

Family Heritage Experience

 American Ancestors.

Family History Attraction to Open in Boston

The Family Heritage Experience, a permanent exhibition that explores the connections between us and our ancestors, opens to the public on April 25 in Boston's Back Bay

American Ancestors®, the country's oldest nonprofit genealogical organization, celebrates its 180th year by launching a new public space dedicated to the joy of family history

Boston, MA, March 18, 2025—The Family Heritage Experience, a state-of-the-art exhibition designed to inspire visitors to reflect on their family history and cultural heritage, opens to the public on April 25 in a newly renovated building at 97 Newbury Street in Boston, Massachusetts. A self-guided tour of interactive exhibits, unique family history artifacts, and original artworks, the Family Heritage Experience invites visitors to ponder questions about their own family's origins, journeys, and cultural traditions, and to learn ways to discover more about their ancestry.

Doors open to the public on Friday, April 25, at 10 a.m., after which the Family Heritage Experience will be open every Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults and free for children up to age 11. Designed to spark curiosity in adults, teens, and school-aged children, the Family Heritage Experience is especially suited to multi-generational family groups. Visit FHE.AmericanAncestors.org for more information.

The Family Heritage Experience is located at 97 Newbury Street, two blocks from the Boston Public Garden and close to Copley Square, in the heart of Boston's historic Back Bay neighborhood. The exhibition takes up the entire first floor of the American Ancestors building complex, which is home to seven other floors dedicated to family history, including an archive and research library that is open to the public.

"Most people are interested in knowing their family's story, but recent studies show that nearly half of adult Americans can't name all their grandparents. Our hope is that a visit to the Family Heritage Experience will inspire people to learn their origin story—ask who their ancestors were, what kind of lives they led, and what events and circumstances influenced their lives. This is quite unlike other museums or attractions because this permanent exhibit sparks a deeply personal journey that's also universal," said Ryan Woods, President and CEO of American Ancestors, the 180-year-old nonprofit organization behind the Family Heritage Experience.

The multi-structure building complex that houses the Family Heritage Experience will be named after American philanthropist and preservationist Thomas Bailey Hagen and Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates has made family history research familiar to millions of Americans through his popular PBS show "Finding Your Roots," which features celebrities learning dramatic accounts of their ancestry. American Ancestors has worked with "Finding Your Roots" since it first aired in 2012.

"Researching family trees has been a passion in my life since I was nine years old, and I am thrilled to know the desire to learn about the past through the roots and branches of one's own ancestry will now be greatly facilitated through the Family Heritage Experience in Boston," said Gates. "It is difficult to imagine a greater honor in my career and I look forward to the luminous discoveries that will be made at this landmark visitor center in the city I love and where

Media Contacts: Michelle McGrath, michelle@mcgrathpr.com
Claire Vail, claire.vail@americanancestors.org,

American Ancestors' Family Heritage Experience

I have lived and taught for over half of my professional life. May the joys of genealogy seeded here continue to flower throughout the generations.”

From the moment they walk in the door, visitors engage with exhibits that explore themes of personal identity, the creation of family lore, and the almost universal desire to leave a record of one’s existence. An early highlight of the self-guided tour is the “Wall of Questions,” which encourages visitors to ponder their ancestors’ life experiences by selecting cards printed with common family history-related queries such as “How did my grandparents meet?” “What kind of clothes did my ancestor wear?” and “I heard a family legend--is it true?”

On display are objects that various cultures and individuals have used to preserve family history, such as an intricate shell-beaded belt from the local Wampanoag nation, a patchwork quilt depicting scenes from African American family experiences over centuries, photographs and items that document Jewish traditions, and artistic renditions of Anglo-American family trees from the 19th century. Other exhibits allow visitors to explore events that took place the year they were born, learn how DNA test results shed light on genealogy, and listen to the family history research journeys of people from diverse backgrounds.

Woven into the exhibition are several original artworks that were commissioned for the space, which echo themes of memory, reflection, and individuality by a diverse group of local and national artists, including Yuko Okabe, Pamela Hersch, *Sisters In Stitches Joined By The Cloth*, and Fred H.C. Liang.

“The Family Heritage Experience really showcases why family history is interesting and fun. This is a no-pressure space. You don’t need to know the details of your family tree or anything about your family’s origins to enjoy your visit. You will leave knowing how to find out more as you start your adventure of looking into your past,” said Jennifer Zanolli, Family Heritage Experience manager.

Toward the end of the self-guided tour, visitors can learn more about ways to begin researching their own ancestors using vital records and other family history documents. A spacious rotunda welcomes visitors to relax on sofas and chairs and reflect on their past while viewing artistic interpretations of ancestral images via a colorful ceiling projection.

