

Searching Your Family History: How to Begin

People have always been interested in their family history, and a couple of recent series on television have just increased that drive to know where and who they come from. New family history researchers begin with the question, "Where do I begin?" Well, before plunging into census, web sites, and family tree forms, I suggest you sit down with a piece of paper and write down what you already know. Then take that paper to the next family reunion, or get on the phone or drive to visit your oldest living relatives, and ask them what they know. You may find contradictory names and dates, but include them all. Just be aware that all of the oral information is subject to confirmation and/or change. Peoples' memories are notoriously faulty. You also may want to decide to work on one branch of the family first, but that's up to you. Just be organized in your notetaking.

Hopefully relatives will be prompted to find records in the attic, or the family Bible in the book case. Ask them to dig out birth, marriage, and death certificates, and make copies of them. Perhaps there will be photo albums- this is a great time to label them if that has not been done. There is nothing worse than a gorgeous old photo album with no names attached. It's great to end up with a family tree with photos of some of the people involved. I suggest you don't limit yourself to names and dates, but collect family stories as well. Photo albums are a great prompt for stories. You can write those down or tape record them (if you still have one of those old fashioned machines).

You may want to take the information you have and begin to record it on a family tree. You can make your own tree or find one online. There are some free forms, and some to purchase. The Ellis Island website is a good source of free forms. Be sure to identify the source of any information you record, for example, John Smith, b. Dec 20, 1944. Source, Aunt Tillie. Or John Smith, b. Dec. 20, 1944. Source, birth certificate. Otherwise five years from now you just might not remember where that tidbit came from. In every case, you have to evaluate the reliability of the information you find. 97-year-old Aunt Tillie might not be a good source of a birth date from fifty years ago, but even a family Bible might not be reliable if Aunt Ruth bought it twenty years ago and filled in all the births, deaths, and marriages from 100 years ago. If the information in the family Bible has been added in different handwritings over the years, it is more likely to be accurate than one with uniform handwriting. On the other hand, Aunt Tillie might be the only source of information on where Grandma was born, or that she did have a first marriage that she rarely mentioned.

An official government document is the best source of information, but even that could be incorrect. Recently I found a death certificate in our town, where the son of the deceased gave the incorrect first name for his grandfather, father of the deceased. In general, though, you can accept the information given on birth, death, and marriage certificates. Gravestones are not official documents. Even though the information on grave markers is "carved in stone", it isn't necessarily correct. After all, the dead person usually didn't provide the information on the stone, and it may have been erected long after the death. And spelling....unless your name is extremely easy, it is sure to have been spelled in various ways over the centuries. It is important to be flexible in your search- especially searching an alphabetical index- look at all the possibilities you can think of, and don't discard an interesting item because the name is spelled a little differently from yours. In our town we have many Ackerts, Ackarts, Eckerts, for example, and VanVechtens, VanVeghtens, and Pratt, Bratt!

Next week, I'll begin to list sources of information as you expand your genealogical search from family members to the written record.

Researching your Family Tree: Written Sources

In the last column, I spoke about the first step in family research, writing down what you and your family members already know, or already have in their possession- records, photos, etc. Now you are ready to move on. Thanks to information placed on the internet by many wonderful people and organizations, family research is much easier than even ten years ago. In addition, information is available in libraries, town and county clerks' offices, historical societies, churches, cemeteries, the National Archives, and the state departments of health. You may even want to take a class in genealogy- Hudson Valley Community College has a great one, fall and spring, unfortunately during the day, and local genealogical societies and libraries sometimes sponsor classes.

Basic types of information are census, church and cemetery records, vital records, land records, wills, military records, immigration records, and printed genealogies. Because availability of these records varies from state to state and town to town, it is difficult to generalize about how and where to find them. But two important types of records are available online: federal census and some military records. The federal census was taken every ten years from 1790 on. The most recent census available is from 1930, but the 1940 census will be released in 2012. Several major commercial websites have the census online and indexed. Heritage Quest is available at home for those with a Troy Public Library card, but the index is only for heads of households. Both Ancestry.com and footnote.com have the census with a more comprehensive index. They are available at some libraries, or you can buy a membership to use them at home. They give access to the original census document, and a transcript of the information, helpful as the handwriting is often poor and/or smudged.

