

Lessons In Genealogy: A Note to Beginners

Taken from "Family Chronicle" magazine pages 24, 25 & 26 by John J. Weidner

1 Know where to begin

Follow a logical order, begin with yourself, your parents, your siblings, and then your grandparents. Once you complete this step, branch out to aunts, uncles, cousins, and so forth. Your family tree will soon grow.

2 Source citation

Even if you are researching your family for yourself or immediate family members, cite every source, no matter how inconsequential it may appear. You may never know when you will need to refer back to the source. As you continue researching and citing sources, remember that if a statement is not in writing, it does not exist. Conversely, a statement reduced to writing is not necessarily true.

3 Primary source and secondary source

Understand the difference between a primary source and a secondary source. A primary source is firsthand evidence frequently expressed by the participant(s) or witnesses by creating a document at the time of the event such as an original birth certificate, an original marriage certificate, an original death certificate or an original will. A secondary source is most often created after the event. Secondary sources may include documents such as transcribed deeds and wills; or can reference recording events long after their occurrence such as recording the birth date of your great-aunt on her death certificate.

4 Record collection

While not an exhaustive list, the essential documents to collect whenever possible include: birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage, death records, bar/bat mitzvah, probate, deed and other property records, obituaries, newspaper articles, and photographs. Pursue primary source documents or reliable photocopies of them whenever possible. Sometimes a secondary source may be all that is available.

5 No shortcuts

Shortcuts rarely exist in genealogy. Unless you have reliable evidence supporting kinship to a well-known family such as the Astor's or

Rockefeller's, finding a published genealogy is unlikely. However, a search will avoid duplicating what may already exist. Begin your search using Ancestry.com, the Library of Congress, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or at the local library. If a published genealogy is found, answers may be forthcoming and may open new research opportunities.

6 Correspondence

Be succinct and polite when writing correspondence requesting information. Few people will want to read a lengthy letter. Include a self addressed stamped envelope when appropriate.

7 Photocopies

Always copy the title page when photocopying pages from a or magazine. Copying the title page ensures having a complete source citation. Include the repository name, address, zip code, phone number and date the copy is made on the front or back. I write this information on the back and create a label at home with this information and apply to the front of the document. When sharing this information, always include both sides of the paper if the obverse contains writing.

8 Photographs

Scan photographs in their entirety — framing and all. Do not crop. Crop the photograph during editing. If the photograph is too large for your scanner, seek someone or a service with a large enough scanner to accommodate the photo. When scanning is not possible or practical, have a professional make a duplicate. Use a flatbed scanner for photographs. Never scan photographs using a document scanner because the photograph may be damaged by the scanner. Document scanners are intended for paper documents.

9 Scanning

Scan photographs and other documents using at least 600 DPI (dots per inch) and save them as a TIF (Tagged Image File Format) file. The TIF format records more information. Editing from a TIF file reduces image degradation thus offering a sharper image. When sharing scans, one can use several popular file formats including JPEG or JPG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) and BMP (Bitmap). Do not be confused by the terminology, just become familiar with the file formats.

10 Sharing scans

First, seek the owner's permission to use their photograph(s). The worst a person will say is `no'. Credit your source — see item two above. No one

wants their work or effort stolen — not to mention possible copyright infringement. Second, when sharing photographs via email or other digital media, provide a TIF or JPG. And a personal pet-peeve — DO NOT provide recipients a scanned photograph as an Adobe Acrobat PDF (Portable Document Format) file. Making a usable photograph from a PDF file is not worth the required time and effort.

11 Genealogy software

When using genealogy software, use the program best suited to your needs and one that is easiest to use for your level of experience. I began with the Family History System, then moved to Family Tree Maker, and finally graduated to The Master Genealogist (TMG). Each have their merits. I prefer TMG because it is a powerful professional-level program with an extensive help file. The program's ample features make the learning curve worth the effort. And this is well worth the price. The program is available from Whollygenes.com. TMG users may also want to visit Reigelridge.com and Johncardinal.com for additional help and resources.

12 Supplies and equipment

When traveling, have your supplies with you (or at least store them in your vehicle). Minimum supplies should include: pens; pencils; erasers; paper clips; highlighters; ruler; brief case or similar carrying device(s); USB flash drive; stapler; staple remover; blank paper; log book; letter opener; and magnifying glass. Additional supplies that may be necessary to a given situation: laptop computer or tablet; flatbed scanner; document scanner; spray water bottle and crayon or black marker (for headstones); sponge; power supplies and batteries for electronic devices; digital/film camera; and video camera.

13 Gut feeling

When the evidence before you does not make sense, follow your gut feeling. The answers you find will surprise you.