FIRST STEPS IN GENEALOGY

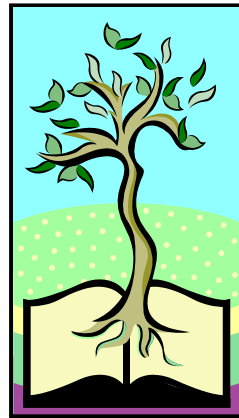*Suggestions for Beginning Genealogy Research*

Charleston County Public Library
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Suggestions for Beginning Genealogy Research

ONLINE BEGINNERS GENEALOGY GUIDES

RootsWeb's Guide to Tracing Family Trees

http://rwguide.rootsweb.com

About.com Genealogy: Introduction to Genealogy

http://genealogy.about.com/library/lessons/blintro1a.htm

Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet: Beginners

www.cyndislist.com/beginner.htm

Olive Tree Genealogy's Help for Beginners

http://olivetreegenealogy.com/beginner

Ancestors: Viewer's Guide to Getting Started

www.byub.org/ancestors

Be prepared to devote considerable time and effort to the project but the results can be highly rewarding.

1. **Start with yourself and work backwards.** Make it easy on yourself, you know more about you than about any of your other relatives or ancestors. Avoid the temptation to start with a distant rumored ancestor and work forward, that will add infinitely to your labors and may not be accurate information.

Also think about which lines you want to follow. On your father's side, you have a parent, two grandparents, four great-grandparents, and the family tree will continue to branch. The same is true of your mother's side of the family. You may want to start by choosing to research your father's or your mother's line first and then return to the other line at a later date.

2. **Talk to your relatives.** Interview family members in person or by letter. Ask what records or documents they may have. Particularly talk with your older generation relatives, while they are still present and able to share information. What you want to determine for each person in question is their full name, including maiden name for women; approximate dates for vital events—birth, death, marriage, residence, etc.; locations for vital events. Since most records are organized at the local level, location is very important in genealogy.

Ask specific question that will generate the information you want, such as "Who were your grandparents? Where did they live? Where are they buried? When did you get married?"

Some people starting out in genealogy find that trying to fill out a form, such as a pedigree chart, helps them organize their knowledge. You can print out copies of forms at:
—www.ancestrylibrary.com/charts/ancchart.aspx (available online only in the library),
—http:freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~ruthann/charts/5gen.gif, or

—www.pbs.org/kbyu/ancestors/firstseries/teachersguide/charts-records.html.

3. **Document and Keep Records**. Document your sources. You may need to return to that source or someone may want to verify your research. Genealogy without concrete evidence is hearsay. When you find information in a source, take enough specific notes on that source, so you can find that information again quickly and easily.

Also keep track of where you have searched for information, even if you didn't find anything. This can save you from have to search the same source twice.

You are going to be generating a lot of records in the course of your research. Come up with some plan for organizing your notes and records, so again you can find what you need quickly and easily.

4. **Search for Death Records.** There is no nationwide system of death records registration. Also most states didn't start requiring death certificates until the 1910's.

Visit www.vitatlrec.com. This site will give you information on the availability of vital records for every state, territory, and county in the U.S. It will also inform you on how you can order copies of death or birth certificates, marriage licenses, and divorce decrees.

Try using the Social Security Death Index to narrow down a death date. This is available online on both AncestryLibrary Edition and www.familysearch.org. Sometimes the SSDI provides a full death date, sometimes only a month and year. Not everyone who died with a social security number is in the SSDI, only those deaths that were reported to the Social Security Administration. The SSDI sometimes also provides a birth date.

The SSDI may also tell you the last residence of the deceased. You may wish to write to the nearest public library to that community to request a search of the local newspaper for an obituary. Most newspapers aren't indexed, so you will need as approximate a death date as you can get.

5. **Research on the Census.** The federal census for all fifty states is available online on AncestryLibrary Edition. The library has a subscription to AncestryLibrary Edition but it must be used in the library. The federal census is taken every ten years, starting in 1790. Most people start with the last census released, which currently is the 1940, and work backward. The census can be useful for confirming location, not only a state and a county, but where in a county, remember location is important in genealogy. Also when you find your ancestor listed in the census, see who else is shown in the household. These will be his or her relatives: wife, husband, children, parents, etc. However the census prior to 1850 only list the head of household by name. Please note also that the 1890 census was destroyed in a fire. The census may also provide additional information on your ancestor, such as occupation, personal wealth, place of birth for himself and his parents.

6. **Continue the Search**. Now that you have taken the first steps, there are many more avenues of research still to explore. For further guidance, check the library shelves around call number 929.1 for guides to genealogy. Also visit the online beginners genealogy guides listed elsewhere on this handout. Try some of the general free genealogy web sites such as RootsWeb (www.rootsweb.com), Family Search (www.familysearch.org), or Olive Tree Genealogy (www.olivetreegenealogy.com).

And remember, it is better to be looking for the dead, than to have the dead looking for you

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