

# Mastering Genealogy Records using the Internet



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

When I began thinking about writing this book, I decided to target the sweet spot of genealogy: finding records using the Internet. What the majority of family researchers really want to know is the secrets to finding free record sources that can be access via the web and that is what this book will reveal.

For several years, I have been researching genealogy and creating the website Focused Family Research (<https://www.FocusedFamilyResearch.com>), endlessly searching for record sources that everyday genealogist could use in their family research. Now, all that research is consolidated into this book.

My focus is on finding those “low hanging fruit” genealogy records that are freely available now thanks to the Internet. No attempt was made to cover the entire universe of records, only those that are Internet accessible.

## Current State of Internet Genealogy Research

Records are at the core of genealogy research. In a perfect world, we could do 100% of our research using online data

sources without the need to leave the comfort of our home. Unfortunately, we just are just not there yet.

Although we now have access to literally billions of indexed records online, many of the records you need to do thorough research remain undigitized squirreled away in courthouses, municipalities and libraries. Accessing these offline records is beyond the scope of this book.

However, if you know where to look, you can do the bulk of your research online for little or no money. That is where this book comes in. It provides a practical, hands-on guide for genealogy enthusiasts to find the records they are looking for using the Internet as their gateway. This book will help you build a toolbox full of strategies for finding many of the records you need.

## Hiring out your Genealogy Research

Back in the old days, genealogy was reserved for royalty. Royals had a vested stake in preserving their royal blood lines and had the funds to support such an endeavor. If you are flush with cash, you might want to consider hiring a professional genealogist to do your family research and then sit back and enjoy the results.

If you choose this route, you will soon find out that professional genealogists are well compensated for their work, just like other professionals including doctors, lawyers, mechanics and plumbers. Said another way, it is very expensive to hire a professional genealogist to perform your research and most people don't have that luxury.

## DIY Genealogy Research

This book is geared for those who want to do their own research, but not go broke in the process. Have their cake and eat it too, so to speak. It is pretty amazing what is freely available in this new information age. All you need to do is arm yourself with knowledge and following the advice in this book is a good place to start.

## Quality Genealogy Research

Let's start with a good understanding of what makes genealogy research outstanding, because not all genealogy research is judged the same.

According to the *Genealogy Proof Standard*, reasonably exhaustive research needs to be conducted. What is meant by this statement is that a variety of records are needed to be found in order to sufficiently prove your findings.

It is not enough to find a U.S. Census record for a family and then call it a day, thinking your research task is done. A single record may contain inaccurate data that will lead to erroneous results and trash your reputation as a genealogist. What is really required is to locate records from several different sources to make your research robust.

Having found records from different sources will serve to strengthen the credibility of your research. Your research may include census records, but should also include some of the following: birth, death, marriage, cemetery, immigration, land, homestead or other types of records.

Doing quality research is what this book is all about. Providing you with the guidance necessary to find a good variety of genealogy records to document your research. You may be wondering why I put so much emphasis on the quality of genealogy research when it requires so much effort.

The bottom line is that you want to have pride in your genealogy work and share your findings with others. By taking the easy way out by not doing thorough research and not documenting your sources, will make your work product flimsy when exposed to scrutiny of others.

No one wants to worry that someone might uncover problems with your research now or in the future. I can assure you that nothing will hurt your pride and soil your reputation faster than others poking holes in your research. Enough of this soap box rant, lets move on to the good stuff.

## Book Organization

The rest of the book is devoted to the practical aspects of how to get our hands on ancestor records. In chapter 2, I explore how to use an index of genealogical resources. In chapter 3, I cover the use of FamilySearch.org, which I consider an absolute must for all genealogists. Simply put, if you are not making use of this website, you are making a big mistake.

Chapter 4 covers Ancestry.com, the most popular genealogy resource on the planet. Although Ancestry is a subscription based service, it should not be overlooked, even by those on a tight budget. In Chapter 5, I cover the important topic of finding family books. Before continuing your family research, you need to make a good faith effort to find out if you are duplicating research already completed and published by someone else. Subsequent chapters focus on specific record types answering the what, where and how's of accessing them.

## 2 FINDING YOUR WAY WITH CYNDI'S LIST

Cyndi's List has become a genealogical institution for legions of people researching their family history. If you have never heard of it, then go to [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com) and check it out; you have been missing out on a very powerful resource.

Cyndi's List is a categorized and cross-referenced index to genealogy resources on the Internet created by genealogist Cyndi Ingle (formerly Howells) more than 20 years ago. Over the years, the number of links has ballooned to more than 330,000.

The Internet has been likened to a library with its books strewn all over the floor. I think this is a very apt description for the Internet as we know it today. There is an incredible array of useful resources available, but it is hard to find what you are looking for. Using Google or Bing searches to call up information often times proves ineffective for finding what you need.

Cyndi's List serves the function of being a card catalog index of available genealogy websites. Kind of like a Dewey Decimal index of genealogical sites on the web.

## Using Cyndi's List

I must confess that I have a kind of love/hate relationship with Cyndi's List. When I don't have a specific research problem I am working on, I can consume endless hours aimlessly following the almost inexhaustible ocean of links on the site. It is kind of like a kid in a candy store scenario for those with a curious mind, large appetite for knowledge and a lack of focus.

A much more effective way of using Cyndi's List is as a reference when you are stuck on a research problem and looking for fresh leads to follow. That way your scope is focused on finding a particular answer or resource and you will stay on task.

### Why is it so popular?

First of all the site is free; nothing turns off the genealogy community faster than having to pay for another monthly subscription fee. The main reason genealogists find it irresistible is because it provides links to resources that you may never have found otherwise.

In fact, you will likely find resources that you never dreamed existed. Also, no one is an expert on everything, so having a place to turn to when you need to do in-depth research makes Cyndi's website worth its weight in gold.

