



10 “Must Know” Tips To Uncover Your Heritage

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Introduction

I have been researching my family tree for over 25 years. My research has included the highs of finding a new branch of my family as well as the lows of information overload. I have traced my family origins back to Ireland in the late 18th century.

Like many of you, I have had my share of "brick walls" or in some cases "dead ends" that seem to set your research back a generation or two. But I have also had the great pleasure and satisfaction to uncover family stories that show the courage and tenacity of my ancestors. These stories demonstrated that my ancestors were bound and determined to overcome all obstacles and setbacks and build a new life for themselves and their families.

More recently, I have published a genealogy website "All-About-Family-Trees.com". This site was set up to show you important genealogy information that you can use to get started researching your family and their heritage. It will also provide access to useful software that you can use to trace your roots. The site has numerous links to a wide variety of websites that provide valuable search tools and even access to other family historians that are interested in working together to uncover common ancestors and relatives around the world.

My website also provides a free Family Tree - Tip of the Week newsletter to help you stay informed about new techniques and services that are available to everyone.

I hope you enjoy this eBook and that it provides some insights into the fascinating and challenging hobby of researching and documenting your Family Tree.

Preface

I have found the following tips very useful and effective in uncovering my ancestors and more importantly helping me to effectively document them and the stories that I'm sure they would like passed on to future generations. Like many of you, I am hoping that my research will help my children and their children appreciate the contribution that their ancestors made and appreciate the heritage that they enjoy.

Where Did My Family Get Its Start?

Have you ever wondered about your family origins? We often simply take it for granted. We fail to recognize how important it is to document the origins of your family names in your family trees.

Your last name is the key to your heritage and your past. It is very important to take the time to research the region that your ancestors settled. Study the history of the region and the time period to understand "the life and times" of your ancestors and appreciate the challenges that your family has had to endure.

Make sure that you record any stories or history of your families and their "world" so that you and future generations will understand and appreciate the courage and fortitude that your ancestors possessed.

For more information about uncovering your family's origin refer to my article entitled [Family Origins - Where Did My Family Get Its Start?](#)

Stories Are The Key

Stories about your ancestors are the key. The dry bits of information and facts about your ancestors are important. But their stories are the key to making your family tree come alive for your family. The stories of overcoming hardships, packing up all their belongings and travelling half way around the world, settling in small undeveloped forests and building a new life for themselves and their children is the important information that is frequently lost and forgotten.

As family historians, we need to focus on these important details to ensure that future generations can appreciate their challenges, triumphs and sacrifices that are your heritage. This is the legacy that you can document and pass on to your children and your children's children.

The stories may be found in scrapbooks, Family Bibles, old newspaper articles or even recorded in history books in a local or distant library. Sometimes the stories are just passed down from one generation to another at family reunions, parties and dinners. The stories may become embellished and incorrect over time, so it is important to try and uncover the true details and record them as part of the legacy that you can leave for your descendants.

The important point is that when the stories are discovered at a library or discussed at a family dinner be sure to document every last detail. If possible tape record or even videotape the story as it plays out around the table or photocopy the text in the book to be sure that you captured it all.

For more information about researching and recording your family's stories refer to my article entitled [Family Stories - The Stories Are The Key](#).

Ask Your Family

Take advantage of all opportunities to collect information from each of your relatives. They may have Bibles, scrapbooks, journals, baby books, letters, Christmas cards, military records, wills, marriage certificates, old photos and photo albums that you can borrow, study and even photocopy or transcribe.

Make sure that you share the discoveries that you make with the person who provided the books or documents. This will help them feel a part of the research and actually may lead to additional discoveries as they get more involved in the research.

If you get a chance, go through the attic or basement storage area with your Mom or Dad and look for boxes and memorabilia that they can describe. If you can, use a tape recorder to capture all the stories and anecdotes. Be sure to record the descriptions of the memorabilia and the answers to all of your questions.

When you find an object, try to find out who owned it or bought it, how important it was, and especially what memories does it bring to their mind. Record everything.

Diaries and journals can provide a wealth of information about the era, conditions and circumstances of your relatives. Take the time to study any diaries and journals that you discover very carefully. They may provide important clues to your family's health, their journeys and even detail the families' emigration to a new country. The stories not only include clues to big events, but small events, and even unexpected visits by distant relatives. These stories also detail important and not-so-important information about their daily lives. Be sure to make special note of any loneliness, pain or frustration, as well as the joys and the excitements.

Ask Your Family (cont'd)

These stories will literally bring your ancestors to life for you and your entire family for generations to come.

Naturally, start your Family Tree research and interviews with your parents. But be sure to interview Grandparents, Aunts and Uncles, as well as cousins and other more distant family members. They have a wealth of information about the family and may have memorabilia that can provide valuable clues for you to follow.

For more information about researching and recording your family's history refer to my web page entitled [Use free genealogy tools to perform your free family tree search and find your family history.](#)

Surname Origins - How The Name Began

Surnames have evolved over the past century, mostly out of necessity. As populations grew, it was necessary to differentiate between John the carpenter and John the blacksmith. Last names were derived in several different ways:

- ❖ Some were patronymic (based on the father's name) like John's son becoming Johnson;
- ❖ Some were based on occupation like the carpenter example above;
- ❖ Some were based on the region or area like Hill or Lock;
- ❖ Some were based on characteristics like Small (their size), Lamb (their nature), or Knight (their status);
- ❖ In Ireland and Scotland last names were based on the Clan that you belonged to.

