

Genealogy Basics

What is genealogy?

Genealogy is establishing a line of descent from our ancestors. We can do this by verifying details of their basic life events like birth, marriage, and death.

How can PPLD help me?

In addition to classes, PPLD Special Collections offers research assistance, specialized reference materials, and genealogy database access.

Where do I start?

No matter where you are in your research process, you can use this 5-step guide to dig in to your family history! We'll walk you through how to gather and organize information, plan research goals, and seek and evaluate genealogical records.



Step 1: Identify what you know

Write down everything you already know about your family, including names, dates, and places.

- Begin with yourself, then your parents, grandparents, etc.
- Work backward, starting with the most recent records/events first (i.e., death records before records of birth)

[Pedigree charts](#) and [family group sheets](#) will help you begin organizing this information. You can also keep track using an online family tree or genealogy software, or even use pencil and paper!

Tip: Connect with relatives who can share family stories and may have documents, photos, heirlooms, and family history information to provide additional clues. Don't wait to ask questions!

Step 2: Decide what you want to learn

Now that you have written down what you know, what information is missing from your notes? These blanks will become your research goals.

If you are not sure where to start, begin with:

- Full names of direct ancestors (parents, grandparents, and great grandparents)
- Female ancestors' maiden names
- Dates and places of birth, marriage, and death

Work from the known to unknown and do not skip generations. If you jump ahead, you may climb the wrong family tree! As you work your way back, your discoveries will inform your future research of more distant ancestors.

Write down your questions and work on one at a time, starting with most recent.

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Step 3: Consider which records to use

As you begin searching for records, ask yourself:

When was the record created?

Is the information included on the record primary information (e.g., birth certificate), secondary information (e.g., obituary), or both (e.g., census record)? If time has passed or the informant was not present for the event, proceed with caution.

Is there more than one source?

Seek multiple sources to confirm a fact. Looking for a birth date? Various records contain birth information.

Is this an original document or an index/transcription?

Indexing and transcription errors do occur! Track down original documents (or scans) to verify information.

Does the record exist?

Laws governing record keeping varied significantly by date and location. The [FamilySearch Research Wiki](#) is a great resource for determining where and if records are available for a specific state, county, etc.

Step 4: Locate records

Vital records: records of birth, marriage, divorce, and death

Census records: (federal, state, and special schedules): beginning in 1790 and available through 1940

Newspapers: obituaries, local news, birth/engagement/social announcements, etc.

Cemeteries and church records: records of baptism or christening, marriage, burial, membership, etc.

Military records: service records (draft/enlistment, rank and unit, casualties/captures/desertions, etc.) and benefit records (pensions and bounty land)

Land and deed records: maps, land ownership, land grants, land sales and transfers, etc. (*note: county, state, and country boundaries changed over time*)

Wills and probate: last will and testament, papers from estate settlements, guardianship records, etc.

Immigration and naturalization records: passenger lists, citizenship declaration of intent and petition, etc.

Tip! [Research Logs](#) help keep track of where you looked for information, what details you found, etc. Verifying your research from the beginning is key – a date or name without a source is hearsay.

Step 5: Evaluate and repeat

Your genealogy journey is never truly over. Once you document the basic vital information of your immediate ancestors, return to Step 1 and establish new research goals!

Additional Resources

- [PPLD Website](#) – genealogy database and reference material access (checkout our [Genealogy Toolkit!](#))
- [Find A Grave](#) and [BillionGraves](#) – crowdsourced images and indexes of cemetery tombstones
- [Cyndi's List](#) – index of online genealogical resources
- [National Archives and Records Administration](#) – census, military, government records
- [Library of Congress](#) – city directories, county histories, newspaper directories
- [Internet Archive](#) – free digital library including thousands of genealogy books in the public domain

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