

Getting Started in Family History Research

Class 2: Decide What You Want to Learn

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What do you want to learn?

- Research is more than “searching”
- **What:** make a plan to begin answering your questions
- **Where:** Online and other repositories
- **How:** General principles
 - Consult multiple sources
 - Gather as many records as possible about a family or individual that you can find
 - Track your work! (Research log)

Creating your Research Question

Create your research question

Your research question should be *specific*: identify a unique individual and identify exactly what you want to learn. Research questions typically focus on questions of identity (what makes a person unique), kinship, or events. The question should be tied to a place and time as all records are local and availability varies by location and time.

A good research question might ask “What are the origins of Elizabeth Powell?” but a better research question asks, “Who are the parents of Elizabeth Powell who married Martin Powell of Manchester Vermont in 1788?” The latter formulation places Elizabeth in the context of a place and time and focuses on a specific question of kinship.

Documenting Known Facts

Research planning requires you to identify key information about the subject such as birth and death dates and places, spouse(s), and children. These anchor the subject to a *where* and *when*. You also need to identify what you already know about the research question and how you know it. Here you are distinguishing between facts and family lore. This helps you determine what new information you must seek.

Background Research

Perhaps the most important step in research planning is educating yourself about the types of records available to answer your questions and what information they might contain. Genealogical resources vary widely by

geographical location and time period. Researching the town, county, and state (or country) where your ancestor lived is an important step in learning about what does and does not exist. Keep in mind that dates of formation/incorporation, previous names, boundary changes, and land grants can all affect where you look for records.

Tip: Anchor a question to time, a place, and a name

Ask yourself these questions while creating Research Plan

- **What are you hoping to accomplish? e.g.**
 - Looking for an event (birth, marriage, death, immigration)
 - Looking for a name (parent, child, maiden)
 - Apply to a lineage society
- **What records do I already have?**
- **What resources have I already used?**

Focusing the Genealogical Question

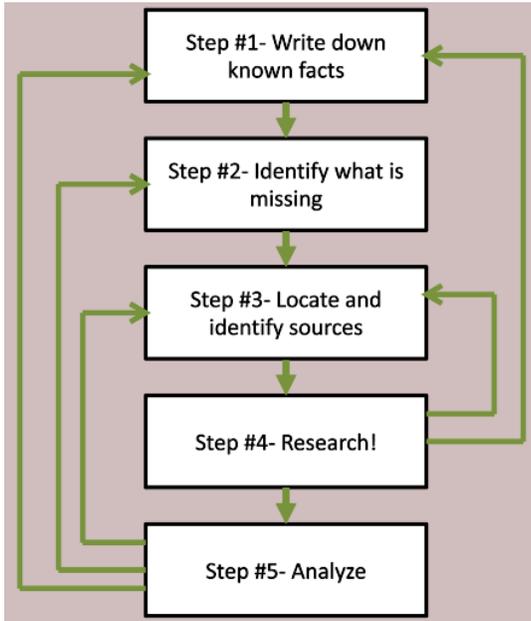
- **Genealogical Data**
 - Identity
 - Events
 - Relationships
- **For example:**
 - Who are the parents?
 - What is the date or place of birth?
 - What is the date or place of marriage?
 - What is the date or place of death?
 - What is the spouse's name, or maiden name?
 - Who are the siblings?

Do not get overwhelmed

- Try to focus on a single person and a few events for that person
- Set a time limit for your help
- Try not to fall down a “rabbit hole” with multiple ancestors.

Tip: Work from the known to the unknown

Rinse and Repeat



What is a research plan?

A research plan provides a roadmap for your genealogical research. It includes a statement or question that defines your research goal and outlines the steps to achieve your research goal. This can be a formal statement or document but does not have to be.

Typical genealogical questions center on identity, events, and relationships. All of these are starting points for developing a research plan.

Begin your research plan by defining your goal and determining what you want to learn:

- Examine the information you have.
- What is missing?
- What individuals or families are the most intriguing?
- What family stories have I heard/what legends have been passed down?

