

History at Home: A Guide to Genealogy

by Andrea Davis



Former U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a pretty impressive family tree. By blood or marriage, he had ties to 11 other past presidents. While most people aren't related (even by a shoestring) to a single world leader, tracing a family's history is an exciting journey. Genealogy involves searching for the clues that link relatives from one generation to another. There are some professional genealogy researchers, but anyone who researches family history is a genealogist. Some explore their past just for fun. Others, however, are eager to learn more about their personal health history or answer questions about their heritage.

The term "genealogy" is used in two ways. By one definition, it is the search for family history. Genealogists might start by gathering information about their own families and then learn about past generations. The second way the term can be used is to describe the descendants of a specific ancestor. For example, a genealogist compiles a list of all of the descendants of a great-great-grandfather. This list is the genealogy of the great-great-grandfather.

Every genealogist has their own reasons for delving into the family's past. Some are merely curious, pursuing answers to questions, such as why Grandpa's surname is spelled differently from his brother's. In searching for the answer, the genealogist uncovers more information that inspires continued research. A person who is planning to travel to a location where an ancestor once lived might also want to be more familiar with the family tree before making the trip.

Some people conduct genealogical research for health reasons. A family's history might reveal recurring medical issues or genetic traits that put the individual at risk for certain diseases. Patients can share this information with their doctors and discuss ways to address these concerns. Adoptees frequently choose to learn about their biological family in order to complete their medical history and to gain a better understanding of their social and cultural identity.

Genealogy can also play a part in resolving legal and financial matters. An attorney might hire a professional genealogist to locate the heir of an estate or find the owner of abandoned property. While discovering an oil well in the family name would certainly be exciting, most family

historians are simply interested in building bigger family trees. As the family learns about its past, there are more stories to share, more pictures to swap, and more people at the next family reunion.

To get started, talk to relatives, identify people in family photographs, and read saved documents, such as letters, diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, military records, maps, and legal papers. One way to keep track of generations is with an ancestral chart. This form contains brackets for each generation and space to write in the family members' names along with birth, marriage and death information. Family group sheets are a form for organizing information about a couple and their children. Use a notebook or computer to write out the family stories and sources of information.

The next step is to research public records, some of which may be accessible online. Look for information about a relative's birth year, occupation, marital status, country of birth, citizenship, and the names of other people living at the same address in census records. Ship manifests, such as those preserved in the Ellis Island archives, are helpful in identifying where immigrant ancestors came from and where they were planning to settle. The U.S. Social Security Death Index is used to confirm information about a deceased ancestor. Birth, death and marriage information might also be available through a state's vital records department.

Land records, probate files, and court cases shed more light on family dynamics. Church records provide information about baptisms, marriages, and burials. If these documents are not online, contact the courthouse or church and ask how the information can be obtained. Provide as much specific information as possible, such as names, dates, case or document numbers, and legal descriptions of property.

Oral histories are another way to enrich genealogy. It may be easier to get a family member to tell their stories verbally than in writing. Set a time and place for the interview and a method for recording it. Decide on a topic or series of questions to discuss, but give the interviewee flexibility to tell their stories. As technology changes, transfer the recording to a more current storage system so that it can continue to be accessed.

Through genealogy, researchers find out more about themselves and their families. The search may seem endless, as one piece of information leads to new stories, places, and people. Genealogy can improve lives by helping people identify and treat health risks. And genealogists hold a special spot in the hearts of their families. After all, genealogists know who to invite to the next family reunion.

Get started on your own genealogy with these resources:

- [Basic Genealogy](#): This article outlines the core principles of genealogical research and sources of information.
- [Starting Your Genealogy Research](#): The USGenWeb Project offers step-by-step instructions with links to useful tools and a list of common research mistakes.
- [Top Ten Tips for Starting Your Family History](#): Try one or more of these tips to break into genealogy.

