



Berks County Genealogical Society

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HELPFUL TIPS

GETTING STARTED

Many people have a natural curiosity about their family history. They may have heard stories from older family members about a relative who did something remarkable or was famous because... They wonder how much of the story is true. On the other hand, maybe they asked about their ancestors, but family members didn't offer much information. That can be frustrating. In today's digital information age, many documents and periodicals have been microfilmed or computerized. Previous researchers have taken on the task of indexing records to simplify the search for individuals or families. With so much information out there, where does one begin and what information can be obtained from which documents? Let's examine the science of genealogy and develop a research strategy.

In research, the Number 1 Rule is to work from what you already know, into the "nearby" unknown. Finding a place to start your research is easy. Start with yourself and then work backward, one generation at a time. If you take small steps at the beginning, then you may be able to take much bigger steps later on.

During research, a genealogist becomes a detective by analyzing documents and piecing together bits of information to solve the puzzle. Information may come from a family member, obituary, cemetery, history book, census record, draft registration, another's family tree, or other genealogical record. Conflicting information may be encountered. Keep a record of all data until a fact is verified by a reliable source.

Organization is key to time saving research. Keep a log of your research. The amount of information can get overwhelming rather quickly. If you find a useful document, make a notation of where you found it (book, page, facility). This will prevent spending time repeating the same research at a later date. Organize computer files by document date and/or person's surname. Software packages are available to assist genealogists with research and organization of information. Remember, for each generation backward you search, your number of ancestors doubles. We all have 8 sets of great-great-grandparents, 16 sets of 3rd great-grandparents, and so on. In the left column, check out the **HELPFUL TIPS LINKS** for other topics that can benefit the genealogist and the useful forms listed under the **VIEW / PRINT** section.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Most genealogists will offer advice and share stories and research expertise. The BCGS Library is staffed by knowledgeable volunteers who share your interest in genealogy.

CLUES IN CENSUS RECORDS, 1850-1930

Experienced genealogical researchers use clues found in one record to find other records about the same individual. Below are some of the clues found in Census Records.

NOTE: The 1890 Federal Census records were destroyed by a fire at the Commerce Department in Washington, DC on January 10, 1921.

Date of Birth

The 1900 Census (column 7) indicates the person's month and year of birth; the 1850-1880 and 1910-1930 Censuses indicate the person's age.

The 1870 Census (column 13) and 1880 Census (column 7) indicate the month in which the person was born, if born "within the year;" that is between June 1, 1869 and May 31, 1870 for the 1870 Census or June 1, 1879 and May 31, 1880 for the 1880 Census. The official census day was June 1 in both 1870 and 1880, although the enumerator may have visited the household at a later date.

While the person's age is not an exact date of birth, it at least provides a "ballpark" figure useful (1) for tracking the person from one census to the next, especially if other people have the same name, and (2) for locating the person in any existing Vital Records.

Place of Birth

The 1850-1930 Censuses indicate the person's state or country of birth, which helps narrow the geographic scope of search for the specific town of birth.

Date of Marriage

The 1850 Census (column 10), 1860 Census (column 11), 1870 Census (column 14), and 1880 Census (column 12) indicate whether the person had married within the year.

"Within the year" means during the year before the official census day; that is, between June 1, 1849 and May 31, 1850 for the 1850 Census, between June 1, 1859 and May 31, 1860 for the 1860 Census, between June 1, 1869 and May 31, 1870 for the 1870 Census, and between June 1, 1879 and May 31, 1880 for the 1880 Census. The official census day was June 1 in each of these census years, although the enumerator may have visited the household at a later date.

The 1900 Census (column 10) and 1910 Census (column 9) indicate the number of years of marriage for each married person.

Number of Children

The 1900 Census (column 11) and 1910 Census (column 10) indicate how many children were born to each woman. The 1900 Census (column 12) and 1910 Census (column 11) indicate how many of those children were still living. These clues can help determine whether the researcher has identified all children in a given family, and whether any were deceased when either census was taken.

Immigration

The 1900 Census (column 16), 1910 Census (column 15), 1920 Census (column 13), and 1930 Census (column 22) each indicate the person's year of immigration to the United States. This information should help in locating a ship passenger arrival list.

Naturalization

The 1870 Census (column 19) has a check mark for "Male Citizens of the U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards." If the person was a foreign-born citizen, this means that he had become naturalized by 1870.

The 1900 Census (column 18), the 1910 Census (column 16), 1920 Census (column 14), and 1930 Census (column 23) indicate the person's naturalization status. The answers are "Al" for alien, "Pa" for "first papers," and "Na" for naturalized.

The 1920 Census (column 15) indicates the year in which the person was naturalized.

These clues may lead to Naturalization Records.

