

HOW TO UNCOVER YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

By Mike Dunn

Genealogy is becoming more and more popular as a hobby these days. The interest in our own family history has always been there; but now technology advancements (primarily the Internet) allow for much easier and more extensive researching of our roots.

It's the thrill of discovery about our past that motivates us. We'd like to know if any of our ancestors were part of America's War for Independence in the 1770s or led a brigade of soldiers in the Civil War. Was there a famous military commander in our past... or maybe (we shudder to think) a notorious criminal? The only way to find out is to take the time to investigate our family history. We're also curious to discover when our ancestors came to America and why. And we're curious to see just how many generations we can trace our bloodlines back to.

There are a number of informative Web sites to help a novice get started on the fascinating journey into his or her family history. Genealogy Made Easy, Genealogy for Beginners, and Ancestry.com are just three of many valuable online sites devoted to the popular topic.

The first step in the genealogical process is to chart your own family tree. There are different ways that this can be done, and you'll need to make some choices before proceeding. Are you interested in simply tracing you ancestors, or in something more extensive, such as writing a family history? If so, then your research will need to be as thorough as possible.

Invest in a good notebook, preferably one with acid-free paper that won't wear easily over time. The notebook very well could become a valuable family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation. In addition to a notebook, you will also need to acquire some items specifically designed for genealogical pursuits. You will want to have pedigree charts, family group sheets, and research calendars.

The pedigree chart reads from left to right and records information from three generations. You begin with your own statistics such as birth date, birthplace and marriage date. You go backwards from there to your parents and grandparents. The family group sheet is designed so you can list information on each nuclear family. There are places to record the birth and marriage of each child. The research calendar is a valuable organizational aid. It enables you to keep all the information and research about a specific line of ancestors on one sheet. This is particularly helpful if the ancestors have all been traced to one location.

All of the necessary genealogical forms are available online or through a genealogical society. A creative person can even make up his or her own forms.

Once you have your notebook and charts, begin the formal process of searching out your family history by talking to your living relatives, especially the older ones. Attain from them as much detail as possible about your family line and the relatives that they would have known growing up. Record the conversation. Take careful notes as well and remember to include anecdotes or interesting details about your family history, or the colorful characters in your family line.

All genealogy starts with the present and works backward. You begin by recording all of the pertinent information about yourself, such as birth date, place of birth, marriage date, place of marriage, etc. Then repeat the same process with your parents, siblings, and other living relatives.

Any written documents you can find are a great help as you launch your journey. Items such as family histories, scrapbooks, diaries, yearbooks, letters and postcards yield a wealth of information. Your local newspaper may also contain valuable information. If one of your descendants ran for public office, for example, or was a police chief, or won a prominent award, you will find articles or photos in the archives of the newspaper.

After you have followed every available lead and garnered information through personal contacts with relatives, through old scrapbooks and diaries, and by searching back issues of the local newspaper for archived information about family members, you will be surprised at how much research has already been done and by how much new knowledge you've acquired. Everyone in your family will be fascinated as you recount the things you've learned.

From here, the next step is to continue with the birth, marriage and death statistics of previous generations. Begin from the last point of reliable information and proceed from there. If you have acquired the statistics of your paternal great grandparents, then try to get the statistics for their parents and so on. Births, deaths and marriages have all been recorded in state or county offices somewhere. Each state is a little bit different, but again the Internet is a valuable tool. Visit the National Center for Health Statistics and you will be directed where to search in your particular state.

Researchers requesting information from state or county offices should state their purpose and be specific and detailed. Include full names and genders and as much information as you have obtained that would be pertinent.

The more you dig, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you desire to dig. Everyone in genealogical circles is familiar with this pattern. Just call it the Genealogical Bug. Those who have been bitten by it are happy that they were. They've embarked on a fascinating journey and discovered a part of themselves that they didn't even know existed.

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