### How is the site organized?

Cyndi's List is organized by categories, more than 200 of them. The high level categories drill down into more and more specific sub-categories.

How can I stay up to date on added links?

Cyndi's List is being constantly added to at about a rate of about 1,500 links a month. Use the link <http://www.cyndislist.com/whatsnew/> to stay in touch with daily updates.

Although Cyndi's List genealogy research is an incredible resource, you will inevitably run into dead links, websites that are no longer maintained and some with very little to offer. Just like in pan prospecting, you must work through a lot of silt to find those precious nuggets of gold.

The ever evolving nature of content on the web makes it an impossible task to keep every link up-to-date, so there is a link on the homepage for reporting bad links. Using Cyndi's List may take a bit of patience, but the potential payoff makes it well worth your time and effort.

### 3 FAMILYSEARCH: ESSENTIAL GENEALOGY

Simply put, everyone serious about researching their genealogy owes it to themselves to become familiar with the FamilySearch.org website. The reason for this bold statement is that the website provides free access to a record collection containing approximately 4.4 billion historical records.

You won't see commercials for their service on television, but that does not make them any less of an incredible asset to practicing genealogists. They have been digitizing and indexing records from all over the world for decades and generously make access available for free to everyone who creates a free account on their website.

You may wonder how this is even possible. The answer lies behind the religious beliefs and practices of the people who run the FamilySearch website.

#### Mormon Religious Beliefs

Mormon religious doctrine calls on Mormons to do genealogy research because they believe that marriage and

families can continue beyond this life. They endeavor to “save” their ancestors who died without the opportunity to be baptized or hear the gospel from eternal damnation.

They perform genealogy research to obtain names and other genealogical information of their ancestors and act as proxies so that temple ordinances can be performed on behalf of their kindred dead. They are giving their long dead family members, whose spirits wait for entrance into heaven, a chance to hear about the gospel and either accept or reject it.

Just as proselytizing missions benefit the living, genealogy serves the dead in an effort to reunite lost family members in the eyes of God. Their research efforts are intended to build bridges between the lost generations of their family so they can be sealed together as an unbroken chain.

The Mormons at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in support of their religious beliefs, have been collecting genealogy records for decades (way before it became popular to trace your family roots). They have invested tremendous amounts of money and human capital into building the world’s largest collection of genealogical resources and a global network of research centers. Brigham Young University (BYU) also offers degree programs in genealogy research.

Please don’t be put off by the religious aspects driving the creation of the FamilySearch website. I have been to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City and mixed with many Mormons and always found them to be generous of their time and spirit. There was never any attempt to push or promote their religion.

FamilySearch Features

If you are not yet familiar with FamilySearch, you owe it to yourself and your family research to check it out. Create a free LDS account and start building your family tree. By creating a family tree, you now have a place to link the records you find using their search mechanism. Also, like Ancestry's "shaky leaf", FamilySearch will work behind the scenes to provide you with records that match your family members and can be attached to your tree.

Some choose to use this website as their primary data source making database programs like Family Tree Maker or RootsMagic unnecessary. Another feature is that photos can be uploaded, tagged and added to albums. The uploaded photographs can also have stories attached to them, providing a great way to store and share stories and photos. All photos are public and they allow 5,000 photos to be uploaded by each user with unlimited stories.

An interactive fan chart has also been added to aid in viewing a lot of information in a small space. The fan chart allows for navigation, so you can move from one ancestor to another.

Don't allow any preconceived notions you may have about Mormons keep you away from this tremendous resource. Your genealogy research will be greatly benefited by leveraging this incredible free asset. Just let their religious fervor work to your advantage.

#### 4 ANCESTRY: ESSENTIAL GENEALOGY...IF YOU CAN AFFORD IT

Ancestry.com is the undisputed industry leader in genealogy record databases and should not be overlooked by any genealogist. Ancestry has more records than any other service with 20 billion historical records and more than 10 million subscribers, easily dwarfing their closest competitors.

The only catch is that it is a subscription based service and potential users of the service have to make the call on whether the service is worth the cost of approximately \$200/year for a U.S. only subscription and roughly \$300/year for a worldwide subscription (Note-pricing estimates were valid at the time this book was written, check Ancestry.com to get current pricing for their service).

The answer to this question is based on how much you plan to use the service. Some people use their Ancestry account on a daily basis and it is well worth the cost. I have been using Ancestry for many years and feel it is worth the price for all but the most casual hobbyist genealogist.

Ancestry Strengths

Their power comes from a massive data collection of billions of records of which they add a million or more records every week. That is why Ancestry is the first place many genealogists look when they start their research.

There is more to Ancestry.com than just their massive record collection. In order to get all you can out of your subscription, you need to dig a little deeper. Their unique combination of features: gigantic record collection, large customer base, and powerful collaboration tools makes their site unmatched in the industry.

### Ancestry Collaboration Features

The very first thing each user should do on Ancestry.com is create a family tree starting with yourself. Even if this is a duplication of your family data, it is worthwhile for the following reasons.

1. It allows you to collaborate with other members (potential relatives of yours), which can lead to new discoveries.
2. Ancestry.com will search its massive archive to find records likely pertaining to your ancestors and present matches as leafs or hints. This is a very powerful feature that will find records that you did not even know existed. Let the tool perform research on your behalf to discover and save pertinent records at the touch of a button.
3. You can match your tree against others in the world family tree. This is a great way for you connect with others who have uploaded their data to the world family tree. If they sourced their data exceptionally well you can adopt their research, otherwise use this data as hints for further research.

Uploading photographs for the individuals in your family tree is also a good collaboration move. The people who come to get a copy of your photos are likely relatives of yours.

## Search Tips

The downside to having such a massive wealth of data is that their search mechanism has to accommodate every type of record and tends to be a bit complicated.

A single query may return hundreds, if not thousands, of matches and it is not feasible to thumb through every one. The real trick is to narrow your search down by using advanced search features to reduce the number of records in your search results. The search options listed below should help.

