Getting Started with FamilySearch

• FamilySearch.org • Free account recommended •

Start with a research question

Instead of searching for everything about an ancestor, ask one specific question: "Where did Mary Johnson marry between 1880 and 1890?" Record what you already know: name variants, approximate dates, location, relatives, and the source of each clue.

Choose the right FamilySearch tool

Search Historical Records — familysearch.org/search

Search indexed names, dates, and places. Useful for quick leads, but not every digitized record is indexed.

Full Text Search — familysearch.org/search/full-text

Search words and names within transcribed historical documents, including some records not indexed by name. Check the original images and try alternate spellings.

Images — familysearch.org/records/images

Browse digitized record groups and image sets, including some that cannot be searched by ancestor name.

Family Tree — familysearch.org/tree

Explore the collaborative tree for clues and attached sources. Verify relationships against original records before accepting conclusions.

Catalog — familysearch.org/search/catalog

Discover record collections by place, subject, surname, author, or title. Especially useful for local records that do not appear in a general name search.

Books — familysearch.org/library/books

Find digitized family histories, county histories, genealogical journals, and other books. Search names and places within available full-text content.

Research Wiki — familysearch.org/en/wiki

Learn which record types exist, their date coverage, jurisdictions, repositories, and strategies for a place.

The Catalog: find records by place

1. Identify the place and time when the event happened. Determine the county, state, and country as they existed then.
2. Open the Catalog and search by Place. Select the standardized place entry, then review topics such as Vital Records, Church Records, Probate Records, Land and Property, and Court Records.
3. Open a promising title. Read the description, author/creator, coverage dates, notes, and film or digital identifiers.
4. Look for a camera or digital access link when available. Some materials are online, some require visiting an authorized location, and some are not digitized.
5. If no useful title appears, try a broader jurisdiction (county, state, country), neighboring places, alternate place names, or a different subject. Get creative.

Catalog tip: A county probate index may lead to a probate packet; the index is a finding aid, not necessarily the complete record. It may just be another clue.

Allison DePrey, MA, MLS • The Genealogy Center • GenealogyCenter.org • Genealogy@ACPL.Info

The Research Wiki: learn where to look

Search for a place (for example, “Lewis County Washington”). Use the Wiki to identify when records began, which government or religious body created them, where they are held, and whether online collections or indexes are available. Follow citations and repository links. Wiki pages are research guides, not proof that a particular ancestor appears in a record.

Search for a place plus a record type (for example, “Lancaster County Pennsylvania probate”).

- Use the Wiki to identify when records began, which government or religious body created them, where they are held, and whether online collections are available.

1 Define the question and estimate a date and place.
2 Check the Research Wiki for record availability and jurisdiction.
3 Search indexed Historical Records using flexible names and dates.
4 Search the Catalog by place and browse Images for unindexed material.
5 Check digitized books and relevant external repositories.
6 Examine the actual image when possible; capture its citation and record what you searched.

When a search comes up empty

Try spelling variants, initials, maiden names, nicknames, and searches without a surname. Widen the date range; remove restrictive filters; search a parent, spouse, sibling, or neighbor. Consider boundary changes and records filed in a different county. Browse page by page when no index exists. A “no results” message does not mean no record survives.

Practice: find a record collection

Research question: What probate records might help identify the heirs of a person who died in Franklin County, Ohio, around 1895?

□ Search the Catalog for Franklin County, Ohio, then examine the Probate Records topic.

□ Write down the next step and the collection title or link.

Research notes

Ancestor / question: _____

Place and date: _____

Collection / repository: _____

What I found / next step: _____

Remember

- FamilySearch is free, but access varies by collection because of agreements with record custodians. Sign in to see available options.
- Always distinguish an index from an original record, evaluate the evidence, and save a source citation (collection, creator, volume/page or image number, website, and access date).
- Website menus and access arrangements may change.