

Getting Started Doing Your Family History

Doing family history is just that: it is history. The story of immigration and its aftermath is the story of this nation. You will find in telling your family stories a similarity with other families—families perhaps you thought you had nothing in common with before.

In doing genealogy you want to do the easiest research first. But with documenting family history (both oral and written), there are always pitfalls. I like oral history because it is in talking with your relatives that you get the grand old stories to pass down from one generation to another. These stories can be as much a reflection on the teller as on the event.

Before beginning, consult a how-to book on genealogy. Most are very good and can tell you where to write for information and pointers. You just want to make sure that the book is current; otherwise you'll have your written queries returned to you.

Then begin speaking with your relatives and neighbors. Sit down with your siblings or parents or aunts and uncles. Ask them not only for statistical information (when they were born, who was grandma's brothers and sisters, etc.), but also what life was like back then. Ask them what stories their parents passed down to them or what stories are family stories carried from one generation to another. Growing up, most of us were continually bombarded with stories that usually began with "you have it easy now..." But these old stories are the stuff of family history. Genealogy is more than simply a set of birth and death dates. Indeed, if you start simply reciting a litany of necrology to your uncurious friends and relatives, their eyes will soon glaze over.

Having just stated all that, you must also be careful with oral history because memories fade and recollections are embellished. (After several hundreds of dollars in "genealogy DNA" tests, I found out I am not any part Cherokee—which my father always claimed was somewhere in the family tree.)

After you've talked and written to your relatives (perhaps one of them is already doing family history), you may want to look at your family Bible or perhaps other papers usually kept in an inconvenient box: immunization records, report cards, graduation announcements, programs from church or school plays or concerts, sporting events, etc. These are documents which give meat to the bones of genealogical research.

When you've exhausted all the freebies, it's time to put your time (and wallet) into the project. Write to houses of worship your ancestors may have attended, asking them for a contact person and a list of fees they charge for such information. Always include a self-addressed, business-size envelope so they may respond to you—not necessarily with your genealogical information, but with information on how you can get your information. [The same is true for corresponding with historical and genealogical societies and associations.] And be prepared to prepay.

These individual houses of worship, or their larger religious archives centers, should hold sectarian records such as baptism, christening, confirmation, communion, Sunday School,

marriage, and death.

Next you may wish to contact the county clerk of various counties (or the state vital records office if that information is consolidated) for civil birth, marriage, and death records. There is usually a nominal fee for this service since they are all government entities. Always be specific with your requests and state why you are looking for this information. Often you must be somehow related to the person whose information you are seeking. A birth record should tell you who the parents were and where they were born. That will get you back another generation.

In all these endeavors, be prompt with your replies when someone responds to your query. Developing a positive relationship with someone at a church or county office could speed things up a lot.

By this time you may wish to take a trip to a genealogical collection (like [HSP's](#)^[1]). At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania you can check newspapers, city directories, unpublished manuscripts, published family histories, cemetery/tombstone/undertaker records, published town and county histories, and many other resources. You can also read HSP's blog, "[Roots & Branches: Genealogy at HSP](#)"^[2], to learn more about new resources in our library, upcoming events and workshops at HSP, and much more.

HSP also offers free access to helpful genealogical databases such as [Ancestry.com Institution Edition](#)^[3], [Pennsylvania's Historical Newspaper Collection](#)^[4], and [Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice: 1490-2007](#)^[5]. HSP also has free access to [JSTOR](#)^[6] (a database of thousands of journal articles).

Other great resources are the regional branches of the National Archives and the local Family History Libraries of the LDS Church. The LDS Church also maintains a free website called [FamilySearch.org](#)^[7], which is very helpful and user friendly.

However, do be careful about information posted on genealogical sites by individuals. They are not vetted by the hosting website and people often repeat incorrect information. For instance, one of my relatives is listed as being buried in four different states. Another time, a client I was working for was looking for a relative buried in Adamstown, Pitcairn Island (as in the South Pacific). One of these databases listed it as Adamstown, Lancaster County (as in Pennsylvania).

In 2006, the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania (GSP) donated its library and archives to HSP, including scrapbooks and family history folders containing original research pertaining to thousands of family lines. One of the products of many years of loyal volunteer service is GSP's [Manuscript Archives Surname Index](#)^[8]. This database indexes GSP's Bible Records, Family, Edward Hocker, Warren Ely, and Albert Gerberich collections—all now part of HSP's manuscript holdings. Many GSP items are listed in our [Discover online catalog](#)^[9]; other items are indexed solely in GSP's [Manuscript Archives Surname Index](#)^[8]. You should search both resources for a surname that interests you.

In 2002 the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies merged with HSP and virtually overnight our shelves were filled to capacity. Besides being the foremost library in the country for ethnic and immigration research, these Balch collections have also been used by genealogists. One example is a researcher from North Carolina who discovered that her ancestors (the Gondos family) had donated a collection of their papers to the Balch. She was able to travel to

Hungary and meet members of her extended family as a result of the information she gained from HSP. She wrote, "It has been an incredible experience to learn more about my ancestors and about the accomplishments and struggles that they went through in their experiences as immigrants in the United States."

Another useful aspect of Balch collections are the fraternal organization records which contain death claim information. Examples of these, now at HSP, include the Russian Brotherhood Organization [10], Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union [11], and the National Slovak Society [12].

So, whether you use the services of our highly-trained staff in person [1], or take advantage of our Research-by-Mail [13] or Ready Reference [14] programs, you have the ability to verify (or debunk) all that family lore and miscellaneous information you have been told.

But that's not the only reason for doing genealogy. Another reason is that none of us here is here solely through individual accomplishments. Somewhere, someone paid a price for each of us to be here. The poet Maya Angelou writes, "Each of you, descendant of some passed on traveler, has been paid for." It could be a goal for you to find that ancestor and determine just what price they paid.

Searching and discovering your family history will also help you discover the history of this country. And it is in doing family history that we can find our similarities and build on them, and also find our diversities and celebrate them. HSP will be here to help you do both.

Lee Arnold
Senior Director of the Library and Collections

Links

[1] <https://hsp.org/plan-your-visit>

[2] <http://hsp.org/blogs/roots-branches>

[3] <http://www.ancestryinstitution.com/>

[4] <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw->

[search/we/Homepage?p_action=doc&p_theme=current&p_nbid=T5ED62HYMTM3ODM4NTM2Ni43NzU5](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Homepage?p_action=doc&p_theme=current&p_nbid=T5ED62HYMTM3ODM4NTM2Ni43NzU5)

[5] <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk/Default.aspx>

[6] <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=pennmaghistbio&>

[7] <http://www.familysearch.org>

[8] <http://genpa.org/collection/gsp-manuscript-archives-surname-index>

[9] <http://discover.hsp.org>

[10] <http://discover.hsp.org/Record/hsp.ead.at01-3035>

[11]

<http://discover.hsp.org/Search/Results?lookfor=pennsylvania+slovak+catholic+union&type=AllFields&sub>

[12] <http://discover.hsp.org/Record/hsp.ead.at01-3447>

[13] <https://hsp.org/collections/library-services/research-by-mail>

[14] <mailto:ReadyReference@hsp.org>