

The background of the cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across the surface. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

BASICS OF GENEALOGY REFERENCE

A Librarian's Guide

Jack Simpson

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Introduction

At the Everytown Public Library, it is a busy morning. You have just opened the reference desk, and already you have:

- a new resident on the phone asking about recreational sports leagues
- a regular at the desk looking for the new Elmore Leonard novel
- a computer freezing up

Into this scene strides a patron with a pile of disorganized papers in his hand and a confused expression on his face. He begins to speak, tentatively at first but with increasing fervor as he warms to his subject:

Um ... Hi ... I'm trying to get started on my family history, and I was told you have good resources here at the public library. I guess I'm mostly English and Scottish but maybe also German. The German was my Mom's side I think, and then the Irish was her dad's side. But I'm interested in my great-grandfather on my Dad's side because my Grandpa never really talked about him. There's some mystery there. He had the same name as me. He was a mine manager in Pennsylvania but also in West Virginia, but that side of the family is also supposed to be from Ohio, so I guess he moved around. He died when my Grandpa was young. Then, my Grandpa married my Grandma, who was also from Ohio, and her family had a general store

This is when panic sets in. You are unsure of how to help this patron, and if you do not do something, the stream-of-consciousness recital of the family epic might go on for hours.

The goal of this book is to replace your panic with a basic strategy for helping genealogy researchers.

Genealogy has long been an extremely popular subject for research, but the role of public libraries has changed a great deal in the last 10 years. Before the Internet,

many public libraries had fairly sparse genealogy holdings: basic guides, reference books, and genealogy materials on the local community. Researchers who wanted to do in-depth genealogical research had to travel to specialized institutions.

With the creation of free resources on the Internet (such as the Ellis Island database) and subscription services (such as HeritageQuest Online), a great deal of genealogical information is available at the public library. It is as if each public library has added a new wing devoted to genealogy research, including every U.S. census, volumes of passenger arrival records, and thousands of other resources. For public librarians, navigating these new resources can be overwhelming.

This book is designed to help in two ways. In the first section of the book, I will outline a very basic starting strategy for genealogy research. I will use four case studies to illustrate the techniques and sources I discuss, but I also encourage readers to test the strategy using their own research. Empathy is an extremely important quality in a reference librarian, and trying out these basic steps will help you see through the eyes of your patrons.

In the final chapters, I will talk more specifically about genealogical librarianship: how to conduct a reference interview, how to continue to learn about the profession, and some basic resources for your collection.

In the appendices, I describe my four case studies with more detailed narratives.

Family history is a very personal and meaningful topic for many of your patrons. Although some pursue it as a light-hearted hobby and become addicted to the detective work, other patrons are researching traumatic events in their family history that have shaped their lives. Some patrons may be researching their family medical history or may need family data to apply for a scholarship. Librarians have an obligation to help all of these varied patrons, and I hope this book will help you get started. Although genealogy reference is challenging, it is also very rewarding, once you have learned the basics.

FOUR CASE STUDIES

To help explain some of the challenges and rewards of genealogy research, I will be using four case studies throughout this work. Here are short summaries of the case studies.

John Simpson

My grandfather was named John William Simpson. His father, also named John William Simpson, was a mine manager in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. I knew relatively little about my grandfather's ancestors when I began doing genealogy research. This case study shows how I traced them backwards for several generations.

Jeanette Winter

A friend of mine asked me to research her grandmother, Jeanette Winter. Jeanette's father was a muralist named Ezra Winter and her mother was an artist's model, born Vera Beaudette. This case study follows the Beaudette line backwards through divorces, name changes, and war.

Coleman Young

Coleman Young was the first African-American mayor of my hometown, Detroit. He was born in Alabama, and this case study traces his African-American ancestors back to Alabama in the 1860s.

Stanley Kubrick

I chose to follow Stanley Kubrick's ancestry because I wanted to include a case study of central European ancestry. Kubrick's grandfather was a Jewish immigrant from the Austrian empire. The case study demonstrates some of the difficulties of researching Central and Eastern Europeans, including surname changes and shifting national borders.

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First Steps in Genealogy Research

I prioritize four starting steps in genealogy research: getting organized, talking to family members, searching the U.S. census, and searching for vital records. Not every researcher will start with these steps; some may start with a wealth of information from other sources, whereas others will not be able to complete each of these steps. However, for the typical researcher, starting with these four basic steps makes the research process easier. This chapter describes the first two steps: getting organized and talking to family. The following chapters describe the third and fourth steps.

Four Basic Steps

1. Get organized
2. Interview relatives
3. Research in the U.S. Census
4. Research in vital records

STEP ONE: GETTING ORGANIZED

Consider the verbose patron depicted in the introduction. His question is vexing because it presents a large amount of information in a disorganized way. However, his recitation reflects how most people carry around their family history: as a disjointed collection of half-remembered anecdotes.

You have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and sixteen great-great grandparents. Over our lives, most of us have heard something about the lives of our parents and grandparents at family gatherings or casual conversation, but many of us were not listening that carefully. We were understandably more interested in hanging out with our friends than in listening to Grandma's stories of life in

central Ohio. This leaves us with a messy, error-filled story of the lives of our numerous ancestors. Rather than try to research in this morass, the first step is to organize the facts that we are fairly certain about in a simple way; then, we can build upon this basic framework.

One basic principle of genealogy research is to start with yourself and move backwards, generation by generation. This way, you are moving carefully from the known towards the unknown, from your own life towards your distant ancestors' lives. This strategy is reflected in the basic organizational tool for genealogists: the family tree chart.