- [Be a Family History Detective](#): The PBS show *History Detective Special Investigations* solves historical mysteries, and this article shares their detective techniques for finding family history clues.
- [Genealogy 101: Family History and More](#): This article introduces methods for collecting and organizing family research and ways to improve these skills.
- [Ancestry Charts and Forms](#): Download an ancestral pedigree chart, a family group sheet, and other forms to organize genealogical research.
- [Genealogy Research in Military Records](#): The National Archives site offers many resources for genealogists, and this article is a guide for researching military records.
- [Personnel Records, Muster Rolls, and Genealogical Research](#): The U.S. Coast Guard explains how to access service records for officers, enlisted and civilian personnel, and lighthouse keepers.
- [Researching Individual Immigrant Records](#): Finding the right immigration and nationality records is simplified by this outline of dates and resources from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
- [Genealogical Research Tips](#): The U.S. Department of Interior explains how to begin a search for ancestors, with a special emphasis on Native American genealogy.
- [Genealogical Research at the Library of Congress](#) (PDF): This article describes what type of research genealogists should do before going to the Library of Congress and what resources they can expect to find in its Local History and Genealogy Reading Room.
- [Ellis Island Immigration Records](#): Information on millions of ship passengers arriving at Ellis Island and the Port of New York can be accessed through this site: Just click the blue "Passenger Search" button in the upper right corner.
- [Compiling a Family Medical History](#): The Mayo Clinic identifies the health reasons for knowing three generations of your family history.
- [Learning About Genetic Health](#): This article details specific medical problems that can be affected by genetics and family history.
- [What is Genealogy?](#): The Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation merges traditional genealogy with DNA to find more connections in the family tree.
- [Public Health Genomics: Frequently Asked Questions](#): The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers advice on topics such as how adoptees can locate information and how knowing family history can lower one's health risk.
- [The Surgeon General's Family Health History Initiative](#): According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the majority of Americans do not have a record of their family's health history, and they can begin to create that record by accessing the My Family Health Portrait Tool on this site.
- [Using Maps in Genealogy](#) (PDF): Maps are an important tool in tracing the movement of a family, and the U.S. Geological Survey discusses how to use maps, the best types of maps, and where to find them.
- [Take a Genealogy Quiz](#): Have a little fun and test your family research knowledge.
- [Oral History Interview, Questions, and Topics](#): This is a list of 83 questions that can be used to generate a family history interview.
- [Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History](#): Check out a comprehensive outline of the process of planning and recording an interview, including tips on how to ask questions, pinpointing problems, and self-evaluation.

- [Genealogy and Homestead Records](#) (PDF): The National Park Service put together this useful guide to researching land records that pertain to the family tree.
- [Ten Things You May Not Know About the Roosevelts](#): This fascinating article about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt highlights some of the very things a genealogist looks for: interesting relatives, a marriage certificate, and juicy family stories.
- [Family History Research](#): This introductory guide includes cautions for wise use of the Internet, verifying information, and respecting the privacy of relatives.
- [Caring for Your Family Papers](#) (PDF): Historical documents can be fragile, and this article gives practical advice for preserving photos, papers, and books.
- [Family Business: How You Find It and How You Keep It](#): This expansive article covers surname origins, cemetery searches and how to take an impression of a gravestone, the difference between primary and secondary sources, African American and Native American genealogy resources, and more.
- [History of Genealogy and Family History](#): An explanation of the British tradition of recorded genealogies and the development of family history societies can be found here.
- [How to Trace A House Genealogy](#): Knowing the history of a home can yield clues to the families that occupied it, and this guide demonstrates how to track down the information.
- [Preserving Your Photographs: Windows to the Past](#) (PDF): The curator of sound and visual collections at the Minnesota Historical Society gives advice on how to identify and store photos.
- [Preservation of Artifacts](#): Discover the factors that can damage historical memorabilia, and learn how to preserve textiles, paper, photos, and items made of metal, leather, or wood.