



AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGY GROUP

JUMP START YOUR GENEALOGY RESEARCH

Taking the First Step

The first step to researching your family history is to think about yourself and what you already know. You know your birth date and where you were born. You probably have a copy of your birth certificate. If you have been married, then you know when and where you were married, and likely have your marriage certificate. You already have the first pieces to your pedigree puzzle.

The reason you begin with yourself is because you are the individual from whom the tree traces back. You are the tip of the upside-down pyramid that you are about to build, and each generation adds twice as many people to the pyramid. There are:

1 of you;
2 of your parents;
4 of your grandparents;
8 of your great-grandparents;
16 of your great-great-grandparents; and so on!

As you identify the family members above, you immediately have two new questions to answer: *Who is that person's mother? Who is their father?*

Start with the Basics

A **Pedigree Chart**, or family tree, is a great way to keep track of what you learn about each generation. The more you research, the more you'll realize how much there is to know about a given generation.

Because you are looking for the parents in each new generation, you might say that you are looking back to go forward on your pedigree. The more generations you trace, the further you have gone with your research.

*While the **pedigree chart** is a good indication of the number of generations you have researched, the **family group sheet** is the story for each couple on your pedigree chart.*

Each couple in your direct lineage gave birth to at least one child; otherwise you wouldn't be here. The easiest way to show this in a format that will be easily understood is to use a **Family Group Sheet**. This is a form with places for all of the important information. The family group sheet allows you to record information about the children of each couple listed on the pedigree chart. Write down your own name, birth date, place of birth, parents, husband or wife if married, date of marriage, place of marriage,



children's complete names and their dates of birth. But first, we need to get back to you: You may know a lot more about you and your family than you think you do.

These two documents become the foundation for genealogical research. As you work your way through your family be sure to use a new **Family Group Sheet** for each family unit on your **Pedigree Chart**.

As you are filling out these forms, here are a few things to keep in mind that will be helpful as you work through your research:

- Write the surname in all capital letters.
- List the dates like this - 3 Mar 1899 instead of March 3, 1899 or 3/3/1989.
- Write the "places" in this order: City/Township, County, State, and Country. Spartanburg, Spartanburg District, South Carolina, USA.
- Document your sources!!!! We will get into primary and secondary sources later.

Interview Yourself

To delve into the story of your lineage, start by "interviewing" yourself. The answers to your own questions will launch you on your road to discovery.

When conducting these personal interviews, we often think to ask only the basic questions. Some of the following questions may make you feel as though you are grilling yourself, but they should help to spark memories – not only of yourself but also of other family members. And that's the most useful information.

- What is your name?
- How old are you, and what is your birth date?
- Where were you born?
- Are you married, and for how long?
- When and where were you married?
- What are your parents' names?
- Where did you live when you were a child?
- Did you move around a lot as a child? Where?
- What were your parents' occupations?
- What is your occupation?
- Why did you pick that profession?
- Did your family get together often for holidays or special occasions? Who was there?

Once you answer these questions, you may be surprised to find out what you do know or, better yet, what you have remembered.



Collecting Documentation

Now that you've interviewed yourself - start collecting documents that verify your information. Specifically, collect your birth certificate, education, marriage & employment records.

Next, collect the same records for your parents. Use the Source List to discover all the types of source information you can collect. Use the categories to help you locate ancestral documents to help you discover and verify information about you, your parents and your family.

Finding Your Family in the US Census Records

The Census Checklist allows you to see if you were able to find an ancestor in a particular Census year. List those you are researching and place a checkmark under the year you were able to find them on the Census. Missing Census years may indicate a need to search for information in other areas.

>> PRO TIP: Use a File Naming Convention when saving documents

Standardized file naming is useful and will help you better identify and search for documents and images. However you decide to name your electronic files, choose a method that works for you and be consistent.

