

Getting the Most from FamilySearch.org

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Much of our family history research can be extended using the many digitized records on FamilySearch.org. And while it looks easy—simply type in a name and go—the reality is that many of the resources that have now been digitized on FamilySearch.org are not indexed. They require you to view the images much as we used to go through a microfilm before these online sites existed.

While FamilySearch.org is freely available, it does still require you to create a log in before you can truly take advantage of the bulk of what is online.

Understanding FamilySearch.org

FamilySearch.org is the internet arm of the Family History Library located in Salt Lake City. Under the auspices of the Genealogical Society of Utah—the microfilming division of the library, which is owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the library has amassed close to three million reels of microfilmed records from around the world. Many of these reels are now in the process of being digitized to make them more accessible outside of Salt Lake City, especially since it is no longer possible to “borrow” microfilms from the Family History Library like was done for years.

Three options on FamilySearch.org are perhaps the most used avenues of research for family historians, and are located under the Search option on the front page of FamilySearch.org:

- Records
- Catalog
- Wiki

Searching Records

There are a variety of ways in which to search the records on FamilySearch. When the Records option is selected from the Search menu, researchers are presented with a Search Database Box on the left and an interactive map on the right. It is also possible to use the *Browse all published collections* to look for a specific digitized collection. The collections are constantly being added to and in some instances changes in legal agreements between the Family History Library and the repository that owns the records, sometimes a collection may be altered or disappear altogether.

When browsing the various collections, you will see three options to the left of the title of the collection:

No icon

Indicates these records are abstracts and no digital images exist at present



Indicates the images are available and the collection has been indexed and is searchable



Indicates that the records have been indexed and are searchable on FamilySearch.org but the images are on a partner site.

Additional information includes the number of records (if indexed), or the phrase *browse images* (if the collection has not been indexed yet) along with the date the collection was last updated.

Tip: Compare the number of records and the number of images that can be browsed when trying to determine how complete a collection is in regard to indexed names.

While wildcards are often used on other sites including Ancestry.com to broaden the search for an ancestor whose name may have been spelled differently from the way in which you were aware, FamilySearch.org offers a fuzzy logic algorithm that will look for variants of given names without your having to do anything.

Blind searching – when you perhaps know the father’s full name and the mother’s given name—can be applied in the Search Records box to often identify additional children in other records. This can be especially useful if children “went west” allowing you hints to the states that they migrated to.

Tip: Don’t forget that some records may be classified under the United States rather than a specific state.

Searching the Catalog

Back before the Family History Library’s catalog was online, when family historians were preparing to take a research trip to Salt Lake City, they would prepare by working with a microfiche version of the catalog that was arranged by place, surname, title, and subject—separate fiche for each classification.

Place Search

As such, I still often turn to the catalog before I do any record searches to see what the Family History Library has on a particular town, county, state, province, or country and then I look at what might be available for me to access on my computer at home.

Note: Because so many records are classified by place, the FamilySearch catalog defaults to the place search, though you can change that to include other search options.



American Ancestors
by NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

Anatomy of a Catalog Entry

Each catalog entry is arranged in much the same way:

- Part I
 - Title of the records (usually including dates of actual records as opposed to a book)
 - Authors (town clerks, religious denominations, and companies in addition to authors)
 - Format (manuscript, printed book)
 - Language of the records
 - Publication (if microfilmed the year it was microfilmed by the Gen. Soc. of Utah)
- Part II
 - Notes about where the originals are housed
 - If the records or book contain an index
 - A link to looking for items via WorldCat
- Part III
 - Subject headings under which the records can be found in the FamilySearch catalog
 - Clicking these will show other records/books cataloged under the same subject heading
- Part IV
 - Film/Digital Notes which include break downs of the records if on multiple reels of microfilm
 - Default location of those records (usually Family History Library)
 - Location of the microfilm in the Family History Library
 - Microfilm number
 - Digital film number
 - Available formats

Like the Browse Collections found on the main search records page, the catalog also uses icons to identify format availability of the records:



