.com/c/african-american>

Black Soldiers in the Civil War <www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/article.html>

BlackPast <www.blackpast.org>

Cyndi's List: African-American <www.cyndislist.com/african-american>

Digital Library on American Slavery <dlas.uncg.edu>

Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade
<www.enslaved.org>

FamilySearch: African American Genealogy Records
<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/African_American_Genealogy>

Fold3: Black History \$ <www.fold3.com/go/blackhistory>

Freedman's Savings Bank <www.freedmansbank.org>

The Freedmen's Bureau Online <www.freedmensbureau.com>

Freedom On the Move <www.freedomonthemove.org>

Legacy of Slavery in Maryland <slavery.msa.maryland.gov>

Lowcountry Africana <www.lowcountryafricana.com>

Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau <www.mappingthefreedmensbureau.com>

Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project
<www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938>

Slavery in America and the World (HeinOnline) <home.heinonline.org/content/slavery-in-america-and-the-world>

SlaveVoyages <www.slavevoyages.org>

Unknown No Longer <www.virginiahistory.org/research/collections/unknown-no-longer>

Books

African American Genealogy: A Bibliography and Guide to Sources by Curt Bryan Witcher (Round Tower Books)

African-American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography edited by James P Danky (Harvard University Press)

American Slavery, American Freedom by Edmund S. Morgan (W.W. Norton & Co.)

Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African-American Genealogy by James M. Rose and Alice Eichholz (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

Black Indian Genealogy Research: African American Ancestors Among the Five Civilized Tribes by Angela Walton Raji (Heritage Books)

Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree by Tony Burroughs (Touchstone)

Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity by Dee Parmer Woodtor (Random House Reference)

Finding and Using African American Newspapers by Tim Pinnick (Gregath)

Finding Your African American Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide by David T. Thackery (Ancestry)

A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors by Emily Anne Croom and Franklin Carter Smith (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

A Legal History of Slavery in the United States by Robert B. Shaw (Heritage Books)

Prologue: African American History and Federal Records <www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer>

Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide with Case Studies by David H. Streets (Heritage Books)

Slaves in the Family by Edward Ball (Ballantine Books)

Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860 by Thomas D. Morris (University of North Carolina Press)

Organizations and Archives

Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society
<www.aahgs.org>

International African American Museum
<www.iaamuseum.org>

International Society of Sons and Daughters of Slave Ancestry <www.isdsa6365.com>

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia
<ferris.edu/jimcrow>

Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University
<library.howard.edu/MSRC>

National Archives: African American Research
<www.archives.gov/research/african-americans>