



Family Historians – Start Your (Search) Engines!

Presented by Kim Alberg

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The CORNER PIECES of Today's Presentation:

- The FRAME – Genealogy Basics
- The BIG PICTURE – Getting Started (or RE-started)
- The DETAIL PIECES – Records & Resources
- The CHALLENGES – Tips & Cautionary Tales

THE FRAME: GENEALOGY BASICS

Genealogy – the study of one's ancestry – is a cross-generational hobby; you are NEVER too old or too young to engage in the discovery of your ancestors, their traditions, and your family's story.

As you tuck into your family's history, you'll run into some "genealogy jargon" like the following:

- Lineage (bloodline) v. family (self-defined, influenced by family dynamics and circumstances)
- Ancestor (the family before us) v. descendant (the family after us)
- Surname (last name), given name (first name), maiden name/"nee" (woman's surname at birth)
- Testate (will provided) v. intestate (no will/different paperwork)
- Vital (life) records = birth, marriage, and death records

Want more? Try these!	✿ FamilySearch. "A Glossary of Genealogical Terms." <i>FamilySearch</i>, 16 Oct. 2025, www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/A_Glossary_of_Genealogical_Terms . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ Family Tree Editors. "Genealogy Terms Glossary." <i>Family Tree Magazine</i>, 2026, https://familytreemagazine.com/general-genealogy/glossary/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026.
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THE BIG PICTURE: GETTING STARTED (or RE-STARTED)

Genealogical research is most effective when the researcher (that's YOU) starts in the PRESENT (also YOU) and advances methodically back to the PAST (your ANCESTORS) one generation at a time.

1. Start "right" by assessing what you already KNOW and can **PROVE** (beyond a reasonable doubt).
 - Use premade charts to identify "holes" in your knowledge and to help organize your research
 - A variety of free, fillable charts can be accessed on the Midwest Genealogy Center website at www.mymcpl.org/genealogy/research/family-history-forms

2. Set an initial research GOAL. Which side of your family – Mom’s side or Dad’s side – is of most interest to you at this time? What do you most want to learn? Where might you start? Do you know any (living) relatives who might be able to help you along this journey? Make a plan!
3. Speaking of plans, give some thought to how you want to ORGANIZE your research “finds”.
 - Paper files? Digital copies? Both?
 - Organize folders (paper or digital) by surname, by location, by record type, other?
 - Your initial system may (WILL?) change but have *something* in place before the next step.
4. Start assembling a collection of records/documents that verify/support/PROVE each and every generational connection.
 - CITE EACH SOURCE – where the original is located, where you found YOUR version.
 - Think of this step as leaving a trail of research “breadcrumbs” for future family historians!

Want more? Try these!	✳ Midwest Genealogy Center. "Get Started." <i>Midwest Genealogy Center</i>, 1 Jan. 2026, www.mymcpl.org/genealogy/get-started . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. (Note: This webpage also has an 18-minute on-demand “Beginning Genealogy” presentation!) ✳ Crow, Amy J. "Beginning Genealogy: How to Get Started the Right Way." <i>FamilySearch</i>, 31 Oct. 2016, www.familysearch.org/en/blog/beginning-genealogy-how-to-get-started-the-right-way . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026.
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THE DETAILS: RECORDS & RESOURCES

Most of the time, we want to focus our research on **primary sources** – documents generated at/around the time of the original event. While these records may be flawed by inconsistencies in spelling and more, they are typically more reliable than personal recollections that risk becoming more fiction than fact over the years.

While not all-inclusive, most of these records fall into the categories shown below. Many are available online at the genealogy sites *Family Tree Magazine* calls “The Big Four” – *FamilySearch* (free with FamilySearch account), *My Heritage* (free through MCPL), *Ancestry* and *FindMyPast* (free at MCPL).

1. CIVIL (GOVERNMENTAL) RECORDS:

- Federal Records – Maintained by National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
 - a. U.S. Federal Census (available 1790 – 1950), Social Security (1935 – 2014)
 - b. Most military, immigration, and naturalization records; some land records
- State Records – Maintained by individual state offices, libraries, and archives
 - a. Birth and death records, state censuses
 - b. Some military (volunteer service), immigration, naturalization records
- Local (County and City) Records – Maintained by county courts and libraries
 - a. Marriage, probate, voter and tax lists, maps
 - b. Often land records
 - c. TIP: Start online county-level research with a FamilySearch “Catalog” search of that county’s resources. (See link in box at end of section.)