Steps for Research Planning

A research plan helps you think systematically about your research. A successful research plan focuses on a single individual or couple and asks a single, focused question. It includes the following steps:

1. **Determine Your Goal:** What do you want to know?

2. **Document the Known Facts:** What do you already know about the subject of your research and the specific research question?
3. **Educate Yourself About Records:** What records are available for your time and place? What records are most likely to answer your question?
4. **Create the Plan:** Use a template to guide your thinking.
5. **Search Strategy:** Which repositories have the sources and in what order should I search?

Tip: Download a “Free” Research Plan template from American Ancestors

Download various research templates from AmericanAncestors.org:

<https://www.americanancestors.org/tools/research-templates>

Instructions for Research Plan Template

- **Research Subject:** Write down what you know about the subject. Information in this section helps establish the identity of your research subject, that is, what makes him or her unique.
- **Research Question:** The research question should include a name, place, and time-period to help anchor your research.
- **What is known about the question?:** Fill out what you know about the specific question being researched. Identifying the source of your knowledge helps sift fact from family lore.
- **Record Dates:** For each of the principal locations of research, go to the FamilySearch.org Research Wiki <https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/> and find the article on the county, town, or state where you will be researching. Use the table in the Wiki article to populate this section of the form: name of place, when it was formed, and earliest record dates. Conclude with a note about any known record loss.
- **What is the working hypothesis?:** Record your best guess about what is happening, what the answer might be, or where you might find the answer to your question.
- **Which records will I need?:** Identify the principal records you will need to help answer your question.
- **Search Strategy:** Identify which sources you will search first and outline your search order.

Learning Standard Source and Records

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Source: U.S. Federal Census >> | Record: Household |
| • Source: Church Register >> | Record: Baptism, Marriage or Burial |
| • Source: Cemetery >> | Record: Gravestones |
| • Source: County Court House >> | Record: Probates and Deeds |

Vital Records

Tip: Use Vital records to answer date and kinship questions

Vital Records Caveats

- Birth, marriage, and death records
- Often provide the names of the individual's parents and/or spouse
- Depending on the state, records may be held on the state, county, and/or town/city level
- Privacy restrictions may limit access
- Certified vs. genealogical or informational copies

Census Records

Tip: Use the Census to anchor a person in a place and time

Knowing the Family in the U.S. Census

- **1790–1840:** lists only the name of the head of the household
- **1850–1870:** lists everyone in household, but not how they are related
Generally, can assume people in same household are family
- **1880–1950:** relationships listed

Canadian Census

- Enumerated in 1825, 1831, 1842, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1906, 1911, 1916, and 1921
- Online resources:
 - Ancestry.com
 - Familysearch.org

United Kingdom Census

- **England/Wales:** 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911
- **Scotland:** 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911
- **Online resources:**
 - Ancestry.com
 - Familysearch.org
 - Scotlandspeople.gov.uk

Ireland Census

- Survived and available for 1901 and 1911
- A small number survive for 1821, 1831, 1841, and 1851
- Available from: <https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/>

Naturalization Records

Tip: Use Immigration and Naturalization Records to Answer “Where From”

Other Sources of Information

- Military
- Newspapers
- Birth and marriage notices, obituaries, and feature articles
- Published genealogies
- Town and county histories
- Cemetery and burial records
- Tax records
- City directories
- Town records Tax records
- Bible records

Resources: Finding Aids

1. FamilySearch.org Research Wiki – Check for information about the state, county, or town you are researching - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page
2. American Ancestors Research Guides - includes subject-specific guides as well as guides about New England towns. <https://www.americanancestors.org/tools/research-guides>
3. Rhonda R. McClure, *Genealogist’s Handbook for New England Research, 6th edition* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2021)
4. The New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, *New York family history research guide and gazetteer* (New York, NY: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 2017)
5. Alice Eichholz, *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004); see also https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Red_Book:_American_State,_County,_and_Town_Sources

6. Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy* (Provo, UT: Ancestry, 2006); see also [https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/The_Source:_A_Guidebook_to_American_Genealogy)
7. Town and County Histories – check online. Many of these were published prior to 1920 and thus are digitally available online on Archive.org and Hathitrust.org