

# Tips for Tracing Your Family Tree from Expert Genealogist, William Forsyth

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The rise in easily searched resources that are available online has made the emotional quest of uncovering the stories of your family history increasingly popular. ProQuest historical content and datasets help in researching your family history. But navigating through the volume of resources may be a bit daunting, especially when you are trying to figure out where to begin.

With October being Family History Month, ProQuest took the opportunity to tap our very own genealogy expert for his tips on researching your family history. William Forsyth oversees ProQuest's expansive line of digital family history resources, and has dedicated more than 30 years of experience to building high-quality genealogy subscription products for librarians. Bill has led many initiatives to educate librarians in their service to genealogy patrons and the following are his expert tips on how to begin tracing your family tree.

## 1) List what you already know

When you're getting started, one of the most important things to remember is to work backwards. Many people want to start their research with a family member who was a Civil War soldier, or something similar, but that could lead you down the wrong line of descent. It is even more critical to work backward if your family surname is common. You don't want to spend a lot of time researching only to find that you were tracing the wrong John Smith. The best approach is to simply start with yourself and work from the present day to the past.

**Ancestry® Library Edition** has ancestral chart forms that you can download to help you while filling in your family tree.

## 2) Interview relatives

This step appears to be easy, but can pose a possible setback if you have relatives who aren't particularly chatty. Be sure to ask your family members whether anybody has already started researching the family history; this can eliminate duplicating work that may already be done. If you should be so lucky, speak to

the family member who started tracing the family history or get a copy of his or her research. This may uncover leads for you to research further. Older generations may know the occupations that family members held, where they are buried, and they may have other stories that you can search for in historical newspapers. This information can provide a place to start.

### 3) **Get death records**

This goes back to working in reverse chronological order. The most recent record of an individual will be the death record. For this reason, death records are much more common than birth records. In the U.S., death records are kept on a state-by-state basis; therefore, some are available online and others require you to mail in a request to receive a copy of the death certificate. There will likely be a fee (which varies by state and/or county), and you may have to provide proof that you are related to the person whose record you are requesting due to privacy laws. A death record will provide many clues about the individual: the names of parents, spouse, residence and where they were buried, their occupation, religion, and even cause of death.

### 4) **Follow death record clues**

Once you have the clues from the death record, you can narrow your research! Search birth records by date, in the county of the birth. The birth record will reveal more information to lead you down the right ancestral line. It is important to keep in mind that while the death certificate can provide plenty of helpful hints, it is not always accurate and reliable. The person that died is not filling out the form, of course, so the information comes from the person who is providing the information on the deceased's behalf.

### 5) **Search census records**

The purpose of using a census record is to discover and validate where the person lived and who is in the family. Many people start their research with census records. The census lists the individuals living in the household – even relatives, servants, farmhands – and provides their name, age, gender, and birthplace. It may also give their occupation, and whether the head of household rents or owns the home, and the value of the property. Census records are the most popular documents in tracing family history, but sometimes for one reason or another, you may not find your family in census records. If that's the case, there are other helpful records to try. Many cities kept their own directories, backed by private enterprises that listed the residents and their addresses. There are also the state censuses, which are not conducted in the same year as the federal census. It may also be possible that you're looking in the wrong county. County boundaries settled around 1920, but throughout the 1800's and early 1900's, boundaries often changed.

It may also be possible that you're looking in the wrong county. County boundaries settled around 1920, but throughout the 1800's and early 1900's, boundaries often changed. **HeritageQuest® Online** provides a digital version of the Map Guide to the U.S. - US Federal Census 1790-1920, allowing you to look up county boundaries by both state and year.

### 6) **Search local sources**

Once you verify names and locations, you can start looking in the local publications for stories about your family and the area. Historical newspapers are great sources of personal stories, birth notices and obituaries. Obituaries can offer rich details about the deceased's life, including the names of other family members. However, not everything is available on the Internet. You may need to do some on-site

research, and the local librarian can help. Local libraries may also have “mug books”; it was very popular for communities and commercial vendors to publish books that contain photographs and information about its residents, as well as history of the community. The accuracy of the stories can be questionable, however, as the content may have been embellished. Often, contributions to these books were made by the wealthier residents, because those who contributed were expected to purchase (or, help pay to publish) the book.

#### 7) **Don't forget Maps**

Maps can provide many helpful details while tracing your family tree. Resources like *Digital Sanborn® Maps* and *Historic Map Works Library Edition* provide the size and type of the family home, business or property, and can reveal other possible ancestors who may be neighbors.

Don't forget to check immigration records, as most of us have ancestors who immigrated to the United States at one point. Ancestry® Library Edition has passenger lists for all major ports and has digitized these immigration records. Also, don't automatically assume that your family changed their surname when they immigrated. Instead, it may have been misspelled on the records. Many of our male ancestors served in the military. Military records, like the service and pension records, are accessible in databases like Fold3, which includes fascinating stories and photos as well. The more corroborating records you can find, the more genealogical proof you have that you're following the right ancestral line.

**Need help with the resources mentioned in this article?** Visit the SWLA Genealogical and Historical Library at 411 Pujo Street in Lake Charles for assistance on these resources and other resources to help you with your research.