

# How to get Started in Family History Research

Family history research is a rewarding detective-like process that starts with your own memories and family records before expanding to online databases and archival records. To avoid becoming overwhelmed, focus on gathering and organizing the information you already have before branching out into public records.

## 1. Gather and organize what you know

The best way to begin is by collecting the information you and your living relatives already possess.

- **Start with yourself and work backward.** Collect names, birth dates, marriage dates, and death dates. Note specific places where these events occurred. You can use free resources, like pedigree charts and family group sheets from the National Genealogical Society, to document this information clearly.
- **Search your home for family records.** Look through family Bibles, scrapbooks, photo albums, letters, newspaper clippings, diaries, and military certificates for hidden clues. You can use your smartphone to scan important documents and photos directly into an organizational app.
- **Interview your older relatives.** Before their memories fade, talk with your oldest relatives to capture their stories and insights.
  - **Prepare specific questions** to keep the conversation focused, but be ready to listen to unexpected stories. Ask open-ended questions like, "What was your childhood home like?" or "How did your parents meet?".
  - **Bring photos and heirlooms** to jog their memories.
  - **Record the interviews** with their permission. A simple voice recording on your phone is a great option.

## 2. Enter your data into a family tree

Once you have collected your initial information, you can enter it into a family tree builder, which will make it easier to see what information is missing.

- **Choose a genealogy platform.** Popular sites include FamilySearch.org (free) and [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) (subscription). These sites offer tools for building a tree, tracking your research, and connecting with other researchers.
- **Record your sources.** When you enter information, always note where you got it from, even if it's just "Grandma's recollections." This is a fundamental practice in genealogy.

### 3. Expand your search with online records

With your initial family tree documented, you can use online databases to extend your family lines.

- **Use census records.** The U.S. federal census has been conducted every 10 years since 1790. Records older than 72 years are publicly available and can show you who was living in a household at a specific time.
- **Search for birth, marriage, and death records.** Most states began keeping vital records between 1890 and 1915, but some local records exist from earlier dates. The FamilySearch Research Wiki can provide guidance on what is available in a specific state.
- **Explore other online collections.** Look for military records, newspaper obituaries and announcements, and passenger lists if your ancestors were immigrants.
- **Use DNA testing cautiously.** A DNA test from a service like AncestryDNA can connect you with genetic relatives. While these can be powerful tools, any new findings should be confirmed with additional historical records.

### 4. Organize your ongoing research

As you gather more information, a good organizational system is key to staying on track.

- **Keep a research log.** Track the sources you have already checked to avoid re-doing work. Note what you were looking for, what you found, and why you accepted or discounted the information.
- **Develop a logical filing system.** Decide on a consistent way to organize your physical and digital documents. For example, you can create folders by surname and divide them into maternal and paternal lines.
- **Create digital backups.** Scan important documents and photos to create a digital archive. This protects against damage and allows you to access files from anywhere.

## What other types of records are helpful for Family History, besides vital and census records?

Beyond vital records and census reports, a variety of sources can help paint a more detailed picture of your ancestors' lives and confirm relationships. These records can reveal insights into a person's citizenship, military service, religion, property, and community involvement.

### Federal and state records

- **Military records:** Service and pension files can provide a wealth of information about an ancestor who served in the armed forces. Pension application files, in particular, may contain documents like marriage and birth certificates, family Bible pages, and affidavits with valuable genealogical details.
- **Immigration and naturalization records:** For immigrant ancestors, these records can include passenger lists, alien registration forms, and naturalization documents, which often contain details about their country of origin and family members.
- **Land and property records:** Deeds and other land records can help establish a family's location and dates of ownership. This is especially useful for tracing ancestors before reliable vital records were kept. Records for land acquired from the federal government, such as homestead records, can be found through the National Archives and Bureau of Land Management.
- **Social Security records:** The Social Security Administration's application form (SS-5) can provide valuable information on ancestors who applied for a Social Security number after 1936. You can request copies of the SS-5 and Numident records for deceased individuals by submitting a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

### County and local records

- **Probate and will records:** Found at the county courthouse, these records can identify family relationships and heirlooms. Probate and land records are especially useful for filling in information from before 1850.
- **Court records:** These records cover a wide range of legal actions, from adoptions and criminal trials to guardianship cases and lawsuits, and can reveal personal details and relationships.
- **Cemetery and funeral home records:** These can provide reliable information on the deceased's name, death date, and burial location. Funeral homes may hold additional records, though their reliability varies.