2. RELIGIOUS RECORDS

- Vital records – Birth, marriage, death and “religion specific” events like baptism, confirmation, synagogue records, circumcision records, name changes, and more
- Miscellaneous – Church directories, membership rosters, minutes, newsletters
- Church-related – Burial records, church histories, religious organizations

3. SELECT OTHERS

- Newspapers (Kim’s favorite)
- City Directories
- Cemetery Records
- Published Resources
- School Records
- Organizations

Want more? Try these!	✿ NATIONAL RECORDS. <i>National Archives and Records Administration</i>, 2026, www.archives.gov/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ STATE RECORDS. "Digital State Archives." <i>Google</i>, 2026, https://sites.google.com/site/statearchives/home . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ LOCAL. <i>FamilySearch</i>, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/ . Accessed 29 Jan 2026. (Note: Free account required.) ✿ NEWSPAPERS. "Chronicling America." <i>Library of Congress</i>, 2026, www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ PUBLICATIONS. <i>Internet Archive</i>, 2026, https://archive.org/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ CEMETERIES. <i>Find a Grave</i>, 2026, www.findagrave.com/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. (Note: <i>Find a Grave</i> memorials are NOT primary sources, but the headstones and some posted documents might be. Note information then verify!)
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THE CHALLENGES: TIPS & CAUTIONARY TALES

TIPS. As it is with any worthwhile endeavor, you will encounter some challenges, but the following tips may help you avoid some of the more predictable bumps in the road.

1. **FILES**. Start and stay organized!
 - a. Use charts to wrangle in names, dates, places, and details
 - b. Save files regularly and, if you’re saving files digitally, take out “3-2-1 file insurance”
 - ✓ 3 copies of each digital file, saved in...
 - ✓ 2 different storage media (hard drive + external drive), plus
 - ✓ 1 copy stored offsite (cloud storage, external drive stored elsewhere)
2. **FANS**. Coined by Elizabeth Shown Mills, “FAN” stands for “FRIENDS, ASSOCIATES, & NEIGHBORS”.
 - a. Also known as “cluster research”, this research focuses beyond an ancestor’s immediate family to others whose stories might lead to missing info in our own family research.
3. **FREEBIES**. GENEALOGY DOES NOT HAVE TO BE EXPENSIVE!!! Take advantage of free databases and support to keep you advancing on your genealogy trail. (See list at end of section.)

CAUTIONS. It’s easier to adapt to challenges when you see them coming in advance. Below are three, all-but-given bumps in the road you’ll have to navigate at some point along the way.

1. **FLAWS.** *Expect* inconsistent spelling, dates, and places of birth even on “official” records.
 - a. Census enumerators recorded what they heard and what they were told, leading to some very creative spelling and dates. Examples include:
 - i. Phonetic Spelling: Poe = Pow = Poo = Pough = Paugh = Pfau!
 - ii. Creative Aging: 1900 = age 30, 1910 = age 37, 1920 = age 44, 1930 = age 50!
 - iii. Nicknames: Edward William listed as Ed, Ted, Bill, Junior, Bud and more!
 - b. When possible, find out who provided the information and assess whether or not they were “in the know”. More research plus some deductive reasoning will also help sort this out.
2. **FABLES.** “My family says we are descendants of an Indian princess/George Washington/Daniel Boone/etc.” Many of these tales contain elements of truth; it is your job to VERIFY the VERACITY of these tales! (By the way, American Indians didn’t have princesses, and George Washington didn’t have any biological children. Boone did, however, have a large family & extended family!)
3. **FACEBOOK™.** Whether through in-person or phone conversations, letters exchanged through traditional mail or email, or contacts made on SOCIAL MEDIA, networking can be key to unlocking facets of your family’s story. The challenges here are selection and safety.
 - a. Selection – to the best of your ability, verify the authenticity of any group you join.
 - b. Safety – your family is personal, and YOU control the data you choose to share with others. Choose wisely!

Want more freebies? Try these!	✿ <i>FamilySearch</i>, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/en/united-states/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. (Note: Access to extensive online records; free account required.) ✿ <i>U.S. Gen Web</i>, 2026, https://usgenweb.org/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ <i>Cyndi’s List</i>, 2026, https://www.cyndislist.com/ . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. ✿ <i>Midwest Genealogy Center</i>, 2026, https://www.mymcpl.org/genealogy . Accessed 29 Jan. 2026. (Note: free classes, 75+ genealogy databases, and free personal assistance)
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JIGSAW JOURNEYS: Parting Tip

You are never too experienced to skip the intermission! Take time **regularly** to stop and assess both your **process** and your **progress**, asking yourself the following:

- Is my ORGANIZATION SYSTEM working? Can I find things quickly? Could others?
- How’s my PROOF level? Does my research prove family connections “beyond a reasonable doubt”? Do I need to go back to find additional supporting documentation anywhere?
- Am I leaving a well-marked research trail by CITING/RECORDING the SOURCE of all my finds?
- Am I at a point where a little HELP could make a big difference? Is it time to learn a NEW RESEARCH SKILL?

Here’s to YOUR piece of YOUR puzzle and the challenge you’ll undertake for the NEXT GENERATION!



Kim Alberg

jigsawgen@gmail.com

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