1. Change the default settings to using combinations of exact, phonetic, and names with similar meanings.
2. Use wildcards in your search including “\*” for multiple character matches and “?” for single character matches.
3. Search by life event (i.e. births, marriages, deaths).
4. Add spouse and children to search criteria.
5. Use slider bars to narrow search for search criteria you know to be true.
6. Use card catalog to search individual collections.

Be careful not to get too specific on name spellings or you could miss out on records. Often times names are misspelled, initials/nicknames are used, or mistakes are made in the indexing process, so being less specific on the name but adding a location, date or spouse name to the search can often do the trick.

## AncestryDNA

The DNA area of Ancestry can be another valuable way to locate family members. In order to take advantage, you need to buy a participation kit and submit a saliva sample.

Once your AncestryDNA results are load into the system, you can see others who share close DNA matches. I have located numerous new cousins this way. Connecting with them often leads to new discoveries and collaborations with cousins who are also interested in their family history. The more popular DNA testing gets, the more powerful the results will be as time goes on.

Ancestry also has some good resources in its Learning Center that are well worth checking out. With the building popularity of their franchise, the collaboration features of your subscription simply should not be overlooked.

In chapters 3 and 4 we have covered, arguably, the two best resources available to genealogy researchers. There are literally dozens of other subscription services, but their value will likely pale in comparison to these two industry giants. When you use these websites in combination, you have two very powerful tools in your toolbox as you go forth to find online ancestor records.

## 5 FAMILY BOOKS

Finding a family book written about your ancestors is like hitting the jackpot for a family researcher. Some families have been written about extensively and others have not.

If you were lucky enough to be related to the feuding Hatfields or McCoys, Daniel Boone, George Washington or Cornelius Vanderbilt you should have no problem locating published works based on your family. For the rest of us the problem is a bit more daunting.

Wouldn't you feel foolish for laboring for months on your family history only to find out that someone had already done the work and published their findings in a book? Since the payoff can be big, a quick check of three of the largest book sources is warranted even if the probability of finding something is low.

### Where to Look for Family Books

My experience has been that there is often unpublished books and data collections that genealogy minded relatives have created and are floating around. These unofficial works,

which may not even be bound, usually consist of family trees and collected stories and photos. This is where the social aspect of genealogy kicks in. If you're looking for help with family genealogy free search, make it known to your family members that you are working on family genealogy and if they had anything to share, you would really appreciate it. Next, we'll focus on the search for published works.

The most obvious choice of where to find a family book is at Amazon.com. Even though they have one of the largest collections of books on the face of the earth, most are the more commercial titles and not the specialty family history type books you are looking for. It is certainly worth a shot to search for your ancestor's name and see what you can find.

Next, try looking at Google Books at [books.google.com](http://books.google.com). Google books has a large collection of digitized books whose content can be searched online. In the example below, I searched for my ancestor Joseph Hoesl, which returned 1,600 matches. You might also try searching for your ancestor's home town, assuming they did not live in a big city.

The FamilySearch.org website, a service of the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints' Family History Library in Salt Lake City has a large collection of family history books, many of which are now digitized and available online.

Use Family History Books for your family genealogy free search.

If you were able to find your family book, then congratulations! If you struck out with your search, at least you know with minimal effort, there is likely no low hanging fruit left on the tree. It is time to refocus your research effort elsewhere.

## 6 US CENSUS RECORDS

U.S. Census records are usually the first place genealogists start when trying to locate an ancestor living in the United States. The reason is that a serious attempt was made, by the government, to collect information for every person living in the United States at the time the census was taken.

Therefore, if your ancestor was living in the U.S. during a census year, it is very likely that they will appear in census records. That is one very powerful statement that many genealogists take advantage of on a daily basis.

These records are also popular because they are packed with valuable information including a person's age, where they lived, marital status, children, occupation, citizenship status, whether they could read or write and more depending on the year of the census. There are not many other record sources that can top the information content of a census record.

### US Census Records Background

The Census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution to be carried out once every ten years so that congressional

representation and government funding can be applied fairly. The first U.S. Census was taken in 1790.

Due to confidentiality laws, individual records are sealed for 72 years in order to prevent the release of an individual's personal information during their lifetime. Therefore, the most recent census that can be accessed for genealogy purposes is the 1940 Census.

Although the U.S. Census records and genealogy data are a great tool for researchers, they do have their limitations. The main problem is that the early censuses were conducted in person, door to door. As you can imagine some families were missed, misspellings were common, and the information provided to the census taker varied based on the recollection of the family member available.

Another problem is that the census is only take once every ten years. Your ancestor could have come and gone in the years in between one census year and the next. Pre-1850 records are of limited value as only the head of household was listed by name. The presence of a spouse, children and slaves was denoted by numbers, not names.

These early records may also bring you face-to-face with the reality of slavery, a dark period of US history where human beings were considered property. Slaves names were not even tracked, making African American research particularly difficult. These records can, however, help you track an ancestor to a specific place and time.

## Finding US Census Records

Most folks who do not have an Ancestry.com account prefer to use the free option for obtaining census records at FamilySearch.org. Just click on the search icon and simply

type the name of your ancestor in the search form and a census record will likely show up in the search results.

### Search Strategies

If you can't seem to find an ancestor in a particular census, there are several things you can try before giving up. First, you can try searching just the first couple of letters of the last name. It is more likely that the census taker got the first part of the name right. If you get lucky, you won't have to dig through too many matches.

You can also try your search using popular misspellings of your ancestor's last name. It is a good idea to keep a running list of these misspellings and track of which ones you tried, so you don't repeat your work. Using the Soundex option in your search might also be worth a shot.

Another thing you can try is not searching the last name at all. If you have sufficient details on the wife or kids, try searching for their first names and see what you get. Feel free to get clever with combinations of the search fields, using known data to narrow the field.

