

Genealogy Pathfinder

for Beginners

Prepared by the Genealogy Specialists in [The Special Collections Department](#)

Central Library, Fifth Floor

Updated November 2006

Start with yourself and work backward in time.

Begin with the known and proceed toward the unknown. Never start with a supposed ancestor and work forward.

Start with what you already have.

Examine all documents in the possession of your family such as family Bibles, wills, property deeds, photographs, letters, birth certificates and military discharge papers. Has anyone already written a history of your family?

Interview family members.

Record recollections of older family members, both about facts such as occupations, birthplaces, health, talents, education, peculiarities and family legends. Whenever possible, get middle names, nicknames, maiden names and alternative spellings of your family name. Record information from interviews even if you are not sure it is accurate; it may represent a piece of the puzzle that will fall into place later.

Define your goals

Many people want to fill in all the names and dates on their family trees. Some seek to prove descent from famous people. Still others are trying to establish a stronger sense of their own identities by examining their ancestors' roles in history. There are many approaches to family history research. Your motives will determine the route that you choose.

Read one or more basic guides to genealogical research.

Some that we have in our collection are:

Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, editors. *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy, Revised Edition*. GEN R929.373 AA HOW-TO

Val D. Greenwood. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*. GEN R929.373 AA HOW-TO

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack
The Genealogy Sourcebook
GEN R929.1 CARMACK

Don't overlook specialized works, such as the following:

Angus Baxter. *In Search of Your British and Irish Roots* GEN R929.341 AA HOW-TO

Tony Burroughs
Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree, by.
GEN R 929.1 BURROUGHS

Bertram Hawthorne Groene. *Tracing Your Civil War Ancestor*. GEN R929.1 GROENE

Dan Rottenberg. *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook for Jewish Genealogy*. GEN R929.1 ROTTENBERG

Robert Scott Davis, Jr. *Research in Georgia*. GEN R929.3758 AA HOW-TO

Bill Zimmerman
How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies
GEN R929.1 ZIMMERMAN

Matthew L. Helm and April Leigh Helm
Genealogy Online for Dummies
GEN R929.1 HELM

Anne Carter Fleming
The Organized Family Historian: How to File, Manage, and Protect Your Genealogical Research and Heirlooms
GEN R929.1072 FLEMING

Attend basic or specialized workshops.

Such presentations are offered by the Friends of the National Archives, State Archives and other institutions. There are also numerous membership organizations for people interested in all aspects of research.

Always try to find primary sources.

Indexers, authors and abstracters inevitably make mistakes. Whenever possible, look at original wills, deeds, birth certificates and other documents, or copies of them on microfilm.

Read documents with caution.

You will see old-fashioned terminology, handwriting, spelling and grammar. There are tools to help you to decipher old documents. Ask about our vertical file on early handwriting.

Beware the common pitfalls of research.

Think of ways your surname could be misspelled, then search under those spellings. Remember that boundaries and names of counties sometimes change. In recalling where they lived years ago, relatives may name the nearest big city rather than the actual locale, or say the name of the county seat when they mean to name the county. Study the ways various documents are organized before you try to use them.

Keep careful records.

Whenever possible, make photocopies of documents. Always record titles and dates of your sources.

Expect to visit many libraries and archives and to use many types of tools.

No single collection will hold every document that you need. Likewise, no single source will answer all your questions. You will eventually use most of the tools of the genealogist: census records, deeds, county histories, wills, death certificates, etc.

Beware ready-made family histories offered through the mail.

These books are usually fraudulent and may be little more than lists of telephone numbers.

Keep family members informed of your findings.

Don't wait to finish your project to publish your findings. Genealogical research is never "finished". Many researchers have waited too late to share their findings with those who would have most appreciated them. Rather, from time to time, give your family progress reports and get feedback. Also, share information with others who are working on your family.