
Getting Started on Your Family Tree

Starting your family research can sometimes seem overwhelming. Everyone wants to dive in and find those interesting ancestors—and the commercials make it look *so easy*. Well, getting started with your family research *is* easy—but you’ll want to make sure you start off on the right foot, which is a lot easier than fixing mistakes made by going too far and fast too soon. So, what’s the best way to start?

STEP 1

Write down what you know

Records for those who may yet be living will be sealed for privacy, so your first step will be to leapfrog to the records of your parents, grandparents, and/or great-grandparents.

Use the family tree on the reverse to fill in what you know about those in your family. (We’ve left out you and your immediate family for now but you can add the information into your tree later.)

You’ll want to record their names (record married women under their maiden name), dates and places of birth, and dates and places of death (if applicable).

If you don’t know exact dates, that’s okay at this point. Use your best estimate.

If they used any alternate spellings of their name or went by nicknames, jot these down, too. Keeping a list of alternate spellings will come in handy in future research.

The further back you go with this initial research, the better start you will have with your family tree.

STEP 2

Research to fill in gaps in your tree

Now that you have the basics of your tree, you’ll need to start some research to fill-in missing information.

Vital records are the records of major life events (e.g., birth, marriage, death) for a person. These records can usually be found at State Archives or the religious institutions where they happened. Vital records list information about the person and may even contain details about immediate family, addresses, ages, birth dates, citizenship/nationality, and ethnicity. (When requesting vital records ask for the long form.) Many government vital records are kept private and made public once a specified amount of time has passed—usually between 70 and 100 years after the event.

In many states, vital records can be ordered online or you can visit your State Archives in person.

For more recent records you will need to contact the Department of Health for the state where the event took place. Many may be ordered online but note that you may need to provide proof of relationship to the person. See www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm

You may also find a lot online, including censuses, directories, military, immigration, etc., at websites such as Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, or FamilySearch.org. Some of these sites are free while others charge a monthly subscription fee. You can use a number of these websites for free at the Ridgewood Public Library in Ridgewood, NJ (subscriptions are sponsored in part by the GSBC).

STEP 3

Start building your tree

Once you have all the basic information in order, now is the time to start diving into the wide array of online sites, visiting your local genealogy library, and expanding your research skills. You’re well on your way to discovering what makes your family unique and learning about the times your ancestors lived in.

But be forewarned, genealogy research can be addictive!

WHERE DO MANY RESEARCHERS SLIP UP?

There are a huge number of online resources available, with more being launched every day.

It is estimated by some professional genealogists that about 80% of trees found online have serious errors, bad information, and/or mistakes copied from other trees. A mistake may be something as simple as linking to someone who turns out to be an unrelated person with the same name. Many beginner researchers have started off on the wrong foot, and tracing the wrong family, through simple mistakes. It’s always best to do your own research and take the time to get it right from the start.

The steps provided on this worksheet can help you gather enough information so that you can link your family to the correct people in the other records. You’ll need to make a leap over the 70–100 year time-frame where records are not publicly available—which is why the first steps of your research are so important.



The practice of genealogy is one which is constantly evolving and can be a lifelong, fun endeavor. The Genealogical Society of Bergen County (GSBC), NJ, is a non-profit organization run entirely by passionate volunteers and is dedicated to helping researchers explore their family history and grow their research skills. We offer talks, programs, and classes; access to online subscription databases; an excellent genealogical reference library; an informative quarterly newsletter, website, and E-News; fun events and tours; complimentary sessions with GSBC Genealogy Consultants—and many more resources to help you with your research.

Whether you reside in New Jersey or are researching from afar, we hope you’ll join us. Find out more at www.njgsbc.org

GSBC Family Tree Worksheet

My Name

Date

YOUR FATHER

Name

Birth Date

Birth Place

Death Date

Death Place

STEP 1

Write down what you know

Start your family research with what you know—and the rest will follow.

YOUR MOTHER

Name

Birth Date

Birth Place

Death Date

Death Place

FATHER'S FATHER (YOUR PATERNAL GRANDFATHER)

Name

Birth Date

Birth Place

Death Date

Death Place

FATHER'S MOTHER (YOUR PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER)

Name

Birth Date

Birth Place

Death Date

Death Place

MOTHER'S FATHER (YOUR MATERNAL GRANDFATHER)

Name

Birth Date

Birth Place

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MOTHER'S MOTHER (YOUR MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER)

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THE GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY
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