The federal census is a great source of family history, but it gives different information each year. Before 1850, the census only gave the name of the head of the household, with just a count of other family members. Some later censuses include information on place of birth of each family member, years having lived in the state, etc. Because the census was done by a person going door to door, it often reveals family members living next door to each other. It is subject to error, as it's possible that information was given by a neighbor, or that the census taker was incompetent. Certainly some of them had horrible handwriting! It's great that the census has been indexed, but that introduces another source of error-by the person reading that bad handwriting and doing the index. One of my ancestors ended up with the most interesting first name of Andr3, instead of Andrew.

Moving on to military records, both Ancestry.com and footnote.com have the Revolutionary War Pension Papers online. If your Revolutionary ancestor lived long enough- past 1800- and was poor, he may have filed for a pension. Even if you don't have a Revolutionary ancestor, the records are fascinating to read as the veterans recorded the details of their service. The lineage society, the Daughters of the American Revolution has a great website at www.dar.org, where the public has access to its records of Revolutionary Patriots and, in fact, to many other sources of family history. Records of soldiers from other wars are available through the National Archives, for example the index to the Civil War Pension papers. The local branch of the National Archives is in Pittsfield, Ma., where they have great volunteers to help researchers. Check out all of the information they have online at www.archives.gov/northeast/pittsfield/. The original Civil War Pension papers are in the National Archives in Washington, DC. Be aware that the World War I pension papers burned at a fire at the archives in St. Louis in the 1970's.

In the next column, I'll discuss other sources of family history.

Family Research: Birth, Death, and Marriage Records

In the last column, I wrote about two main sources of genealogical information, the federal census and military records. Other sources are vital records: birth, death, and marriage. These records are a bit harder to get at than the census, and the location of the information varies with the state. I will use New York State, Rensselaer County, and the town of Schaghticoke as my example, as that's what I know best. This is such a complicated topic, that I will have to take two columns to discuss it.

The town of Schaghticoke has birth, marriage, and death records beginning in 1886, with strict rules for release of information mandated by New York State. No information shall be released from a sealed birth certificate. Information may be released if the birth certificate has been on file for at least 75 years and the person in the certificate is deceased, if the death certificate has been on file for at least 50 years, and if the marriage certificate has been on file for at least 50 years and the bride and groom are deceased. The time periods are waived if the person wishing the information is a descendant of the person in the record, or is designated by the descendant to receive the information. The town clerk may require proof that the person is a descendant. The clerk will copy the information for you, and the fee is \$22. You may find that other towns in New York State have records from an earlier date, and towns in New England often do.

Birth, marriage, and death records may also be on file in the church which the people attended. If you don't know the church your ancestor attended, you may end up checking with every church in a town. In my experience, churches are not wonderful at keeping records. Tombstones and cemetery offices may also have birth and death information. As I said in an earlier column, tombstones are usually, but not always accurate. If your ancestor was buried in a cemetery that is still receiving burials, there may be a cemetery office with more extensive interment records. For example, some of the cards on file at Elmwood Cemetery in Schaghticoke give all of the information that would be on a death certificate- including the parents of the deceased, and sometimes their birthplaces, as well as cause of death. You may get information from churches and cemeteries by writing letters, but, if possible, it is better to go to the site. Church and cemetery employees often have to put answering genealogical questions at the bottom of the stack of work they have to do. I suggest calling or writing ahead to make an appointment to see those people.

In the next column, I will discuss other sources of vital records for your family research.

Researching your family tree: Vital records, part 2

In the last column, I discussed finding vital records in towns, churches, and cemeteries. This week, I will discuss other sources of birth, death, and marriage records.

Every town in New York State has a town historian. She or he may also have some vital records, as well as other genealogical information. You may find information about the historian on the town's website, but a letter addressed to "town historian, town of _____" should reach the person. In the case of the town of Schaghticoke, check out the links on the town's web site. I also have an index to the records of the Schaghticoke Dutch Reformed Church, spanning about 1750-1840, which is not on the site.

Some vital records have been posted online. All of the major commercial family search websites include varying amounts of vital records: www.Ancestry.com, www.footnote.com, and www.HeritageQuest.com. The Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons or LDS) also has an excellent website, www.familysearch.org, which incorporates many church records. More localized information is at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyrense/>, or though the website www.usgenweb.org. In Rensselaer County, the LDS church has catalogued all cemeteries, with the information online at the website just given. In some cases, those with a library card can access HeritageQuest at home.