You could also search on the name of a neighbor of your ancestor, if you have that information. Since the census was taken in person, it is somewhat likely that the record just above or below your ancestor was a next door neighbor or lived in close proximity.

If you can find your ancestor in an earlier census, you could try finding his neighbors and looking on that page and adjacent pages for your ancestor. Neighbors might also be listed as witnesses on a marriage certificate or other documents. This method is a bit of a long shot, but if you are desperate enough it might be worth a try.

If you are still stuck, you need to explore the possibility that your ancestors just might not have been there during the census year. It is probably best to refer to other documents for finding clues to their whereabouts.

## 7 GUIDE TO HISTORICAL NEWSPAPERS

For our ancestors living in America, local newspapers were their primary source of information since as far back as the early colonial days. Long before radio or television, newspapers were the way to keep up-to-date with what was happening in their community. Most folks would read a newspaper cover to cover, looking forward to the date the next issue comes out.

Now, historical newspapers can provide family researchers with a glimpse of the past as they struggle to understand how their ancestors lived. Newspapers often reflect the political leanings and views of the community as circulation size and advertising space rates depended on their ability to cater to their readership.

Newspapers are particularly valuable to family researchers because they can fill in voids left by missing or destroyed official records. Notices of births, engagements, weddings, obituaries, foreclosures etc. provide unique opportunities to find details not normally a part of government records.

### Finding Historical Newspapers

Locating old newspapers can be a hit or miss proposition. The main reason being that newspapers tend to be small circulation, local and widely dispersed across the country. For ancestors living in a rural area, a bit of digging may be required to find the historical newspapers that served that area.

Also, there is no guarantee that copies of the smaller papers even exist anymore. The disposable nature of the media means most newspapers were discarded soon after reading. The cheap paper they were printed on tended to degrade quickly leading to many newspapers being lost to time.

Several approaches to finding historical newspapers are outlined below:

### **Approach 1: You know the Newspaper's Name**

If you are familiar with the newspaper in your ancestor's town, then you are way ahead of the game. You just need to contact them directly or go to their website to search their archives. Defunct newspapers will often have a paper archive of their issues housed in a local library.

### **Approach 2: You know your Ancestor's County/City**

The Online Historical Newspapers Website (<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/>) is meant to be a place where you can find links to all the online historical newspapers in one place. Although this website is a work in progress, they have managed to pull together a pretty impressive list of resources.

The county in which your ancestors lived is a vital piece of information in tracking down local newspapers. A good

starting point would be a Google search of the state and county where they lived with historical newspapers in the search box and then follow where the leads take you.

Otherwise, try searching Cyndi's List Newspaper Category (<https://www.cyndislist.com/newspapers/>) which has an extensive newspaper category. They may have just the link you need.

### **Approach 3: Search Available Free Online Archives**

In this approach, you search for your ancestor's name in several of the larger free online old newspaper collections listed below. With the recent push to digitize and make records available on the Internet, many newspapers are coming back to life as searchable digital images for genealogists to rediscover.

#### **Chronicling America**

[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)

The Library of Congress' portal to newspapers has two important areas of content: digitized newspaper pages (1836-1922) from 25 states and Washington, DC, and an index to all known newspapers published in the United States and where to find them today.

#### **Elephind.com**

[elephind.com](http://elephind.com)

Perform text searches on historic digitized newspaper archives from around the globe. They claim to have a collection of more than 3 million newspapers.

#### **Google Newspapers**

[news.google.com/newspapers](http://news.google.com/newspapers)

Another excellent free website where you can search Google's digitized collection of domestic and foreign historical

newspapers.

## **Bowling Green State University - U.S., Canada, and World Newspapers**

[libguides.bgsu.edu/USNewspapersInternet](http://libguides.bgsu.edu/USNewspapersInternet)

Find links to websites arranged alphabetically by state.

### **Approach 4: Search Fee Based Services**

In this approach, you search for your ancestor's name in one or more of the fee based subscription services such as Ancestry.com, GenealogyBank.com, Newspapers.com or NewspaperArchive.com. Each of these services have significant historical newspaper collections that are well worth looking through.

Most of these services will allow you to search their collection to gauge how many hits you will get before signing up, but it is an individual decision whether it will be worth the subscription price.

The approaches described above should be enough to find generally available resources that have been digitized and made available via the Internet. Sometimes, the resource you are seeking has not been digitized, no longer exists, or has not been made available online.

These cases will require much more digging and legwork and possibly an onsite visit to physically review a collection. The bottom line is just keep looking until you either find what you are seeking or come upon a dead end.

## 8 VITAL RECORDS

When you can get them, vital records can play a significant role in researching your ancestors. Vitals are generally comprised of three types of records: birth records, marriage records and death records. Genealogists love these records because vitals describe the very events they are interested in.

For instance, a death record usually contains the name of the deceased, age, marital status, cause of death, date and place of death. This type of information is pure gold to a family researcher.

### Locating Vital Records

The availability of vitals is limited to time periods when the records were being created, which varies by state. Before a certain date, vital records were not required to be created and most likely do not exist. Fees and bureaucratic rules by holders of the records can also be an impediment to obtaining them.

Some states require that you provide proof of your identity and your relationship to the record subject when you make

your document request. Requirements like these are aimed at curbing identity theft and other abuses, but present roadblocks to genealogists.

The biggest problem for most genealogists is that the specific date and location of the event must be known in order to submit a record request. You can't ask the record holding agency to search their archive for your record, it is just not their job to do research for you.

Once you are sure of the date and location of your ancestors' vital event, follow the simple steps below to order a hard-copy of their records.

