

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 Regional History & Genealogy 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 into your family history! We'll walk you through how to gather and organize information, plan research goals, and seek and evaluate genealogical records.

The Process

Step 1: Identify what you know

Step 2: Decide what you want to learn

Step 3: Consider which records to use

Step 4: Locate records

Step 5: Evaluate and repeat

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, genealogy software, or even pencil and paper!



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 births, marriages, and deaths

Work from the known to the 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 the most recent.

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 whenever possible.

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.

TOP TIPS



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.

Additional Resources

PPLD Website: Genealogy database and reference material access (check out Pikes Peak Library District's [Genealogy Toolkit](#)!).

Find A Grave and **BillionGraves:** Crowdsourced images and indexes of cemetery tombstones.

Cyndi's List: Index of online genealogical resources.

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 1950.

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.

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!

National Archives and Records Administration:

Census, military, and government records.

Library of Congress: City directories, county histories, and newspaper directories.

Internet Archive: Free digital library including thousands of public domain genealogy books.