New York State also has birth, death, and marriage records on file in the Department of Health, beginning in 1880. If you desire a copy of the original record, this is the way to go. You will need to fill out an application form, available at the NYS Dept. of Health Vital Records Section, online, and send it with \$22 for each record desired. Unfortunately, it will take at least six months to get a response to your request. You could also go to the Health Department in person, (800 North Pearl St, 2nd floor, Rm 200, Menands) fill out an application, pay, and receive a response by mail in 7-10 days.

If you don't know the year of your ancestor's birth, marriage, or death (after 1880), there is an index to all of the records at the Health Department at the New York State Archives, on the 3rd floor of the NYS Education Department (the building where the NYS Museum is). Unfortunately, you will have to search the index year by year, though each year is alphabetical. If you don't know the exact date of the birth, death, or marriage, you can also pay the Health Department to search. The original \$22 fee includes a search of three years on each side of the year you request, the Health Department website quotes fees for wider searches, generally about \$20 more for each five more years searched.

As you can see, vital records research can be complicated. It often takes lots of work, time, and money to find the elusive information you need to complete a family tree, but the satisfaction that comes with completion makes it worthwhile.

Family Research: Land Records, Maps, and Wills

In the last two columns, I wrote about finding birth, marriage, and death records for ancestors in your family tree. Other information is available in land records and wills. Again I will use my town and Rensselaer County as my examples, though the research should be similar in other parts of the state. Other states may be different.

Why look at deeds? Deeds records property transfers, which may be from father to son or brother to brother, confirming family relationships. It can also be fascinating to find out where your family lived. I have guided family researchers to the place where their relatives lived. They find it very satisfying, uplifting, and illuminating to stand in the footsteps of their ancestors.

In looking for deeds, it may be important to know something of the history of the county and town where your ancestor lived. Most counties had a history written about them in the late 19th century, available at the local library or from the town historian. This will let you know when the county was established, and what land grants it came from before that. For example, Rensselaer County was created from Albany County in 1790. If you are doing deed research before that, you would need to go to Albany County. In the case of Schaghticoke, the area around the Knickerbocker Mansion was part of a land grant belonging to the city of Albany. Settlers who lived there until the early 1800's actually rented the land from the city of Albany, so land records for them are in the city of Albany. In the case of the town of Schaghticoke, from 1819 to 1912 the Pleasantdale and Speigletown sections of town were part of Lansingburgh, rather than Schaghticoke. Doing a bit of reading about the history of the area where your ancestors lived can save you searching in a courthouse or town hall where there would be no chance of finding any information.

Deeds in Rensselaer County are in the annex of the Courthouse, with the entrance on 3rd St, just at the back of the Courthouse in Troy. Once there, I suggest asking for help with the indexes to deeds, the grantee and grantor indexes. The terminology in deeds can also be difficult. In Rensselaer County, we are lucky to have a county clerk, Frank Merola, who is very interested in history. The courthouse also has a few old maps of the county. The courthouse record room is open Monday to Friday, and until 7 p.m. on Thursday nights.

Another source of land information is old maps. Just about every town had a couple of very detailed maps made in the mid to late 19th century. At the town hall in Schaghticoke, we have a map from 1856 on the wall in the hall, and one in Beers Atlas of 1871 in my office. The maps give the site of every home, with the name of the owner. This can be very helpful if your ancestor owned rather than rented a home. The federal and state censuses in the 20th century also give an address for each family, but usually only the name of the road. Road names and hence addresses changed fairly frequently. I know my own address has changed 3 times in the last 30 years, though I have been in the same house!

While in the courthouse, you could check out the wills in the Surrogate's Court. If your ancestor left a will, it can provide a wealth of information about family connections. You might hit the jackpot and find an inventory of possessions included with the will. In Rensselaer County, the court has an index to wills, and the wills themselves on microfilm. The original wills, also indexed, are in the Rensselaer County Historical Society, 57 2nd St, Troy. I would suggest going there rather than the Courthouse. The library is open Thursday-Saturday from noon to 5. The Historical Society also has a good genealogical collection. Check out its website: www.rchsonline.org or call 272-7232 for more information.

The online sites, from Ancestry.com, to usgenweb.org, have some land and will entries. You might find it worthwhile to check out what is there as part of a general search, but there isn't the comprehensive information that the county courthouse will have.