1. First you need to know if your event happened at a time when records were being recorded. It is a complete waste of resources to order a record that does not exist. Thankfully, the folks at Family Tree Magazine have created a handy genealogy vital records chart listing the dates that vitals officially started being kept by each state. Download the chart (<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/cheatsheet/recordreferences/>) and check your date against the chart to gain confidence that a record does exist.
2. Next, you need to request a copy of the original record you are seeking. One of the best sites for guidance on locating vital records is VitalRec.com. This site provides links to the state and county resources responsible for issuing records. Since information on fees, regulations and addresses of where to write are subject to change, getting information directly from the record holders is preferable over using a static source or reference book.
3. Wait for the record to arrive in the mail.

Keep in mind that these records online can have errors in them. Since parents generally provide the information for a birth certificate, they are typically accurate. Marriage records should be trustworthy as they are also a primary source. Death certificate information, however, is provided by an informant who may or may not have first-hand knowledge of the decedent.

Vitals should a part of any well researched family genealogy as they are critical to validating dates and other details of significant life events. Finding these records can be a bit tricky, but with a little effort and cost, they can be had.

## 9 ELLIS ISLAND PASSENGER LISTS

Some estimates indicate that as many as one third of all Americans have at least one ancestor who passed through the doors at Ellis Island. Have you ever questioned your Ellis Island ancestry to see if you might have a European ancestor or two hiding in your family tree? After all, 12 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island during the period it operated as an immigration center from 1892 to 1954.

Even if you have no Ellis Island ancestry, it is fun to imagine what it was like for newly arriving immigrants getting off the boat after an arduous two-week voyage, clutching a bag stuffed with all their worldly belongings, taking in all the sights and sounds as a stranger in a foreign land. The New York skyline was often the first glimpse of America for these immigrants; for a poor immigrant farmer from a rural area, the sight must have seemed absolutely amazing.

### The Immigrant Experience

Every immigration story starts with a brave and ambitious decision to leave everything and everyone they know to make the journey to America. The cost of a ticket on a transatlantic

steamer was the biggest impediment for most immigrants.

Those on the lower rungs of the economic scale had to work and save for months to afford the approximately \$30 cost of a steerage ticket. Fares to New York City were cheapest for most immigrants, which explains why New York was by far the most popular destination.

First class tickets costed the equivalent of several thousand dollars in today's money, far out of the financial reach of most immigrants. First class passengers were wined and dined and enjoyed private cabins and exclusive access to the deck of the ship. Second class tickets costed a little less but still afforded the passenger a private room.

Tickets were purchased from a steamship company in the passenger's port of origin. The ticketing agent for the steamship line would be familiar with the spoken language of the passenger and filled out a line on the ship's manifest for each passenger. A series of 25-30 questions were asked of each passenger to be used ensure they could be identified at their destination port.

It is a bit of a myth that America threw open its arms to the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" as inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. In reality, once an immigrant's ship arrived at the port of arrival, immigrants had to prove that they were in good health, disease free and able to support themselves by working.

### Arrival in America

The first lesson immigrants learned upon arrival in America is that money talks. First and second-class passengers were let off the ship after a cursory inspection, free to continue onto their destination in America. It was assumed that passengers

who could afford a more expensive ticket were unlikely to be destitute making them a low risk for entry into the country.

Newly arriving immigrants holding a third class or “steerage” ticket were subjected to a series of invasive examinations and those found deaf, senile, lame or with a contagious disease were sent back to their homeland. Fortunately, only about 2% of the new arrivals were deported for medical reasons. Since steam ship companies had to pay for return passage of any deported immigrant, they went to great lengths to deny passengers with obvious medical, legal or financial issues from boarding their ships.

Upon entering the main lobby at Ellis Island, passengers were lined up waiting to enter with all their worldly goods in a bag, trunk or satchel. Next, they were funneled into a staircase that led to the center of the great hall.

Although they probably didn't notice, they were already being inspected as they made their way up the stairs. A limp, trouble breathing or any other sign of ill health would be noticed by an inspector stationed at the top of the stairs who would write with chalk a code for the suspected condition on the overcoat of the passenger.

Doctors would perform 10-15 second medical inspections of each passenger. Minor conditions would be treated onsite, but more serious and permanent conditions called for deportation. After the medical inspection came the interrogation phase to verify passenger answers matched what was recorded on the ship's manifest.

Answers to two questions in particular could get an immigrant detained or deported. They were: How much money do you have? and Who paid for your voyage? If you did not appear to have enough pocket money or a sponsor in America to look after your well-being, you were likely to

become a ward of the state and that was grounds for deportation. Also, U.S. law prohibited companies from paying for the passage of people for the express purpose of having them work for them in an indentured servant type of arrangement.

Although the screening process seemed complex and never ending, passengers spent on average only about 3-5 hours being processed at Ellis Island. Once clear of these hurdles, they were free to exchange their money and purchase ferry or train tickets to their final destination.

### Finding Your Ellis Island Ancestry

Since nearly everyone interested in genealogy desires access to immigration records in search of their immigrant ancestors, records are available at most of the larger genealogy record repositories including FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com, U.S. National Archives and others.

One of the easiest ways to find your Ellis Island ancestry is to go straight to the source. The Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation runs a website

(<https://libertyellisfoundation.org/full-passenger-search>)

which allows users to do free online searches of their records.

All you have to do is supply an ancestor's name and it will find any matching records.

### Reasons for not Finding Ellis Island Ancestry

Keep in mind that even though your ancestor may have been processed at Ellis Island, you may not be able to find a physical record of the event. A fire on Ellis Island on June 15, 1897 burned the immigration station completely to the

ground and many years of immigration records dating back to 1855 were lost.

Also, you can't just assume you have Ellis Island ancestry. Earlier waves of immigration came through the Port of New York (1855 to 1890), America's first official immigration center known as Castle Garden.

Although New York Harbor was by far the most popular port of entry, other major U.S. arrival ports for immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries included Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New Orleans. Numerous smaller ports were in operation at the time and also should not be overlooked. Best of luck on your search for Ellis Island ancestry.

