

Step, Step, Step Backwards in Time As You Build Your Family Tree

Before you get too far into detailing your ancestor lines, as a beginner you will need to know a few basics to help your tree be correct, accurate, and detailed - one that will stand up to close scrutiny from other relatives! Take time and follow these TIPS as you step backwards in time, from the present time, to the past.

Hint: Write down the Source of your information in the correct manner on a Master List, with the correct citation style, plus the names and birthdates of the individuals described, as you go.



Tip #1: Work from the present to the past, the known to the unknown.

You know the most about yourself, your siblings, and your parents. Gather information from any original documents that you and your parents may have stored away, such as birth and marriage records, photos of family members including extended family members, newspaper clippings (birth, marriage, death notices, and more), education records, military service records, naturalization papers, and other memorabilia. Perhaps your father has his military information tucked away with a photo of several of his soldier colleagues or with a medal. Perhaps your mother kept a copy of her parents' records/tickets coming from Scotland, including the name of the specific ship, and the ports of departure and arrival. Start digging, but start with those close to you.

Tip #2: Next, tease out all gaps of information you see in your records.

Do you have a birth date but no details of birthplace for an individual? There's a story that your grandfather came to Canada a year or so before grandmother and 5 kids came; when was it that either of them came from Scotland or England? How did they get there? Do you have a death date but no note of where the individual was buried? You think your greatgrandparents and one of their siblings came together with another couple, and there's a story that one of those children married into the family, but who is who? And when? Aim for filling in the basics of Birth, Marriage, Death, Burial; later you could add emigration, military service if known, land records and so on. Use a Master List of possible documents/events that an individual may have experienced in order to guide your searches.

Tip #3: Ask. Ask all your relatives for information, copies of documents, and other details.



Ask your relatives if they have any old documents, or old correspondence from relatives in the "old country". Your cousins may have some old photos tucked away with details. An uncle's family may have medals of your greatgrandfather's military service. A cousin may have found a few interesting photos of the 1870s of your great-Aunts. Perhaps there is actually a family Bible with details going back to the late 1700s! You will never know unless and until you ask. So, ask!

Tip #4: Search in a circle around an ancestor's known residence.

In the past, families tended to stay together, neighbours worked on each other's farms, sometimes intermarrying. Also, when one individual moved to another state, other relatives came soon after. Take time to look up the address of a known ancestor on old maps, then search for relatives in a circle of 50 miles. You may find even more relatives with this method. Also, it was common for adult children to live close to one's parents, so that by 3 generations you may uncover all brothers and sisters and their families using this search method. I have found young adult brothers living in a boarding situation several streets over from their parents' family home. The 1850 Census of a town or village may cover as few as 20-50 pages. You will be able to quickly scan these pages, once you are familiar with the census-taker's writing style.

Tip #5: Search one family line at a time.

By the time you are looking at your *grandfather's grandfather*, you are at 5 generations with 8 separate family lines listed. Don't get confused and distracted by doing bits and pieces of all 8 of these family lines - it's simply too overwhelming. Instead, choose ONE line perhaps because you think you have some good documents and family stories to support that particular line in your family tree. Methodically work backwards through from one family to their parents, through their siblings (brothers/sisters) and their families, and then backwards again, following the direct ancestor line. Fill in the basics again: Birth, Marriage, Death, Burial.

If you have a Family Group sheet record, you could note on it which specific information you still need to look for, considering questions such as where they lived, what decades they lived in, what world or area events were happening.

Tip #6: Celebrate and inform your relatives of your findings!

There's simply no purpose in doing this without sharing it with others in your family. However, the truth is that you will likely only find a few relatives who are truly interested in what you are doing and may enjoy helping in the research. Others may be very glad that it is YOU who is doing the research, not them, BUT they are interested in various tidbits you find along the way. Perhaps you could send out a periodic newsletter to your family and extended members, asking them to pass it on to others. Remember to include interesting dates/names/events/copies of photos, etc. Perhaps it might be time to have a family reunion, and share all of this with a larger group this summer!



Tip #7: When you decide to put a family tree online, THINK of the repercussions first.

Keep private information just that - private! For instance, your aunt may not appreciate the public information that she gave up her first child when she was 16 displayed in the family tree - even though you and many in the family know this tidbit of family history. Your stories and notes may be simply too personal and intimate for a public tree. Carefully mark the birth and death dates of individuals so that living persons' details are always kept hidden. If you don't know those dates of some of your relatives, make an estimate so that the person will be noted as living and their information kept hidden. Most websites which offer free online family trees have software that will automatically exclude living persons' details, but you need to find out how that works first. Usually you need to specify "living" on each individual's software notes. Check carefully BEFORE you upload a tree on an online website.



One last point about online trees: make sure that only one person has the controls to edit and change details (likely, you). Encourage relatives to send you any corrected details with the source information to make certain that it IS correct! Then you can update the family tree on a regular basis, for everyone to see and use.

In summary:

Start with what you know, keep records of all sources with their correct citations, ask your relatives to help, assume family members lived nearby and search in a circle, search one family line at a time, share your findings, and make sure your public tree does not contain private information. Enjoy your searches as you build your family tree online!

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