Census forms allow researchers to see the format and column headings for various census years (especially if the schedules themselves are hard to read). They also provide a clean and convenient method for extracting and filing important information you find. If you are able to print out the census record, just attach it to the census form. The forms also provide a visual record of how the information has been collected over the years. View and download blank census forms at www.ancestry.com.

VITAL RECORDS (BIRTH, DEATH, AND MARRIAGE)

Birth certificates provide generally reliable information, but data will vary according to geographical location and era. The further back in time likely provides less information. Births were also recorded in registers, large volumes containing the names and birth dates of every person within a civil jurisdiction.

Death certificates provide information about the person's age, place of death, occupation, cause of death, spouse's name, and some other relative's name. In the past, sometimes the ages were actually guessed and may not be accurate. Sometimes names are misspelled by those entering them. Be wary of inaccurate information, but realize that the data obtained provides a place to start.

For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the [Division of Vital Records](#) maintains birth and death events that occur in Pennsylvania from 1906 to the present. From the 1890s - 1906, the Berks County [Register of Wills](#) office may have birth and death records of community members.

Marriage records provide the sometimes hard-to-find maiden name of the bride and open up another branch of the family tree. The marriage application may also include the ages, middle names, parents' names, current residences, and occupations of the bride and groom. Normally, a marriage application is valid for 60 days. The Berks County Register of Will office maintains a register of all the local marriage applications from 1885 to the present including a [searchable online index](#).

OBITUARIES

The deaths of community members often were noted in even the earliest editions of the newspaper. Starting in 1797, the Adler, a German weekly newspaper, is published in the Reading, Pennsylvania area. Other newspapers in the 19th century included the Reading Daily Gazette and the Reading Daily Times. The first Reading Daily Eagle was published on January 28, 1868. In the early part of the 20th century, some obituaries would be grouped together somewhere in the newspaper under a "Deaths" heading. Other death announcements may be located throughout the paper. Starting August 27, 1933, the Reading Eagle first published a daily comic section, located after the sports section. Since then, the obituaries are normally found after the comics and prior to the classified ads. The first listings in the classified ads are the death notices. If the place of interment is not mentioned in the obituary, it may be mentioned in the death notice.

Some of the earliest obituaries/death notices included minimal information to aid a genealogist. Since the 1920s, an obituary most likely contains a wealth of information including:

- Names of surviving families members (spouse, siblings, children, parents) and where they currently reside.
- Parent's names including mother's maiden name.
- If a husband, wife's maiden name.
- If a wife, her maiden name.
- Date of death of spouse if preceded person in death.
- Person's birthplace.
- Street address of current or former residence.
- Age at death.
- Cause of death.
- Occupation and place of employment.
- Organization membership history.
- Church affiliation.
- Name of company handling funeral arrangements and person officiating the funeral.
- Place of interment.

The BCGS Library has issues of the Reading Eagle from 1868 - 1972 on microfilm. Starting in 1955, an index that includes the location of the obituaries is located at the bottom of the front page. The library also offers Reading Eagle obituary indexes of certain years and translations of death notices printed in the Adler. You can search for recent obituaries listed in the Reading Eagle on their web site.

Obituaries are not the only valuable genealogy information obtained from old newspapers. Because births and marriages were big deals and of interest to small town citizens, they were mentioned in the local newspaper. Consider the value of the following:

- Newspapers offer a wealth of useful information for the genealogist.
- Birth announcements - name of parents, grandparents, and possibly siblings.
- Engagement/Wedding announcements - bride's maiden name, names of the bride's and groom's parents, photo of the couple, and sometimes a description of the attire, flowers, and gifts is included.
- Anniversary announcements - couple's current residence, place of wedding, name of wedding officiant, name and current town of residence of children and grandchildren.
- Family reunions - names of attendees.

- Society Pages - provides snippets of visiting relatives.
- Funerals - visiting relatives, place of interment, and sometimes a description of the casket and attire.
- Context - many times, folks are mentioned in the newspaper throughout their life. It may be a result of participation in school, church, sports, organization, an accident, an event, a court case, politics, or receiving an award or promotion.

A worthy by-product of these searches through old newspapers is an understanding of what was happening in the area during that period of time. Don't forget to check out the advertisements, too.

CEMETERIES

A genealogist may find the place of interment of a family tree member from an obituary, death notice, family member, veteran's burial card, church record, or cemetery index. Previous researchers took on the laborious task to index tombstone inscriptions or records of a cemetery. The information may include an approximate location (section, plot) and a cemetery map may be available. Modern cemetery offices may offer assistance in locating the grave of a few ancestors. With the popularity of genealogy, many cemeteries now charge a fee to do this. Headstones and family plots in cemeteries offer useful information for the genealogist that includes:

- Date of birth and date of death.
- Length of life in years, months, and days.
- Spouse's name.
- Wife's maiden name.
- War veteran information.
- Marriage date.
- Children, parents, other family members, and spouse's family members may be buried close by or in the same cemetery.