## 10 CASTLE GARDEN PASSENGER LISTS

Everyone knows story of Ellis Island as the immigration processing hub for new arrivals to New York. But what many don't realize is that Ellis Island wasn't the first immigrant processing facility. In the nearly 40 years span from 1855 to 1890, a facility called Castle Garden processed incoming immigrants arriving at the Port of New York.

The facility today is known as Castle Clinton National Monument, was named in honor of New York City Mayor DeWitt Clinton. The building, which was constructed between the years 1808 and 1811, and served several different uses over the years.

Originally built as a fort to defend New York City from British forces in the tensions leading up to the War of 1812, but it never saw any military action. In addition to its stint as the nation's first immigrant processing center, it has also functioned as a beer garden, exhibition hall, theater, public aquarium, and currently as a national monument.

A transition to the Ellis Island facility occurred on January 2, 1892 and happened for several reasons. First, the new facility was more isolated and better allowed officials to control the

spread of diseases immigrants were known to carry such as cholera and smallpox. Also, the new Ellis Island facility was larger and better able to handle the incredible influx of immigrants to America. Scandals over mistreatment and exploitation of immigrants helped speed the transition to the new facility.

### Finding Castle Garden Records

For genealogists, Castle Garden is a national treasure capturing the early travels of immigrants to America. The Port of New York saw far more immigrants than any other US port simply because fares to New York City were cheapest for most immigrants.

In order to pay the approximately \$30 cost of a steerage ticket, those on the lower rungs of the economic scale had to work and save for months to afford the fare. Obviously, they were going to choose the lowest cost option available to them.

Much of Castle Garden's immigrant passenger records were destroyed in a fire that consumed the first structures on Ellis Island on June 15, 1897. Specifically, all administrative records from 1855 to 1890 were lost to the fire. Fortunately, the Customs Office passenger lists and their abstracts were safely stored in Washington, DC and are available to us today.

The ship manifest records that still exist are available at the Castle Garden website ([www.castlegarden.org](http://www.castlegarden.org)). This website provides a free searchable database of ship passenger records. These records are also available at FamilySearch in the collection called "New York Passengers (1820-1891)" and at Ancestry in the collection "All New York Passengers (1820-1957)" or available directly from the National Archives.

For those just starting to search for their overseas relatives

with nothing more than a rough arrival timeframe (before 1892), it may be worthwhile to do a quick query of the [CastleGarden.org](http://CastleGarden.org) website. New York was the main port of entry for immigrants coming to America, so there is a good chance you will find your ancestor's paper trail here. It is generally accepted that more than 8 million immigrants (and perhaps as many as 12 million) were processed during the time this facility was in operation.

## 11 SANBORN INSURANCE MAPS

If your family lived in an urban area of the U.S. after 1867, you just may be able to locate their home or place of business on a Sanborn map. These maps depict the commercial, industrial, and residential sections of some twelve thousand cities and towns providing a valuable research tool for anyone with a personal connection to a building.

Many people are not familiar with the Sanborn name because they specialized in creating maps for the fire insurance industry. What was once a tool for determining the degree of fire hazard associated with a property has now become a valuable tool for genealogists who seek to understand the environment in which their ancestors inhabited.

The maps themselves are large-scale lithographed street plans at a scale of 50 feet to one inch on 21 x 25 inches sheets of paper. The maps were published in bound volumes, which were updated as needed until a subsequent volume was produced.

These maps reveal details of buildings that could assist a

family researcher in their work including size, shape, and construction of dwellings, commercial buildings, and factories as well as fire walls, locations of windows and doors, sprinkler systems, and types of roofs.

## History of Sanborn Maps

Before these maps were available, insurance underwriters had to visit every property under consideration for fire coverage. As insurance companies increased their service areas, it became no longer practical to send someone out to every insurable property to assess risk.

Daniel Alfred Sanborn, a civil engineer and surveyor, saw a lucrative opportunity beginning to blossom and created a company to fill the need. Once available, these maps allowed the process of underwriting to take place in an office. Subscribing insurance companies helped share the high cost of creating the maps and helped to make the Sanborn Map Company an industry leader.

The last Sanborn fire maps were published in 1977, after US insurance companies stopped using maps for underwriting. The Sanborn Company still exists today, but has adjusted their focus towards the capturing, analyzing and manipulation of geographic data.

## Library of Congress Sanborn Map Collection

The Library of Congress holdings include the largest collection of fire insurance maps created by the Sanborn Company (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps>). Their collection includes some fifty thousand editions of fire insurance maps comprising an estimated seven hundred

thousand individual sheets.

Not all maps are currently available in their digital form, but efforts are underway to get their entire collection online within the next few years.

## 12 SOCIAL SECURITY RECORDS

Some of the best sources for genealogy records come from interactions between our ancestors and the United States federal government. The Social Security Death Index (SSDI) is a collection of records listing deceased people in the U.S.

The index could yield important information about the more recent generations of your family. The data elements contained within each record include name, date of birth, date of death, state or country of residence and zip code of deceased' last residence.

The value of this collection comes from its size (nearly 100 million records); if your deceased ancestor was issued a social security number, there is a good chance a record will exist for them.

If someone is missing from the list, it may be that the benefit was never requested, an error was made on the form requesting the benefit, or their death was never reported to the Social Security Administration.

History of Social Security

The social security number is so integrated into American everyday life that we tend to take it for granted, but this has not always been the case. The Social Security Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt on August 14, 1935.

In addition to several provisions for general welfare, the Act created a social insurance program designed to pay retired workers age 65 or older a continuing income after retirement.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) is the government organization created to oversee the new benefit. The dire economic times of the Great Depression destroyed the value of many Americans' retirement savings and highlighted the need for a safety net to protect the elderly.

Social Security was a major component of President Roosevelt's New Deal package of reforms meant to prevent a repeat of the human suffering caused by the Great Depression.

