



# Genealogy: It's Not Your Grandmother's Hobby Anymore!

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You cannot build a tall building without a good foundation. The same is true with your family tree. For your branches to reach far back in time they need a good strong support system. This support system comes in the form of the basic building blocks you need to master for successful research. By the end of this chapter you will have a strong foundation of skills started to carry you through into your future research.

Ask anyone who has searched for their family history what your first step should be. If they are worth their salt they will tell you to always start with yourself and work backwards from there. Seems simple doesn't it?

The reason we tell people to start with themselves first, and at their own homes, is because you should have the starting documents you need to begin your research right there. Majority of people have their birth and marriage documents in their homes. If they have children, those will be there too. If they were involved with the estate of a relative they most likely have those records as well. These vital (birth, marriage, death) records are the cornerstones to genealogical research.

Each jurisdiction is different in what information is included on these records, but they should include:

- the date(s) of the event
- the name of the person(s) for the event
- the place the event occurred

Starting with your vital records you can begin your family tree with relative ease. You are person number 1 on your tree. Add in other members of your family who live with you and start their branches by gathering those documents as well.

In addition to those vital records there is a whole host of other items that you may want to start collecting around your home to start your research files. Below is a list of papers many people gather for genealogical files when they become the family historian.

Letters to and from family members

- Court papers like deeds or wills
- Historical photographs
- Journals or diaries
- Newspaper clippings

Once you have ransacked your house looking for items to get started it is time to branch out. If you have family nearby ask them if they have any documents, they would like to share with you. Don't just ask immediate relatives, go for cousins too. When someone dies not all their estate goes to one person. More than likely it was divided between many different people. You can never be too sure who has an important piece of family history sitting in their desk drawers.

If I know I am going somewhere to do research, there are specific things I try to carry with me. Being prepared is very important because you don't want to miss the opportunity to gather any clues to your past.

Most people do not go anywhere without their phone these days. Which is why carrying a smartphone with you to a relative's houses is an essential tool in your research kit. Cameras on phones are as good, if not better than many of the cheaper digital cameras on the market so if you are not already comfortable with taking pictures or video with your phone you should learn how. I also like to use the video recording option when I am talking with older members of the family. It is less intrusive than me taking notes during our conversations and after they are gone you will treasure being able to share the video with future generations.

Not all records, nor the information contained in them, are equal. You will come across conflicting and questionable information frequently in your research. What is important for you to understand and take note of is that this is okay. Yep, it is okay if you have 2 different birth dates for a person or if one record says they were born in Virginia and another says Kentucky. What matters is you do not dismiss something because you think it is wrong without trying to resolve the problem.



In genealogy we deal with sources, information, and evidence. They work together to make our research stronger, but they also help us determine which facts we collect are questionable and which are accurate. Think of them like nesting containers. They work together in sequence to provide you with the answers. Let's take a closer look at what these containers are.

### **Sources**

This would be your largest container. A source is where you find the information for your family tree. It could be a birth certificate, or it could be a story you were told. It holds the information and evidence on its pages. Sources can be broken into three categories: authored works, original records and derivative records.

- Authored works are created by a person (usually a genealogist) who is putting forward their opinion on a series of facts they have gathered to make a conclusion. These are most often notes from another researchers' files or a published story on a family.
- Original records give you the details of an event and are created near the time the event occurred. They are original because they are not based on another prior record. For example, they are vital records, court records, or a firsthand account of an event the author witnessed.

- Derivative Records are created from another record, or records, to make a new source. Examples of these are databases, indexes, transcriptions, abstracts, or compiled family histories.

### Information

Inside the source is the information, or what the source contains. Information can vary widely depending on the type of source. It may be as simple as a listing of dates, names and places. Or it could be as complicated as the inheritance of a will. There are three types of information we deal with: primary, secondary and unknown.

- Primary information is like an original record. It was provided by someone who witnessed, or who had first-hand knowledge, of the event in question. For example, the date of birth provided by the parents on a registration card for their child. The parents were, presumably, at the event and had firsthand information on the date the child's birth occurred.
- Secondary information is one step further away from the source. It is usually provided by someone who wasn't present at the event but was told about it later. For example, in most cases when you give your parents wedding date that is secondary information. Most children were not there but were told about it later.
- We list information as "of unknown origin" when we are unable to determine who gave the information in the source. On many records we can make assumptions on who gave the information. Such as on a marriage license. We can be relatively confident that the groom gave his information and the bride gave hers. However, on census records we have no idea who in the house gave the information or if the census taker asked the next-door neighbor.

### Evidence

Inside the information container is the evidence. Evidence is hard to pin down as it is not concrete. It specifically relates to what we are researching or what we are trying to find out. Because of this the type of evidence contained within the information may change depending on what type of question you are asking. There are three types of evidence: direct, indirect and negative.

- Direct evidence gives you the specific answers you are looking for in your research. For example, you want to know who the parents of John Jones were. On the church record for his baptism it states James Jones and Mary Smith as his parents. That information (parents = James Jones and Mary Smith) is direct evidence for our question (who were the parents of John Jones).



- Indirect evidence can be more than one piece of information which when combined could give you the answer you are looking for. In a nutshell, if the information you have from a source cannot answer your question by itself then it is indirect.
- Negative evidence means that the source you are looking at does not contain any information you are trying to find. Negative evidence can be very important when you research because sometimes what a record doesn't say can tell you volumes about the situation your ancestors lived in.

Whether you decide to keep track of your information digitally or on paper you can never go wrong with a template or form to fill out. We genealogists love neat, tidy, and ordered forms. Trust me, there is one for everything out there and if we can't find one, we will make our own. A simple search will land you with all types of variations on the forms we are going to talk about in this section. To get you started though, here are some links with forms that I find helpful you can start out with:

- Cyndi's List <http://www.cyndislist.com/free-stuff/printable-charts-and-forms/>
- Family Tree Magazine <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/freeforms>
- GenealogySearch.org <http://www.genealogysearch.org/free/forms.html>
- National Archives <http://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms/>
- Family Search [https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Genealogy\\_Research\\_Forms](https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Genealogy_Research_Forms)

A good genealogist or family historian always knows where they found the information for their research. Showing proof for a fact in your tree gives credibility to your research and saves work for future generations. Once you have those bits together write them on the back of the document and in a source file on your computer, so you have a record of it.

Other links from the presentation:

- Ancestry <http://home.ancestry.com>
- FamilySearch <https://familysearch.org>
- Find My Past <http://www.findmypast.com>
- Geni <http://www.geni.com>
- My Heritage <http://www.myheritage.com>
- Son of Citation Machine <http://www.citationmachine.net/Chicago>
- Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace Third Edition by Elizabeth Shown Mills <https://www.evidenceexplained.com>

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