Knowing the derivation of the name you are tracing might help you find that earliest ancestor. This may be useful if the trail you are on has gone cold in a particular country and you need a place to begin your research in another country

For more information about researching and recording how your family's name began refer to my web page entitled [Name Origins - Discover Your Heritage](#).

What's In A Name?

When you are looking for a particular name, realize that it may not have been spelled the same throughout history. Make sure that your searches include derivations of the name. For example: if you are searching for Smith include Smithe, Smyth, Smythe, Smithey to name only a few.

Consider the nationality of the person you are researching and be sure to include names that are based on that nationality. For example, if you think the person is German you might try Schmidt, Schmit or Schmitt.

If you don't know what other names to try, simply sound the name and write it phonetically. Get your family and friends to give you other suggestions. Even small children will have great ideas on other ways to spell a last name.

For more information about researching and recording your family's name refer to my article entitled [Soundex - A Code to Group Similar Sounding Names](#).

Questionnaires - Easy To Use Interview Forms

When you are interviewing your family, it is very important to be sensitive and make sure they know that you are not just being "nosey". Show them the information that you have collected so far, and encourage them to correct it (if necessary), and add any new information they might have. The easiest way to do that is record your information on a standard form.

These forms are sometimes called Family Group Sheets, Personal Inquiry forms or Family Tree Templates. The format and contents are up to you - personalize them as you see fit.

Using a common form will help you by ensuring that you don't miss any important information during the interview, and will also act as a "memory jogger" for the family member that you are consulting.

By making your interview interesting and "non-threatening" you will collect the most information and generally, your family will be happy to help. After all, the benefits of helping you collect and record your family tree information is that everyone in your family and all your future generations will know their history and appreciate the heritage that you have uncovered.

For samples of the Personal Inquiry Forms and more information about researching and recording your family history refer to my article entitled [Family Tree Templates - Make Sure You Ask The Right Questions.](#)

Census Records - A Wealth Of Information

Governments have been collecting national census information for hundreds of years. Fortunately, some of these records are available through the internet. One of the earliest is the United States 1790 census. In general censuses provide a wealth of important information for the family tree researcher.

The earliest censuses had little meaningful information for the family historian. In the 1800's the census information included: name, age, gender, country of birth, occupation, education, whether the property was owned or rented, for each member of the household.

This information is invaluable for you to trace your ancestors. Some amateur genealogists suggest that you should start with the most recent census and then trace the details you uncover back through prior census records. With the 72-year restriction on access to the Census, the most current year available is 1930. If you are lucky, you will be able to uncover valuable information about the family's journey.

But, the research requires patience and careful documentation in order to be most useful. It's not enough to simply define the names that you uncover. Carefully record the information about the census record you find. That way you will be able to find it again...particularly if you discover conflicting information at a later date. Document important information about the record you find including: County; State; District; Enumerator; Enumeration Date; Enumerator District Number; and the District Supervisor Number. This will add real value to your research material.

For more information about researching and recording using Census information refer to my article entitled [Census Records - Valuable Historical Information Waiting To Be Rediscovered.](#)

Source Citations - A Key To Reliable

Documentation

You are just starting your family tree research and have meticulously recorded dozens of ancestors from your past. You've made a record of their names and birthdates, death dates and where they were buried. But do you know where you found Great-Aunt Betty's birthday? Was it in your Grandmother's Family Bible or was it in a scrapbook that you found in Uncle John's attic?

Finding all of this important information is great, but if you can't show evidence of the source of these records or who gave them to you, you won't be able to prove it later. Practice good documentation and make sure that every new piece of information that you collect is cited properly and completely. Your family will appreciate the effort you make and will rely on your evidence for future generations.

For more information about recording your source citations refer to my article entitled [Source Citations - A Key to Reliable Documentation](#).

Plan Your Research Trips

Each time I attend a family reunion or trek off to a research library I take the time to thoroughly plan my trip.

My plans always include:

- ❖ A Research Log for each individual that I want to research;
- ❖ Family Sheet for each individual that I want to research;
- ❖ A record of the documents that I am looking for (like Birth Certificates, Census Records, etc.); and
- ❖ The electronic or paper based copies of the documents that I have already collected.

By taking the time to organize this information, and studying the data I have as well as reviewing the data I am looking for, I make sure that I can be as productive as possible in my research.

One more thing! Make sure that you record down exactly what you found (and their citation information) and especially the items that you couldn't find. That way you won't waste another trip in search of that same document.

For more information about planning a research trip or session refer to my article entitled [My Family Tree - Good Habits](#).

Genealogy Program - Making The Connection

Using a genealogy program to document your family tree can be great! But finding one with the right features can be very time consuming and cost a lot of money if it takes more than one brand to meet your needs.

To make your search easier, list the features and benefits that you think you want or need. Review software developer's websites for specific features and take the time to review any Software Reviews that are published on the web or in magazines. Next, rank your list in order of importance to you. If a prominent feature of the software is a feature you won't use it needs to be very low on your list. Concentrate on the features that you know you will need. This is the step that most people miss when looking for new computer programs.

Once you have identified your most critical features then, and only then, can you confidently look for the right software for you.

For more information about purchasing genealogy software refer to my article entitled [Genealogy Program - Making the Connection](#).

Thank You

I hope you have found these tips to be as useful and effective as I have. I'm sure over the coming research that you will find opportunities to put these tips into practice. I hope that your research will help you, your children and their children appreciate the heritage that their ancestors have left and enjoy the legacy that you pass on to future generations.