- Cemetery records often include maps to help you find a grave, and websites like Find a Grave can provide a searchable database of burials.
- **City directories:** Preceding telephone books, these directories can help you locate where your ancestors lived and worked in a particular year.

#### **Private and personal sources**

- **Religious and church records:** Records for baptisms, marriages, and burials were often kept by local churches long before government entities did.
- **Newspapers:** Obituaries, marriage announcements, and articles about community events can uncover significant family history details. Websites like the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* project offer large, free, searchable databases of historical newspapers.
- **Family papers and heirlooms:** Remember to search within your own family for treasures like diaries, letters, Bibles, yearbooks, and scrapbooks, as these are primary sources for your research.
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# What are the Best Websites for Family History Research

To conduct family history research online, you will use a combination of subscription-based and free websites. Each type has distinct strengths, so using both is the best approach for thorough research.

## Paid subscription websites

### Ancestry.com

- **Strengths:** Ancestry has the largest collection of U.S. records, a massive database of user-submitted family trees, and the biggest DNA testing database for connecting with relatives. It is a market leader with a very user-friendly interface.
- **Best for:** U.S. residents and anyone seeking a very large pool of records and potential DNA matches.
- **Considerations:** A subscription is required to view most records, but you can build a tree for free.

### MyHeritage

- **Strengths:** This site offers strong record coverage for Europe, particularly Scandinavia, Germany, and the UK. It has tools for creating family trees and offers unique photo enhancement features. MyHeritage also has its own DNA test and accepts DNA data uploaded from other testing services.
- **Best for:** Those with European ancestry and people interested in DNA analysis and photo tools.
- **Considerations:** You can build a tree with a free account, but a subscription is necessary for full access to records and many features.

### Findmypast

- **Strengths:** This site is an excellent resource for anyone with British or Irish ancestry, with a huge library of newspapers and exclusive records. Its records cover England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, along with emigrant populations.
- **Best for:** UK and Irish family history, with unique records like the 1939 Register and extensive newspaper archives.
- **Considerations:** Though it offers some U.S. records, its focus remains the British Isles.

## Free websites

### FamilySearch.org

- **Strengths:** Run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this is the largest free genealogy website in the world. It provides access to billions of records from hundreds of countries and offers research guides.
- **Best for:** All researchers, especially beginners, as a free way to access a massive collection of records.
- **Considerations:** FamilySearch operates on a single, shared family tree, meaning anyone can edit information. Always verify data from other users with primary sources.

### Library of Congress

- **Strengths:** The LOC offers extensive digitized collections of historic newspapers, maps, photographs, and books on local and family history. This is an excellent source for enriching details about your ancestors' lives.
- **Best for:** Discovering rich primary sources that add color and context to your research.

### National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

- **Strengths:** As the official archive of the U.S. government, NARA holds federal records essential for genealogy. This includes federal census records, military service records, and immigration documents.
- **Best for:** Verifying key details with official government records.

### Find a Grave

- **Strengths:** This volunteer-submitted database contains millions of burial records from cemeteries worldwide. It often provides birth dates, death dates, and family connections.
- **Best for:** Locating burial sites and discovering basic information and relatives of deceased ancestors.

### US GenWeb Project

- **Strengths:** This long-running volunteer project provides free, county-by-county resources for U.S. genealogy. It is useful for finding local-level records and transcriptions of historical documents.
- **Best for:** Niche, localized research, and finding information on smaller communities.

Note: AI Generated information.