The Family Tree Chart

Figure 1.1 shows a basic family tree chart, also known as a pedigree chart.

For a beginner, the chart starts with the researcher (1), the researcher's father (2), the researcher's mother (3), and so on. Researchers often accompany the family tree chart with a family group sheet (figure 1.2) for each family.

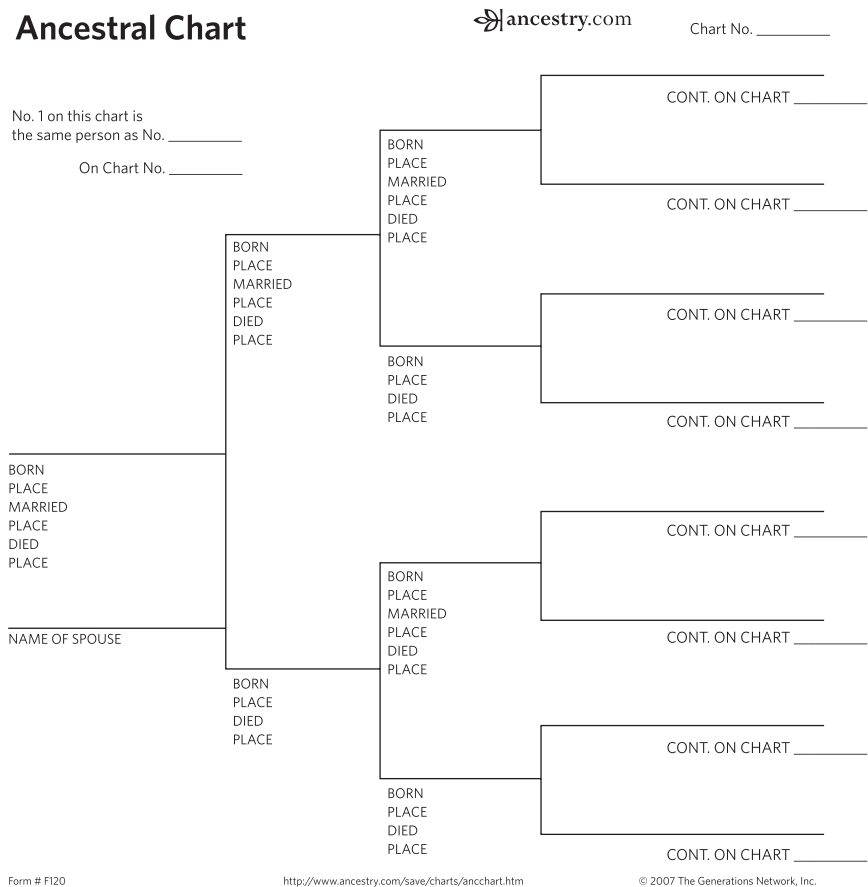


Figure 1.1. Basic pedigree chart.

Family Group Record ancestry.com

Prepared By _____ Relationship to Preparer _____
 Address _____ Date _____ Ancestral Chart # _____ Family Unit # _____

Husband		Occupation(s)		City	County	State or Country	Religion
Born	Date—Day, Month, Year						
Christened							Name of Church
Married							Name of Church
Died							Cause of Death
Buried			Cem/Place				Date Will Written/Proved
Father			Other Wives				
Mother							
Wife (maiden name)		Occupation(s)		City	County	State or Country	Religion
Born	Date—Day, Month, Year						
Christened							Name of Church
Died							Cause of Death
Buried			Cem/Place				Date Will Written/Proved
Father			Other Husbands				
Mother							

-	Sex	Children Given Names	Birth		Birthplace			Date of first marriage/Place		Date of Death/Cause			Computer I.D. #
			Day	Month	Year	City	County	St./Ctry	Name of Spouse	City	County	State/Country	
1													
2													
3													
4													
5													
6													
7													
8													
9													
10													
11													
12													

NOTE: Direct Ancestor Form # F106 <http://www.ancestry.com/save/charts/familysheet.htm> © 2007 The Generations Network, Inc.

Figure 1.2. Family group sheet.

Filling out a family tree chart helps visualize what is known and unknown, thereby identifying areas for research. For example, let us chart the disorganized reference question above. Now for some disclosure: that garbled story represents what I knew about my own family history when I began researching. Figure 1.3 shows that some of that basic information in chart form. (I have redacted some of the names for privacy reasons.)

Although the researcher’s question is still difficult, organizing it in a chart makes it easier to identify where he or she might start researching.

You can download pedigree charts and family group sheets for free from Ancestry.com. To find other paper charts, see the Web sites linked from Cyndi’s List (an online genealogy directory), under the category of “Supplies, Charts, Forms” (<http://www.cyndislist.com/supplies.htm>).

Genealogy Organizing Software

Many genealogists use software for organizing their research. There are a number of different brands of genealogy organizing software; FamilyTreeMaker, Generations Family Tree, and The Master Genealogist are examples of commercial genealogy software. Although each program has unique features, all are essentially databases that record relationships between generations of a family. Most genealogy programs support GEDCOM, a software standard for family tree files. The GEDCOM standard allows any of these programs to open any GEDCOM file: if you use FamilyTreeMaker, and your cousin uses The Master Genealogist, you can still share family tree files.

skill, and genealogists should read a guide such as *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Ritchie, 2003) before talking to their ancestors. Sharing the family tree chart or family photographs with a relative is a good starting point.

Research Using Documents

Following the steps above will help any researcher start their genealogy research. By gathering family information and organizing it, the researcher has a starting point for research in historical documents. The next chapters will discuss the most basic genealogy documents: the U.S. census and vital records (birth, death, and marriage documents.)

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