Searching Family History: Your Immigrant Ancestors

All of us have immigrant ancestors. The date they arrived in the US determines how to find information about them. The US Congress passed a law requiring manifests, or lists, for ships arriving in the US, beginning in 1819. For arrivals before that date, there are some books and web sites which have compiled information on immigrant arrivals in the colonial period. One is the Olive Tree Ship Transcribers' Guild. After 1819, the US passed many laws on procedures for recording immigrants, and the records that were kept varied, but between the National Archives: www.nara.gov, and the Ellis Island web site, www.ellisland.org, you should be able to find information on immigrant ancestors. It can be very difficult if your ancestor has a common last name, but the indexes to the ship manifests are at the National Archives, and the ship manifests after 1895 are all online and indexed at the Ellis Island site. There are organizations and web sites that focus on the details of finding a particular nationality of immigrant. Of course your ancestor didn't necessarily arrive in New York City. There were many ports up and down the Eastern seaboard, including Canada, so you may have to check the National Archives for non-Ellis Island arrivals. After 1895, the US border with Canada closed, and immigrants from Europe entering the US from Canada were recorded. There are indexes to those arrivals at the National Archives as well. The closest National Archives branch is about an hour from here, located on the outskirts of Pittsfield, Mass. The website is www.archives.gov/northeast/pittsfield. Check out the website for a list of family history classes as well.

If you don't know when your immigrant ancestor arrived in the US, you can get some idea from the census. The 1900, 1920, 1930, and 1940 censuses all had a question about how long an immigrant had been in the US. Of course, depending on the memory of the person, and who actually answered the census question- the person himself or a neighbor- that information may be more or less accurate. The census also indicates the country the person came from- though the names may have changed over the years. For example, "Austria-Hungary" means the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and may include parts of what are now Poland and Russia. That's why the naturalization papers are important too.

Once the immigrants arrived, a next step for many was to become naturalized citizens of the US. The process of naturalization generated a number of documents, another boon for family history researchers. Naturalization was usually handled through the county courts in New York State, so that is where you would have to search for information. One web site, www.italiangen.org, has a partial index to naturalizations in New York Counties, and www.familysearch.org also has some county courthouse records. Depending on the type of record, you may find information on where your relative came from in Europe and his family.

As you can tell, this topic is complicated. There are many websites that explain more about the topics I have introduced. The archives branch in Pittsfield has educated volunteers who will be very helpful. Your hard work will be worth it when you find the original manifest listing your immigrant ancestor's arrival in New York City, along with how much money he had in his pocket and the name of the little town in Ireland or Italy from which he arrived.

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Searching your Family History: Summary

Over the last six columns, I have discussed procedures for researching your family history. I hope I have given you enough information to get started, at least. Once begun, I think you will find genealogy rather addictive, and extremely rewarding. As town historian, I meet many people who plan their vacations around visiting places their ancestors lived, both to do more research and just to walk in their footsteps, see the vistas they saw. And that is just in Schaghticoke. How about planning that trip to Ireland or Italy to research there? My daughters have had a great time visiting some of my husband's Irish relatives. The internet will provide lots of hint on European research before you go.

Here is a summary of some useful local places for research, both physical and online. As before, I am restricting myself to Rensselaer County, but every county will have similar resources.

Places: The New York State Library and Archive, in the Cultural Education Center in Albany- census, Index to vital records, genealogy
The New York State Health Dept., 800 North Pearl St., Menands- vital records
The Rensselaer County Courthouse Annex, 105 3rd St., Troy- Naturalization, wills, deeds
The Rensselaer County Historical Society, 57 2nd St., Troy- wills, city directories, books
Troy Public Library, Troy History Room, 100 2nd St. Troy- census, newspapers on microfilm, index to vital records in the local papers city directories

Churches and cemeteries

Sites: www.usgenweb.org free, information input by volunteers, very localized
www.ancestry.com available at many libraries, by subscription at home
www.heritagequest.com available online at home with a Troy Public Library card
www.familysearch.org the Latter Day Saints (Mormon) website
www.dar.org the site of the Daughters of the American Revolution
www.rootsweb.org another free site
www.nara.gov the National Archives site
www.archives.gov/northeast the Pittsfield National Archives site
www.ellisland.org all of the arrivals at Castle Garden and Ellis Island

There are thousands of websites that may help with family research. Also, remember that every town in New York State has a town historian who should at least be able to point you in the right direction. And every town hall will have vital records from about 1880 on. Good luck!

Soon after these columns appear in the Express, they are posted on the town of Schaghticoke website: www.townofschaghticoke.org.