

How to Begin

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Decisions to be Made (and recommendations for the beginner):

- How far out (leaf-wise) are you going on your family tree?
A minimum of fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles; siblings and spouses. This gives you a complete core family and their spouses and children. It gives you just enough leaves on the tree to find others working on your family lines.
- How far back (trunk-wise) are you going on your family tree?
Start with as far back as you already know. Then, limit yourself back to 1800. Prior to 1800 requires more in depth research and you should have plenty to do back to 1800.
- Are you going to use a computer program to organize your data?
If you are comfortable using a computer, do it. The computer makes most things faster and easier and neater for storage and research. If you are not comfortable using a computer, then don't. Research and finding time should not be wasted.
- How are you going to document sources of information?
Document the source of your information starting now. Catching up is not fun. Eventually you will run into conflicting information and you'll love yourself for having documented well. *(see the class handout for Evaluating and Citing Sources)*
- What will be your naming, dating, and place name conventions?
Follow the basic standard conventions and be consistent. If new data comes your way, stop and get your files cleaned up. *(see the class handout for Entering Your Data Right the First Time)*
- Will you include guesswork? How will you document guesswork?
Yes. One of the first research techniques taught is to estimate times and places so that you can start researching records. However, date, name and place guesswork should be preceded by words like estimated, about, before, after, between, etc. in the data field. Family folklore and guesses should be included in the notes and be preceded by "According to" and followed by "I have no proof if this statement is correct or not." *(see the class handout for Entering Your Data Right the First Time)*
- How are you going to organize the paper, documents and mementos?
I recommend three-ring binders and sheet protectors organized by surname in the pedigree chart order.
- What will you print from the Internet to keep?
Only print and keep what truly relates to you, but not pedigree charts. Worthwhile printing includes historical maps, articles mentioning ancestors by name, family and town histories, county histories or discussions on why people did what they did.

❏ How will you verify data accuracy?

Yes, you will eventually need to verify data accuracy, so why not start now. If the information is from a secondary source, you need to contact the researcher to find out how they discovered the information. (see *the Evaluating and Finding Good Data on the Internet class handout.*)

❏ Will you download from the internet? How much at a time?

Don't download more than 2 generations at a time. All you'll end up doing is fixing and deleting and correcting someone else's errors that have now corrupted your files and not getting your family history work done. If you can't help it, set up a separate file for the GEDCOM and fix the data over there and then slowly migrate the proofed and corrected information into your file. And, never let someone else download or merge to your file without you. Only you will do the best job possible for your family.

Selecting a Computer Program: Choosing a family history computer program seems daunting. But, It doesn't matter which computer program you choose to use now if the computer program can export a GEDCOM file. Pick the cheap one and get started, when you decide on the computer program you really want to use in the future, you can just GEDCOM your file to the new program.

Understanding GEDCOM: GEDCOM is a common format used by all family history programs to communicate with one another. If you can import/export a GEDCOM file, you can use any worthwhile family history computer in the world.

Step By Step through Family History

Phase 1 Organize Your Information

1. Complete a pedigree chart from your own information. Use paper first. Only fill in up to 4 generations as much as possible (direct line only.) Estimate dates and places if needed but mark them as estimates. (i.e. Abt 1820-1850, Bef 1873 or Estimate, Butler, Kansas)
2. Enter the pedigree chart into a family history computer program. Select any family history program that is inexpensive and can "import/export GEDCOM files".
3. Enter additional related families and family members to your family history computer program from your own family history records.
4. Document the sources of your information. You will run into conflicting information. Assume you are going to have to prove which piece of information is correct and why before accepting it as valid.

Phase 2 Organize Your Artifacts and Documents

1. Organize your non-computerized documents so that they can be found and used easily. I recommend three-ring binders and sheet protectors organized by surname in the pedigree chart order.
2. Separate documents by type such as maps, census, deeds, cemetery, marriage, birth, correspondence, etc. Keep pages or copies of pages specifically related to an ancestor in the ancestor portion of your notebook. Put all the rest, which you may use later, in a back section of your notebook labeled "Extra Records".
3. Eliminate all old printouts of pedigree charts and family group sheets if all information on them is in your current family history files. Keep notes and comments only if you can clearly label what you were thinking at the time and if it is fact or not.

Phase 3 Put the Internet to Work for You

1. Publish your family history information right now. Using www.rootsweb.com, (it's free) upload your data using a GEDCOM file into the World Connect Family Tree. Instructions are provided. Takes less than 30 minutes usually. You can update/replace the file as you go.
2. Let people know you're working on family history. Using www.ancestry.com, (this part's free), place messages on the message boards for your main family lines. Increase the likelihood of people finding you by titling your message in one of the following ways: Buckley from Canada in 1850's, Jessie Dunlap 1774-1850, James Malarkey and Annabelle Kelly. (see *The Power of Networking class* handout.)
3. Let researchers know you're working on family history. Using www.usgenweb.com, (it's free), select the state and county related to your ancestor and place a query at the website. Put specific information in the text of your message, information about profession, entering or exiting the county. This will help other researchers guide you to sources for more information.

4. Phase 4 Basic Beginner Research –Via the Internet

1. Flesh out your information. Make sure all locations have a city, county, state and country when possible. Using www.familysearch.org, (it's free) enter the Family History Library catalog and browse city locations to find the counties for your cities. This is a crucial and easy step. Most records are stored by county.
2. Use other people's research. Using www.rootsweb.com, (it's free) search the World Connect Family Trees for your ancestor (exact matches only). Be creative in using the search engine here. Try "Last name, first name" search or "Last name, birthplace" search or "Last name, spouse last name" search or "Parents, last name" search. Each website has an email address for the submitter who can be contacted directly from the website.

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3. Use other people's research. Using www.familysearch.org, (it's free) search the Ancestral File or Pedigree Resource File for your ancestor (exact matches only). Be tricky here. Try all possible misspellings of a name. Try partial name or initials searches. Try the middle name as the first name. Mix up the city and county. Try city only. Try historical location names. Try nearby counties. Try partial dates. Try 20-year date range. Only download three generations to your personal pedigree chart for now. Enter the Ancestral File Number into your personal records (Remember you can do this step again later after you are sure the information is correct.)
4. Use other people's research. Using www.familysearch.org, (it's free) search the IGI or Ordinance Index. Check the source of the data. If it is an extracted record. This is a primary record and is 100% accurate. Search by major surname and location. Try a parent search to see if a whole family is in the index. Try another individual search for the parents to see if another generation is in the index. (www.familysearch.org best for individual searches, CDs at FHC best for major surname searches) Look at the on-line source guide by location and read up on the tips and tactics for research in this region.
5. Get hints from researchers. Using www.familysearch.org find the research assistant and get hints about how to research your location in a specific period of time for the specific life event records. Click on her picture and a list of locations will appear. Scan all the way through the information provided. It's better than the Source Guide. She also does a bit of foreign words and old script translations.
6. Search on-line primary source records and local information. Using www.usgenweb.com, (it's free) search by state and county for primary records and background data by location. Some websites offer on-line vital records indexes and cemetery listings. Others connect to historical societies who will search their records as a part of a new membership fee. Volunteer researchers and how-to information abound herein.