

Using Ancestry.com

Rhonda R. McClure, rmcclure@nehgs.org

Much of our family history research is begun or extended through the use of the many digitized records on Ancestry.com. And while it looks easy—simply type in a name and go—there are some tricks that help you to get much more from your Ancestry.com research. These tricks can also help you find people in records that you couldn't find them in before.

What is Ancestry Actually Indexing?

Just because there is a field in which to put information, it does not always mean that you should fill in that field. With Ancestry, it is important to understand what they have actually indexed, because you are not searching the record, but instead a man-made table of facts that have been abstracted from the original record that you are looking for.

Just a Name

Unless you are researching someone named *John Smith*, it is sometimes better to put in just the name of the person you are looking for and leave other information until you are in a specific set of databases. For instance, some records may not have asked for town of birth, and if you add that, you may eliminate the person you are looking for.

Tip: Test what Ancestry indexes by working with a family you know should be in records.

The information that has been taken from the records varies from census records to draft cards to passenger lists, and these records themselves vary in what was important to record. Additionally, the records themselves can vary over the years as they change with the times.

Understanding what facts have been taken from a record by Ancestry's indexers and are therefore now searchable will aid you in more effectual searching.

Tip: Remember that searching a name through Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org is not necessarily exhausting a census.

Understanding Wildcards

Wildcards are a way of including variant spellings that cannot be addressed through Soundex or other sounds like options available in the Ancestry search form. Most notably, Eastern European names that have a number of consonants that may not actually be heard in the surname or that may have a much different sound.

Tip: Ancestry requires three letters, but they don't need to be together.

Wildcards are a great way to include variant spellings without getting too many hits which would make a search overwhelming.

Different Search Options

If you are routinely seeing that each category has +5,000 entries when you are doing a search, this may seem overwhelming or you may be wondering if your search criteria was even considered. Ancestry offers two different search options and one of them supplies researchers with many hits that have nothing to do with the ancestor you are looking for.

Ranked Searches

This is usually the default search for Ancestry—especially if you are using a library edition. While it puts those records that appear to best match your search criteria at the top, many times, the number of non-matches is so overwhelming that researchers do not find what they are looking for.

If a name is unusual enough, this approach may offer a solid method of casting the widest net for evaluation. However, if it is a more common name, the number of results may be so daunting as to put off a researcher.

Match All Terms Exactly

When using the main search page of Ancestry, it may appear that you do not have the Match All Terms Exactly option. It is hidden under the “Show more options” link. Using this check box allows you to narrow the search to just what you place in the search fields. However, through wildcards and the search options under the name and date fields, you can expand the parameters without having so many hits that working through them seems insurmountable.

Keep in mind that when using this option, the search will do exactly as it is told, so it is usually a good idea with year of birth to use “+/- 2 years” as a minimum, since many of the records may have an age based on a particular time of year and thus not match up to the year of birth known to the researcher.

All or One

The main search page for Ancestry is a global search of all the databases Ancestry offers. It offers many fields—some of which may not pertain to certain databases. As a result, if you fill in a lot of fields in the Global Search you may eliminate some of the records that do actually exist, but for which some of your information is not included and therefore are not shown in the list of hits.

Narrowing down to just census records or passenger lists will also offer you fields that are not available in the global search, but do apply to the type of record you are looking in. Global searching is best done with a name and an approximate year of birth to begin. Then you can edit the search as necessary when you get

into a specific category (e.g., census records, passenger lists) or a specific database (e.g., 1900 United States Federal Census; New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957)

Browse the Records

It is always tempting to jump right into putting information into the search box, after all that is what makes Ancestry so great – they have indexed everything haven't they? Well yes and no. The title of a collection could be misleading, or the collection could be a “work in progress” as more years are added.

If you don't find your person and you are certain of your information, then you will want to step away from the fields in the Search Box and look to the right to see if there is a “Browse this collection” option. This is where you can learn just what records are in the collection at present.

Card Catalog

If you are interested in searching just a single dataset, then the easiest way to find it is to go through Ancestry's Card Catalog. This can also be a great way to see what databases Ancestry has for a particular country, state, or subject of interest.

From there you can select the database you are most interested in and conduct your search with the fields appropriate to that database.

Errors and Omissions

When researching on Ancestry, it is important to understand what it is that you are actually searching. Many believe they are searching the original documents. In reality, you are searching a man-made index in which the index entry has been linked to the original image.

The indexes are generally created off-shore. Indexing a list of names is quite different from searching for a particular name in a list of names. When you are searching for a particular name, even if you can't read the name on the document, you can usually determine that it is not the name you are seeking. When indexing such records, the indexer must try to come up with something.

Variations in handwriting, faded documents, ink spills, and more can result in names being unreadable or misinterpreted. In some situations, the errors can be as high as 40%.

Take a Look Around

Because Ancestry links documents to the indexes, researchers often do not take the time to see what else is on the page or more importantly if there are other pages that pertain to the ancestor being sought. When viewing a record that has been accessed through a search, take a moment to look at the pages before and after the specific document.

Tip: Take advantage of the film strip option to see smaller versions of up to 10 images.

The more familiar you can get with how things are arranged, the more effective your research efforts will be.

Review

To be effective with your research on Ancestry, keep in mind:

- What information in the record is in Ancestry's index?
- Can you expand your search through wild cards?
- Would searching a specific database offer better search options?
- Could errors in transcription be the cause of a negative search?