



Genealogy 101

Starter Guide

*Your first five steps in family history research -
no experience required.*

Inside this guide:

- What records exist - and where to find them for free
- The 5 most common beginner mistakes (and how to avoid them)
- Your first 5 research steps, explained simply
- Free tools every genealogist should know

A free resource from **operationgrannyfiles.com**

Why Family History Matters

Every family is sitting on a treasure chest, and most people have no idea it's there.

Somewhere in your orbit - an older relative's memory, a drawer full of old documents, a shoebox of unlabeled photographs - there are stories that tell you where you came from, what your people survived, and who you might be. Those stories don't preserve themselves. They disappear one funeral at a time, unless someone does the work of finding them.

Genealogy is that work. And it's less intimidating than you think.

You don't need a subscription to an expensive website. You don't need a genealogy degree or a family with famous ancestors. You need curiosity, a willingness to ask questions, and a place to start. This guide gives you that place.

"The best family history researchers always start by admitting what they don't know. Blank spaces aren't failures - they're your next adventures."

- Granny

What Records Exist

The genealogical record universe is larger than most beginners expect - and a significant portion of it is free. Here are the major record categories you'll encounter as you research your family.

Record Type	What It Tells You	Where to Find It
Vital Records	Birth, marriage, and death dates; parents' names; maiden names; causes of death	State vital records offices; FamilySearch.org; county courthouses
U.S. Census (1790-1940)	Who lived in a household, ages, birthplaces, occupations, immigration year	FamilySearch.org (free); Ancestry.com (library card often = free access)
Military Records	Service dates, unit, physical description, pension claims, discharge info	Fold3.com; National Archives (archives.gov); FamilySearch.org
Immigration Records	Ship of arrival, origin country, destination, traveling companions	Ellis Island (libertyellisfoundation.org); FamilySearch.org; Ancestry
Church Records	Baptisms, marriages, burials - often predating civil records by centuries	FamilySearch.org; local church archives; diocesan repositories

Record Type	What It Tells You	Where to Find It
Newspapers	Obituaries, wedding announcements, birth notices, community news	Newspapers.com; GenealogyBank; state digital newspaper archives (free)
Land & Probate	Property ownership, heirs, wills, estate distribution, neighbor names	County courthouses; FamilySearch.org; state archives
DNA Records	Ethnic origins, living cousins and DNA matches, unknown parentage clues	AncestryDNA; 23andMe; MyHeritage DNA; GEDmatch (free third-party tool)

A note on free access: FamilySearch.org is completely free. Many public libraries offer free access to Ancestry.com and other subscription databases with your library card. Check before you pay for anything.

5 Common Beginner Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)

Most beginners make the same five mistakes. Knowing them before you start will save you hours of frustration and prevent you from building on a shaky foundation.

Mistake #1	Starting with Strangers Instead of Family
The Problem:	Jumping straight to 1700s ancestors before you've talked to your living relatives. Online trees and historical records are powerful - but your grandmother remembers things no database has.
The Fix:	Start with yourself. Work backward. Interview your oldest living relatives first. Their memories are the only primary source you can call on the phone.
Mistake #2	Assuming Online Trees Are Accurate
The Problem:	Copying information from other people's Ancestry or FamilySearch trees without verifying it. User-submitted trees are full of errors, myths, and wishful thinking.
The Fix:	Every fact needs a source. If you can't see the original record behind a claim, treat it as a lead - not a fact. Find the actual document before adding it to your tree.
Mistake #3	Not Recording Where Information Came From
The Problem:	Writing down names and dates without noting the source. Six months later, you won't remember where you found anything - and you'll have to find it again.
The Fix:	Keep a simple research log: date, what you looked for, where you looked, what you found. A one-paragraph note per search session is enough.
Mistake #4	Giving Up When Records Are Missing
The Problem:	Assuming a brick wall means the research is over. Most records do exist - they're just in unexpected places, or under a name spelled differently, or in a county that's since been renamed.
The Fix:	Try alternate spellings of surnames. Check neighboring counties. Look for the same ancestor in sibling records, neighbor records, or church registers. Brick walls usually have a way around them.