### Social Security Death Index

The Social Security Death Index is a database of death records created from the United States Social Security Administration's Death Master File Extract. The deaths of people after 1936 with a social security number are recorded by the Social Security Administration in this database.

Due to security concerns about possible identity theft, the Social Security Administration changed their policy in 2013 about releasing the most current records. They now do not release records for three calendar years after an individual's death.

Also keep in mind that the absence of a particular person in

the SSDI does not prove this person is alive. The Social Security Administration does not guarantee the accuracy of the file, so it may contain errors or omissions.

### Accessing the SSDI

Thanks to the folks at FamilySearch.org, the SSDI can be searched for free at:

<https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1202535>

The content of its database is not complete (most of the people in this index died after 1962) and may contain errors. Taking these shortcomings into account, the Social Security Death Index still provides a valuable tool for genealogists.

There is no real downside to spending a few minutes searching for your family members who died in the United States after 1936. Especially given the fact that you can search it free of charge at FamilySearch.com without the need to leave the comfort of your own home.

## 13 FEDERAL LAND RECORDS

Some of the best genealogy records come from interactions between our ancestors and the United States federal government. Government land records are an excellent illustration of this fact.

Over the years, the government has kept careful track of all federal land transactions and provides free online access to the public at the U.S. Bureau of Land Management website (<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>). This website fronts a database of more than 5 million land titles entries dating back to 1820.

You owe it to yourself to take a few minutes to search this database for your ancestor's names. If your ancestors purchased land from the government or were land granted as a part of a war pension, land records should show up in the database.

Just click on the link on the menu bar called "Search Documents", select the state in which your ancestors resided, enter their last name and hit the "Search Patents" button to see what record matches are found. If there is a hit, click on the patent image link to view a digitized image of the source

document. The document will reference the Homestead Act if the transfer of land was executed as part of a homestead claim.

## Homestead Land Records

If your ancestor was a homesteader and met all the requirements for gaining title to their claim, a patent record should exist. Homestead files are a holy grail document for family researchers due to their size and detail. The homesteading process produced a lot of paperwork and provide genealogists with some interesting insights into a homesteader's life.

Homestead records often reveal juicy bits of information such as the monetary value of the owner's property; the amount, description, and value of crops grown; and the dimensions of the house, barn, or corncrib. Paperwork may include descriptions of the property and completed improvements, citizenship applications, family Bible pages, marriage or death certificates, newspaper clippings and affidavits.

If you are lucky enough to have a homesteading ancestor, I encourage you to go one step further and request a copy of their homestead file from the National Archives. I describe the process for making this request below.

## Homesteading Basics

By 1880, there were 31 million Americans living on farms. If you had relatives living in the Midwest region of the country during this period, there is a good chance that they were farmers and possibly even an original homesteader. The Homestead Act of 1862 was an important tool for settling

much of the American heartland as it converted vast amounts of public land to private (tax paying) ownership.

The act allowed people from all walks of life to pursue the dream of owning their own land. People from all walks of life including non-landowning farmers, immigrants, single women, former slaves and get-rich-quick schemers all jumped at the chance to become landowners.

The U.S. government partitioned large swaths of raw land into 160 acre tracts which just about anyone could own outright if they met the specific requirements of living on the land and making improvements. There was no lack of people willing to take the government up on their offer of “free land”.

Obviously, the land was not “free” by any stretch of the imagination. It took a lot of sweat equity to meet the ownership requirements. Only those with a significant amount of grit and determination were able to make a go of it. Homesteaders had to demonstrate a willingness to work hard and endure the many hardships required to create an operating farm out of raw land. Many homesteaders abandoned their claims or sold off to someone else before the government requirements for ownership could be met.

### Requesting Copies of Homestead Files

If one of your ancestors was a homesteader, you can request a copy of their homestead file. Armed with a legal description of your ancestor’s homestead (specifically the section number, township number and range number), you can request a copy of your ancestor’s homestead file from the National Archives.

Although efforts are underway to digitize the entire collection

of homestead records, you can still request a copy of your ancestor's record using form number NATF 84 (<https://www.archives.gov/research/land>) from the National Archives website. The form appears quite complicated, at first, but just requires a few specific bits of information you can get off the Bureau of Land Management website to help them locate the correct file. Fill out the payment section and send it in through the U.S. mail.

Federal land records are a resource that should not be overlooked. Thanks to their free and easy access on the web, there is no excuse for leaving this stone unturned. You never know when a simple database query will lead to a significant research breakthrough like locating your ancestor's homestead land records.

## 14 MILITARY RECORDS

### Nature of War

Wars and armed military conflicts seem to be as old as time. I can picture marauding bands of cave men solving territorial disputes by killing each other with rocks and sticks at the dawn of mankind.

This might makes right mentality seems to be a basic component of our human nature and employed as the primary method for solving disputes. This is evident in the historical record of seemingly endless warfare throughout time.

### Military Records: A Goldmine for Genealogists

Fortunately, as genealogists we can use the artifacts of these wars as a tool for learning about our ancestors. Military conflicts generate a tremendous amount of paperwork considering the logistics of signing up, supplying, managing, paying and discharging large numbers of people. A significant amount of valuable information can be extracted from the various types of military records kept.

For the male ancestors in your family tree, it is important to consider if they served in the military conflicts of their time. Always assume that they were involved until you can make certain that they were not through careful research.

The first step is to understand the time periods of the various wars and conflicts to see if your ancestor was of age to participate in that war. You can download a handy War Service Reference Guide from Family Tree Magazine (<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/cheatsheet/recordreferences/>) which provides a timeline view of US conflicts plus a birth date chart to help determine which major war your ancestor likely served in.

The next goal is to find the branch of service to which your ancestor belonged and the unit in which he served. Detailed unit histories exist on most units that operated in war time, but it may take quite a bit of digging to find the unit you are looking for. If your ancestor was an officer and graduated from a military academy, there are likely a lot of detailed records kept by the academy.

