

How to create your family tree with Internet links.

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A Step by Step Guide for Beginning Genealogists

by Joe Long

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Chapter 1

Genealogy As A Hobby

*Any family tree produces some lemons,
some nuts and a few bad apples.*

--Anonymous

Where do I fit into the big picture? How did my ancestors contribute to who I am today? What were they like? How did they view the world? Mankind has always been curious about the past.

Most of us grew up at least knowing our grandparents. A few are lucky to have known great-grandparents. Beyond that, unless you are very curious, you might not have asked anyone in your family about ancestors. Some lucky families have a famous ancestor, or are related to royalty. However, most of us spring from a line of "commoners" who worked, lived and died in virtual obscurity. The thing that makes them important is that they are your ancestors and you would not be here today if it were not for their decision to have children. And those children had children and on down the line to you. We owe it to our ancestors to know more about them. As we learn about them, we learn about ourselves.

A Brief History

Genealogy as a pastime has changed dramatically over the years. Past genealogists were primarily concerned with proving a connection to aristocracy and royalty. Family pedigrees were only maintained for the upper classes of Europe until census and other records became more common for all classes in the early 16th century.

In the United States, early work was done by John Farmer with his book, *A Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England*, published in 1829. In 1845, the first genealogical society was formed, called The New England Historic Genealogical Society. The National Genealogical Society was formed in 1903 with 24 charter members. The Society today has thousands of members.

Donald Lines Jacobus helped develop sound scientific methods to compile family history by using original records and a critical approach to research. With the advent of computers and the Internet, much more information is available to individuals at their fingertips. However, primary research is still the correct way to find the right information on your ancestor. You must question all data before adding it to your file. *(See Sources in Chapter 7).*

Today, genealogy is one of the most popular hobbies in the U.S. As a society, we are asking more questions about where we came from and who we are. It is estimated that over 80 million Americans are actively involved in family research. If you are just starting your work in family history, the fun is just beginning. However, be forewarned, once you get the "bug" you are hooked for life!

Learn About Your Past and Yourself

Once you begin the journey, you will look at the world in a whole new way. You will realize that mankind has created a complex system of laws, government and regulations over the years with which your ancestors had to deal. However, if it were not for the law, we may not have any trace of their existence. I'm sure you will agree, in today's world, almost every step we take is documented and recorded in some way. Our descendants will have no trouble finding information about us. The difficulty for you is identifying the appropriate records to fill in the missing pieces in your family tree puzzle.

In the past, it was much more common for only a few events in a person's life to be recorded...birth, marriage and death. The further back in time you go, the less documentation exists and you must use other sources to find your ancestors. Luckily, early in our history as a nation, historians realized the importance of preserving records that might be needed for future generations. Key government officials dealing with land, military records and tax records generally tried to find ways to protect records from harm.

There were a few disasters, such as floods, fire, war and other events that caused some records to be partially or fully destroyed. I have spent many a day working in Southern courthouses that were burned during the Civil War. Almost the entire 1890 U.S. census was destroyed by fire. As recently as 1973, a disastrous fire destroyed approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

You will find your past is made up of a great cast of characters. Just as in modern families, there were "good" and "not-so-good" members. Your great-great aunt Martha may have gotten married several times or great-great grandfather Bob may have been the town drunk. However, that just makes the digging more interesting. So what if they weren't perfect people? They had problems and challenges just like we do today. In your research, you may find a family secret that has been covered up for many many years. You must ask yourself if you are willing to reveal the truth to other family members or "let sleeping dogs lie". A few skeletons in the closet can make your research that much more interesting and bring a new perspective to your ancestors and to your own place in the world.

Enjoy The Journey!

As you get started, remember that this is a fun, rewarding hobby that will bring years of enjoyment to your life. And keep in mind...you can never be completely finished. There will always be more bones to dig up! You will spend countless hours working on one family line that seems to have hit a brick wall. Then, when you are about to give up, you find a new clue, a new book or you remember something your grandmother told you, and *voilà!* you find the breakthrough you needed. I have spent years working to find the parents of some distant ancestor, only to discover the answer was easily accessible, but I hadn't yet opened the right door!

Your present is made up of little parts of your ancestors' past. Your research will bring your own family closer together. Family vacations can include a visit to the places your ancestors lived, battlefields where they once fought, and cemeteries where they now sleep in eternal slumber. You might even find that your children will better appreciate history when it becomes more personal and fun.

You will discover the euphoria of finding that long lost relative and their entire family on a microfilm census record, or the name of the ship that brought your immigrant ancestor to America.

Your research will become part of history. You may find that you are the first person in your family to construct a family tree. Your legacy will be appreciated for generations to come. Future researchers will build on your work and help complete a few more branches. At some point DNA testing (*See Chapter 20*) may determine our ancestral lines back to Adam and Eve. But for now, it's done one generation at a time!

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