Five Tips on Researching Your Genealogy

Every day, thousands of people around the world embark on the journey to learn about their family history. Like any endeavor, one can get off on the right or wrong foot with good or bad habits respectively.

The following is a list of five of the key tips any person will need when they start researching their family history, and do it in a way that will lead to the best results.

1. Do your own research.
2. Keep a list of all your primary and secondary sources.
3. Seek out genealogical libraries, societies and online databases.
4. Record and organize all your findings, even if it still needs to be verified.
5. Sign into an online message board such as Ancestry.com, GenForum and Rootsweb’s World Connect.

1. Do Your Own Research

This tip is the hardest but also the most rewarding. When you’re doing your own research, you are the one to do the leg work, the trips to the library, the letter writing but you in turn will have the thrill when that elusive ancestor is finally located. You will know first about the any black sheep in the family or that relative awarded the Purple Heart.

After collecting thousands names in my own family tree by copying in data from others, I can tell you first-hand that there is nothing less rewarding.

It might seem easy to simply copy someone else’s findings but instead try to use these other results as a springboard, possibly a location or a name you hadn’t checked yet to investigate further. Be sure to touch every name that goes into your family tree as a confirmed ancestor enough to learn who that person is until you’re personally convinced that they are your ancestor.

Have you ever done a sudoku puzzle and got a number wrong early on in the puzzle? That probably happened because you were not focusing enough on getting the information correct, maybe going too fast.
How difficult was it to fix that puzzle later? Very! Basically you had to start over as you couldn’t rely on any number after that mistake.

Genealogy research can be just as diabolical. One wrong ancestor in your tree can send you down the wrong line costing you hours, months, even years of research.

Never accept someone’s research as the absolute truth without checking with other records.

2. Keep a list of all your primary and secondary sources.

This second tip also requires a good deal of work, that of keeping records of all your sources for information. You have your mother’s birth, marriage dates and locations. Where did you learn those facts but directly from her? That is a “primary source”, as is of course, a copy of her birth and marriage certificates. A “secondary source” would be the date of her birth on her marriage certificate, noting it as an item that occurred years earlier.

On the family tree database or chart, write the source for every bit of information. This way if you need to recheck or expand on a certain item, like your mother’s exact birth date, you have the source of your statistics. Oh, yes, birth dates can be one of the first areas with a wide range of variations. Remember that date is different from the baptism date.

3. Seek out genealogical libraries, societies and online databases.

By contacting genealogical societies and libraries, you will find a wealth of assistance in locating your ancestors. Once you have identified the county a relative resided in, you will nearly always find a genealogical society in that county. From obituaries, city directories, old newspapers, books, land, court and voting records, town history and photos can all be on file with those societies.

From important town leaders, businessmen to ordinary citizens, the society along with museums and libraries help preserve information,
especially concerning former residents. Much of the information comes from county vital records, cemetery listings, local newspapers and items donated from the clearing of estates.

Many state, county and city governments have now placed online a selection of databases accessible to the public. For example, the State of Massachusetts has a searchable index of births, marriages and deaths in the state between 1841 to 1910.

This web site is at: http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcsrch/VitalRecordsSearchContents.html

Or, for example, if you needed records on family members who lived between 1874 and 1913 in Natick, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, that is also online.

For Texas, there is an online database of death records covering 1964 to 1998 though Rootsweb site. In Burnet County, Texas, they have a searchable online obituary index covering 1876 to 1910.

It is at: http://sites.google.com/site/obitindex/

The list of databases is endless and more being added everyday. Just use a search engine to put in the county or state name and birth, marriage or death index.

4. Record and organize all your findings, even if it still needs to be verified.

In tip number four, the word is ‘record’. Just like in real estate the key word is ‘location’ for genealogy it is ‘record’. You will quickly find you need a notepad every time you go anywhere to do some research or even if you are searching at home online. Keep all you findings together, one notebook or in one filing cabinet in folders. Items that still need further verification can be specially marked or kept in a separate folder.

Placing the information on your computer using various software genealogy programs is a bonus in helping you organize. However, never make it your sole depository of data without a complete backup system. Even with it backed up at least once a week on an external hard drive or
on discs, there still needs to be a paper copy in your filing cabinet, notebook or drawers. Very quickly over time, you will start to amass quite of collection of information and you certainly would not want to start from scratch again.

5. Sign into an online message board such as Ancestry.com, GenForum and Rootsweb’s World Connect.

You will find a wonderful lifeline of untapped information by using the various message boards available. Three of the top ones are with Ancestry.com, Rootsweb and GenForum, as well as smaller ones as well like FamilyTreeCircles.

http://boards.ancestry.com/
http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi
http://genforum.genealogy.com/surnames/
http://www.familytreecircles.com

For Rootsweb’s World Connect Board, there are over 600 million names posted by individuals all over the world. The individuals can date back hundreds of years or as recent at the 20th century. They are family trees of people who have selected to share world-wide the information they’ve gathered.

Caution again in accepting someone else’s work. It may have be copied from a third party and never has been verified. However, it does provide an email address where you can contact that person to check on their sources or allow you to offer your findings in comparison. Sometimes, two heads working on a problem can reach a correct solution.

Rootsweb also has the direct community message board with over 17 million messages. It covers everything from surnames, locations, historical events, to general genealogical topics like questions on locating immigration records to using software to store your data. There is a search under the different topics to see if your question has already been asked and answered. Or create your own question and request. For example, if you needed a copy of newspaper obituary for an ancestor who
died in Brevard County, Florida, going to the message board for Brevard County, you could type in your request and probably get a reply within a week or so.

The five tips offered are appropriate for the novice or the researcher working on the family history for a few years. They are all common sense techniques that all genealogists aspire for everyday.

Scott Jangro has been researching his roots for about 15 years is the self-appointed, de facto, genealogist of his own family. With plenty of help from others, he has traced his mother’s line directly back to the Mayflower and his Father’s line back to 17th century France via Quebec. He is the owner of FamilyTreeCircles.com, a genealogy community and message board and is presently working on his next project, The Genealogy System.