“After four years of planning, and two years of almost non-stop construction, we are delighted to welcome the public into the Family Heritage Experience and our new facilities this spring,” said David Trebing, American Ancestors’ Board chair. “American Ancestors has been helping people uncover their family history for 180 years, but the Family Heritage Experience marks a new phase in our evolution by creating a modern, dynamic, inviting space where people can enjoy learning about the one thing we all have in common: family.”

Exhibit Highlights

Who in the World Are You?

Visitors use iPads to place digital pins in an interactive 15-foot world map indicating where their ancestors originated, creating a compelling visual of journeys and migrations, accumulating as each guest passes through.

Wall of Questions

This exhibit features rows of 90 colorful cards with curious questions about family history. Visitors can choose one or more cards that resonate with them and scan the QR code on the back to find out how to answer the questions at an answer station kiosk.

Family Treasures Vault

Step into this brightly lit chamber displaying an eclectic collection of historic objects that document family history, representing diverse cultures, traditions, and spanning many different time periods.

Your Name, Your Year

An interactive, screen-based exhibit that lists the popular films, songs, sporting events, and trivia for the year visitors were born, and ranks popularity of a visitor's surname.

Story Station

A dedicated space in which visitors can listen to audio recordings by people of all backgrounds narrating their family history discoveries.

Research & Records

An interactive, educational exhibit that teaches visitors how to find the answers to their family history questions using vital records and other documents.

Other Spaces at American Ancestors

In addition to the Family Heritage Experience, American Ancestors is home to several other public spaces dedicated to the preservation and study of genealogy, history, heritage, and culture, including:

The Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center preserves New England Jewish history and heritage and advances the understanding of the American Jewish experience through archives, educational programs, scholarship, and public events.

The Brim-DeForest Library, made possible through the generosity of Brady Brim-DeForest and his family, is a historic space where members and the public can explore their family heritage through an extensive collection of books, maps, manuscripts, and digital resources.

The Brue Family Learning Center is dedicated to introducing family and local history to national and international audiences. Founded by Nord and Suzanne Brue, the Center supports the creation of programming aimed at helping anyone start or advance their family history journey.

Supported by a gift from Judy Avery and her family, the **R. Stanton Avery Special Collections** is one of the world's leading collections of family history materials, containing more than one million manuscripts, photographs, handwritten and typed family histories and charts, material with vital statistic data (such as town, church, and cemetery records), genealogical papers, family association collections, and original primary source documents.

Project and Donor Support

The newly redesigned space, which connects the interiors of two historic buildings at 97 Newbury Street, was designed by architects Schwartz & Silver and built by Shawmut Design and Construction, with exhibition design by the Experience Alchemists.

American Ancestors is indebted to the donors whose contributions made the Family Heritage Experience possible, including Thomas Hagen, Brenda Johnson, Jonathan Treat, Kathleen & Peter Van Demark, Joan & Ernst Berndt, Helen Condon Powell, Amelia Peabody Charitable Fund, Cheryl L. Edwards, Beverly H. Hamilton, and the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund.

American Ancestors also thanks the many donors, members, and volunteers whose everyday contributions and dedication make its mission-based work possible.

Visitation and FAQ

The Family Heritage Experience and the gift shop on the first floor of American Ancestors at 97 Newbury Street, Boston, MA, will be open weekly Tuesday through Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The facility is located near Copley Square and the Arlington and Copley Green line T stations. For more information, including accessibility and amenities, please visit FHE.AmericanAncestors.org.

Media Contacts

Michelle McGrath, michelle@mcgrathpr.com, 339.832.0820

Claire Vail, claire.vail@americanancestors.org, 857.225.8738

About the Family Heritage Experience

The Family Heritage Experience—an interactive, state-of-the-art exhibition that introduces visitors to the joy of family history research—was launched in 2025 by [American Ancestors](https://AmericanAncestors.org)[®], a national center for family history, heritage & culture. The Family Heritage Experience is located on the first floor of American Ancestors' headquarters at 97 Newbury Street, in Boston, Massachusetts. For more information, visit FHE.AmericanAncestors.org

About American Ancestors

American Ancestors[®] is a national nonprofit center for family history, heritage & culture based in Boston, Massachusetts that has been setting the gold standard for genealogical research since its founding in 1845. Today, American Ancestors serves 400K+ members and subscribers through AmericanAncestors.org, one of the world's largest online collections of family history resources. In 2025, American Ancestors launched the Family Heritage Experience, an interactive, state-of-the-art exhibition that introduces visitors to the joy of family history research, located at 97 Newbury Street at our headquarters in Boston. American Ancestors is also home to the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center, which preserves New England's Jewish history, and 10 Million Names, a project dedicated to finding the names of the enslaved men, women, and children in pre- and post-colonial America before emancipation. For more information, visit AmericanAncestors.org.

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