The following the file naming format is suggested:

[Year of the Document]_[Doc type]_[Name of Person]_[Location of Found Doc]

For example, your file name would be:

2005_BirthCertificate_JohnSmith_PhiladelphiaPA.jpg

Interview your Family

After you have asked and answered these questions, the next step is to ask similar questions of your family members. Interview your parents and siblings.

When you interview family members, don't ask "yes or no" questions. Instead of asking them to tell you what they know about "Aunt Janie", ask them to tell you about a particular family gathering. How old was Aunt Janie at the time? What else do they remember? By asking these kinds of questions, you may be able to jump-start the memories and obtain information your family didn't even know they knew.

While they may not know Aunt Janie's exact date of birth, they may be able to tell you that she was 67 in 1977 when the big blizzard hit. And once they have remembered that, they also may remember something about where she came from. You now have



something to work with! Remember, family history is a puzzle. Each piece adds to the big picture, and you'll find that there are lots of little pieces!

It's a good idea to interview any older relatives as soon as possible. Too often people are left bemoaning the fact that they learned interesting details only after members of their family were no longer living.

If you find yourself in this situation, don't fret. While it makes the research difficult, be assured it can be accomplished. If you find there's no one in the family to answer your questions, look for old records. Paperwork can offer bits and pieces of information such as names, dates, and places. Don't despair if at first these are hard to get. As you delve deeper into your research, you'll discover a number of resources.

Primary and Secondary Sources

As you collect documentation, you must know that you will find two types of “sources” used in genealogical research: **primary** and **secondary**. **Primary sources** are documents and records that were created at or around the time that an event, such as a birth, death, or marriage, occurred. Someone with direct and personal knowledge of the event wrote these documents and records. They may include vital records, such as certificates of births, deaths, or marriages, family bibles, military records, census information, naturalization records, and more. Because they are considered to be highly accurate, primary sources are preferred when obtaining and citing genealogical information.

Secondary sources are documents and records that were not created at the time that an event occurred. They may include old letters, books, oral interviews, and vital records for events other than that for which they were written. Secondary sources are often provided by someone recollecting events of the past and may not always be completely accurate.

Some sources may be considered either primary or secondary, depending on certain factors. For example, a family bible is only a primary source if events were recorded at or around the times that they actually occurred. A family bible obtained in the 1800s that lists birth dates or other events from the 1700s is a secondary source. A birth date found on a death certificate is also a secondary source. However, the death date listed on the death certificate is a primary source.

Be sure to make photocopies of all papers found (census records, vital records, military records, deeds, photographs, church records, newspaper articles, etc.) by duplicating them and placing them in a binder/folder and, if possible, also scanning them into your computer. All research on your family should be documented and cited (where you located this record) for future reference.



Things to Remember as You Research

- ★ Be sure to use family group sheets and pedigree charts. These are the foundations of your research.
- ★ Ask for help from your relatives. You will have to talk to them to get information - so get used to the idea that you will need to ask for information.
- ★ Don't assume that "no one else is working on my line." Ask around. Someone else in the family may have started their own research projects.
- ★ Look for maps of the area at the time your ancestors were living there. It will help you to understand the context and the conditions of their community.
- ★ Do some background research on the history of the area in which you are conducting research.
- ★ Be sure to use your common sense when reading family histories. If a source for information is not listed, be cautious about accepting it. Some information may be hearsay.
- ★ Be careful not to gather information on everyone with the same surname, unless it is an uncommon one.
- ★ Remember that many immigrants changed their surnames when they reached America. Others had their surnames misspelled by government officials. Other families truncated or shortened the length of their surnames. Be sure to keep an open mind when conducting your research for alternative spellings of your family's surnames.
- ★ Be sure to use primary sources, like: land, probate, church, county records. Do not rely on printed histories.
- ★ When and if you get *original* documents and photographs from family members this will become your master copy. Always leave your master copy at home when you travel to do research and take a photocopy with you.
- ★ Try to stay on top of keeping your records organized. You will thank yourself for this later!