Many genealogists spend time walking through cemeteries looking for headstones of ancestors. In addition to the digital camera (with extra batteries and memory card), they may carry a cemetery kit that includes the following:

- A spray bottle of distilled water and a soft brush to clean the headstone.
- Small clippers to trim the landscape around the headstone.
- Hand rake and hand garden shovel to uncover flat, sunken markers.
- Foil to gently press over a hard-to-read inscription. It will create a relief that is easier to read.
- First Aid kit including sun block, insect repellent, sting/bite relief medication, and sanitary wipes.
- Small notebook and pens for notes about grave location and hard-to-read marker inscriptions.
- Drinks to stay hydrated.

Genealogists use different methods to carry their kit including a nail apron, canvas book bag, back pack, bucket, cooler, wheeled container, tackle box, and wearing cargo pants/shorts.

Sometimes the abbreviation of an organization may be included on a gravestone. Find out [what they mean](#). Also, find out the meaning of [gravestone motifs](#).

GENEALOGY SOFTWARE

Millions of people have adopted genealogy as a hobby and even as a passion. People discover a sense of self-identity and family pride through uncovering their family's legacy. Genealogical research of your ancestral roots can bring your current family together by creating a project to which everyone can contribute. Whatever your reason for researching the past, genealogy software can become your most valuable tool.

TopTenREVIEWS offers information so consumers can make a smart purchase. They make recommendations for the best product in each category. Through their side-by-side comparison charts, news, articles, and videos, they simplify the buying process.

| TopTenREVIEWS Top 5 Genealogy Software Titles | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| Rank | #1 | #2 | #3 | #4 | #5 |
| Software | Family Tree Maker | Legacy | RootsMagic | Ancestral Quest | Family Historian |
| |  |  |  |  |  |
| Cost | \$40 | \$30 | \$50 | \$30 | \$47 |
| Comments | Read Review | Read Review | Read Review | Read Review | Read Review |
| Rating | 4/4 | 4/4 | 4/4 | 3.9/4 | 3.8/4 |

While all these software packages offer a wealth of features, only Family Tree Maker and Legacy can import data from online sources like ancestry.com. RootsMagic offers a free basic version of their software, [RootsMagic Essentials](#). MyHeritage.com offers a free genealogy software package called [Family Tree Builder](#). Users can upgrade to a premium version with more powerful features.

Let's not forget about the Mac users. The Mac version of Family Tree Maker also topped the list. Check out the reviews of the [top Mac genealogy software titles](#).

Some may prefer to build their family tree at an online site. Most sites require a membership fee. Many offer a free trial period. The popular online sites allow users to convert their family tree information to a popular format (GEDCOM) in order to download and import the information into the software. Popular research sites will be discussed in the next section.

POPULAR RESEARCH SITES

Before the days of the Internet, genealogists may have started a family tree by interviewing older members of their family and asking for copies of family documents and old photos. This may include phone calls or letter writing. They most likely spent time traveling to local historical societies and browsing page after page of historical documents for clues to their ancestry. Local libraries may have microfilm copies of old newspapers and census records for researchers to analyze. Don't forget about the long walks through cemeteries looking for an ancestor's headstone.

Starting a family tree today may involve some of these tasks as well. Fortunately, previous genealogists took the time to catalog and index information including church records, newspaper obituaries, and cemetery headstones. Census records, vital records, military records, and other documents are now digitized and searchable. Because of the popularity of the Internet, many of these documents are available to view at research sites online. Although it may be easier to research one's family tree, it still can be an overwhelming amount of information.

A host of genealogy research sites exist on the Internet. Below is a list of some of the popular ones as well as some review sites. Some sites are free to use, and those that offer subscriptions usually also offer a free trial period. The more popular sites allow genealogists to research their ancestry, build their tree online, and share it with other genealogists.

- Ancestry.com - many consider this the best overall genealogy research site.
- Rootsweb.com - a sister site of ancestry.com.
- FamilySearch.org - supported by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is the largest genealogy organization worldwide.
- Genealogy.com - is geared toward United States users. Access to international records is minimal.
- Archives.com - produces detailed search results, but lacks worldwide search capabilities.
- MyHeritage.com - provides excellent genealogy searching and family networking.
- MyFamily.com - build and share your family tree online at this popular site.
- usgenweb.org - Volunteers provide websites for genealogical research in every county and state of the United States. Everyone is granted free access.
- berks.pa-roots.com - the Berks County project of the usgenweb.org volunteers.
- findagrave.com - Search 64 million grave records at this free web site. Contributors submit new listings hourly.
- Cyndislist.com - Cyndi Howell lists a categorized and cross-reference index to over 300,000 genealogical resources on the Internet.
- Olive Tree Genealogy - Search more than 1,900 pages of FREE genealogy records to help you find your brick-wall ancestors and build your family tree.