### Locating U.S. Military Records

Below is a selection of some of the largest collections of military records available so you can use your research time most effectively. It is by no means an exhaustive list of resources; there are literally thousands of places across the country where military records are stored. Just keep in mind that locating your ancestors' military records is part of the challenge and thrill of doing genealogy research. If all military related records were conveniently located in one convenient collection, what would be the fun in that?

### **Fold3**

<https://www.fold3.com/>

Fold3 is the web's premier collection of original military documents, with more than 460 million records from the National Archives and other partner locations. Fold3 is a subscription site, but may be worth the several dollars a month fee if you have a lot of military research to do. Also, you can get free access at Family History Library affiliated Family History Centers. They have vast collections of pension files with images and compiled service records.

### **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Nationwide Gravesite Locator**

<https://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/index.html>

If your ancestor was buried in a veteran's cemetery, he is likely to show up on this list. Wives of veterans can also be found using this resource if they were buried with their veteran husband. In these cases, graves are stacked or ashes interred together.

### **U.S. National Archives**

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/>

The U.S. National Archives are the primary source for many military veteran records.

### **Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org**

These genealogy record repositories have military collections and are a great place to find draft registration records. Draft registration records are popular because they cast a wide net that captures a majority of the male population living at the time of the draft.

### **Cyndi's List- Military Category**

<https://www.cyndislist.com/us/military/>

There are many more military records both online and in libraries, archives and other repositories. Cyndi's list is a great place to get an overview of what resources are available online.

The bottom line is that military records are widely dispersed and will require some significant digging. Some of the earliest records (pre-Revolutionary War) are located in state and local archives. Just keep on searching and following the clues that you uncover along the way.

## 15 GOOGLE PATENTS

Do you have an inventor hiding in your family tree? The only way to be sure is to search the massive online patent database created by Google.

Since access is free, there is no good reason not to spend a few minutes looking for your family members. Even if you have no knowledge of any inventors in your family, the ease at which this massive database can be searched certainly qualifies it as “low hanging fruit” for genealogists.

### Finding a Family Inventor in Google Patents

The Google Patents service, launched in 2006, makes available more than 87 million granted patents and patent applications from numerous sources around the globe. The patent database can be searched at <https://www.google.com/patents> or by using the advanced search at [https://www.google.com/advanced\\_patent\\_search](https://www.google.com/advanced_patent_search).

One issue with Google Patents is that their database was populated by using optical character recognition technology to translate document images into searchable text.

Sometimes, errors were introduced during translation. Considering the overwhelmingly massive task of digitizing mountains of patent documents, this is just a minor inconvenience for the end user.

## My Experience

To my surprise, when I searched Google Patents for my Hoesl family members, I ran across a patent submitted in 1964 by my uncle Gerald.

The patent concerned a novel design for a flashlight that eliminated the elongated casing that normally supports the batteries and serves as a handle. The new design, which uses an armature to support the batteries, was thought to reduce the cost of manufacturing the flashlight significantly.

My guess is that flashlights of 1960's vintage had handles constructed of metal with a threaded end to receive the bulb assembly. Savings in manufacturing costs was likely a real concern in those days, but with today's inexpensive injection molded plastics, flashlights are so cheap now that they can be purchased in dollar stores.

This fact in no way dampens the enthusiasm I felt in discovering his patent. I can only assume that this patent meant a lot to my uncle considering the labor required to capture his idea and the expense of employing a patent attorney to help push his patent through the several-year long approval process.

Google Patents is a must stop for any family researcher. In a matter of minutes, you can do a name search for each of your ancestors. You just never know when you will strike gold with a minimal time investment. You owe it to yourself to make sure that no inventors in your family go unrecognized.

Paul Hoesl

Just think of the great story you will have to share at the family Thanksgiving table this year!

## 16 GETTING HELP FINDING RECORDS

Everyone who has been doing genealogy for a while has run into trouble locating certain kinds of genealogy records. Family researchers often don't know where to turn for guidance on finding records; this is a common occurrence. Even practicing genealogist are not experts in every kind of record.

When they try to stretch their research beyond what can be found online, they hit roadblocks in their search. Instead of getting frustrated and giving up altogether, consider following the advice in this chapter. It explores several excellent resources that can be used to push through knowledge gaps.

### U.S. Record Finder

Tops on my list is the Record Finder on the FamilySearch website. This tool has been designed to guide you through the process of finding dozens of different record types.

The Record Finder can be located at the following URL: [https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Record\\_Finder](https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Record_Finder)

The U.S. Record Finder should be the first place you go for advice as it provides free and easy access to a wealth of information. Just find the record type you are interested in along the right-hand navigation bar and click on the hotlink you want and follow along as you drill down your desired path. What could be easier than that?

### Cyndi's List

The Cyndi's List website can be accessed at the URL:  
<https://www.cyndislist.com/categories/>

Although not quite as well organized as Record Finder, the Cyndi's List website is also a good choice for finding records. Cyndi's List is a categorized and cross-referenced index to genealogical resources on the Internet created by genealogist Cyndi Ingle more than 20 years ago. You can search through the website's categories to find links and information on the record type you are seeking.

### Reference Books

If you fail to find what you are looking for using the first two web-based options, you may want to refer to hardcopy reference books. You might be able to find a copy of the reference books referenced below in your local genealogy library or you can order your copy of your own from Amazon.com. Both are good choices for guidance and deep wells of genealogy information; and worthy of your time.

Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources. 3rd Edition

The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy. 3rd Edition

If you have read this far, you should now be armed with some good research leads to follow. I want to wish you well on your search for online records. Just like when you go fishing, you will sometimes come up empty, even though you put out a lot of effort. The same is true for the search for online records. Don't get discouraged when you hit a dead end, just keep searching and you will be successful more often than not.