Indicates these records are index and searchable – you need only click the icon to be taken to a search box for that specific microfilm



Indicates the images are available from home but if no magnifying glass is to the left of this icon, then you can only view them as you would a microfilm (no type in a name and find a record option)



Indicates that the records are not available from home. Clicking on the icon will tell you if they are available in one of the following manners:

- FamilySearch affiliate library (many public libraries and historical organizations, such as NEHGS)



- Family History Center (located in local churches of the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints)
- Family History Library
- LDS Member login



Indicates the records are still only available on microfilm requiring you to either travel to the Family History Library or hire a professional researcher in Salt Lake City

The limitations of access to records through FamilySearch.org is decided in the legal agreement between the Family History Library and the holders of the original records.

Surname Search

Searching by surname is generally best for surnames that are not as common. If you do a search of *Smith* or *Johnson*, the number of hits is likely to be overwhelming. However, if you have a surname such as *Willey* or *Sickafus* then you might find some valuable clues.

The Surname search usually shows local history books, manuscript compilations and sometimes family histories that pertain to the surname requested. Not all of these will be accessible remotely. Many published volumes still require you to look at them physically in the Family History Library. However, more and more are making their way onto the FamilySearch site in a PDF format that may allow you to download a page or two with the information on your ancestor.

Understanding Record and Index Availability

As researchers we are groomed now to type in a name and be supplied with records. And when working on FamilySearch, this is often also how the site is used. When working in the catalog and a magnifying glass is included, it is often assumed that all the records on that microfilm have been indexed and are not searchable. This is not always the case.

Tip: Not all images may be indexed. Use the results filters as a guide. Only see Birth and Marriage options? Then likely deaths were not indexed even if available on a film that has been digitized.

The NEW Catalog

The catalog that we are taken to when we visit FamilySearch.org is what the FamilySearch Library now refers to as the FamilySearch Catalog and this catalog hasn't been updated since September 2022. There is now a second, newer, catalog known as the FamilySearch Library Catalog. At present these two catalogs cannot talk to each other. To access the newer catalog, you will need to visit the FamilySearch.org Library site (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/family-history-library/>).



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Once on the FamilySearch Library page, you will want to click on the Collection menu and thereunder you will see the “Our Catalogs” menu item. This link will take you to a page that includes both this new library catalog as well as the catalog you traditionally get taken to (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/library/our-catalogs>).

The FamilySearch Catalog (the second on this page) is the one that you visit from the main FamilySearch.org Search menu. This catalog unfortunately has not been updated since September 2022. The newer FamilySearch Library Catalog (<https://libcat.familysearch.org/>), which has a very different interface, is the one that the FamilySearch Library is moving forward with.

At present there is no way to get the two catalogs to talk with each other, so it is always a good idea to search both to ensure that you have checked all the records and resources available through the FamilySearch Library.

Images

In the past the Family History Library had teams roaming the world with microfilming equipment to capture and preserve records wherever they were allowed. Today those efforts continue, except now they are done with digital cameras. Those records are being made available instantly, and searching the Images collection is a good way to see what new records may have been added for a particular place.

Searching the Wikis

Once again, before the internet, there were finding aids and research guides published and made available for sale by the Family History Library. Many of those are now available online, many in an expanded manner to link to other sites beyond FamilySearch.org.

The wikis cover any manner of research:

- Places and their records, including what records may be available through some commercial sites as well as on FamilySearch
- Word lists for reading and understanding foreign records
- Letter writing guides for reach out to repositories in foreign countries
- Paleography help

These are but a few of the options one can find in the Wiki. Most of the time the record availability for a town, county, state, province, or country is where most researchers are looking when they visit the Wiki.

Note: A Wiki allows individuals to collaborate on a specific topic creating subject headings and, in some instances, include source citations.

Because these are online and the online world is an ever changing, always fluid, place, some of the links to records or guides offsite—that is not on FamilySearch.org—may be broken links. However, if you know such a guide or record exists you can try using Google to locate it or try searching the home site to which you were directed.

Review

To be effective with your research on FamilySearch, 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?