Mistake #5	Researching Alone
The Problem:	Treating genealogy as a solo project when relatives and genealogical societies have already done significant work on the same families.
The Fix:	Search for your surnames on FamilySearch, GenealogicalSocieties.org, and DNA sites like GEDmatch. Someone, somewhere, may have already found the ancestor you're looking for.

Your First 5 Research Steps

These five steps work for every beginner, every family, and every starting point. Do them in order. Take your time with each one.

1

Start With Yourself

Get a piece of paper - or open a document - and write down everything you know about yourself: full name, birthdate, birthplace, parents' names, grandparents' names, and anything else you can recall. This is your baseline.

Then write down what you don't know. Those blank spaces are your first research questions. "I don't know where my grandfather was born" is not a failure - it's the start of a research project.

2

Interview a Living Relative

Call or visit the oldest relative you can reach. Ask open-ended questions: "Where did you grow up?" "What were your parents like?" "Is there a story about our family you don't want to be forgotten?" Let them talk. Record the call if they're comfortable with it.

Oral history disappears one death at a time. A 45-minute conversation with an aging relative can unlock three generations of research - and it's irreplaceable once that person is gone. Do this before anything else.

3

Search Your Own Home

Before looking anywhere online, look in your own drawers, boxes, closets, and attic. Families preserve history without realizing it: birth certificates, marriage licenses, old photographs, letters, diplomas, military discharge papers, recipe cards in someone's handwriting.

Make an inventory. Photograph everything. Note who appears in old photos if you can find someone who knows. These documents are your primary sources - originals that no website can replace.

4

Search FamilySearch for Free

Go to [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) and create a free account. This is the world's largest genealogy database and costs nothing. Search for a grandparent or great-grandparent by name and approximate birth year.

Look for census records first - they show entire households and can add siblings, parents, and birthplaces in a single record. Then look for vital records, immigration documents, and any other matches that appear. Every record you find is a source to cite and a clue to chase.

5

Start a Research Log

Open a notebook or a document and begin recording your work. For every search session, write: (1) what you were looking for, (2) where you looked, (3) what you found, (4) what you want to search next.

This habit is the single most important thing that separates researchers who make steady progress from researchers who go in circles. After a few months of research, your log becomes a map of everything you've explored - and everything you haven't tried yet.

"The worst pencil is better than the best memory. Write it down, honey. Write it all down. You might not need it today, but someday you or someone you love will be so glad you did."

- Granny

Free Tools Every Genealogist Should Know

FamilySearch.org - Free.

The world's largest genealogy database - over 12 billion records and growing. Includes indexed U.S. census records (1790-1940), vital records, military records, immigration documents, and international records from 110+ countries. You can build a free family tree and share it with relatives.

FindAGrave.com - Free.

Volunteers photograph grave markers across the U.S. and worldwide. Search by ancestor's name to find burial location, dates, and headstone photos. Often the only source for death dates on older ancestors.

Newspapers.com & GenealogyBank - Subscription (library free).

Billions of newspaper pages digitized and searchable. Find obituaries, wedding announcements, and news articles featuring your ancestors. Check whether your public library offers free access before subscribing.

National Archives (archives.gov) - Free.

The official U.S. repository for federal records. Census images, military service records, immigration and naturalization files, land records. Many collections searchable online at no cost.

Your Local Library - Free with library card.

Most libraries subscribe to Ancestry.com, HeritageQuest, or both - giving you paid-tier database access at no personal cost. Many libraries also have dedicated genealogy collections with local records not available anywhere online. Librarians are often excellent research partners.

GEDmatch.com - Free (basic tier).

Upload your raw DNA data from any testing service and compare with matches across all platforms. Invaluable for connecting with DNA relatives and breaking through adoption or unknown parentage situations.

Operation Granny Files - Free.

Mission-based genealogy adventures delivered to your inbox. Each mission teaches one research skill - census reading, obituary hunting, immigration research, and more - in a practical, hands-on format. Visit operationgrannyfiles.com to subscribe free.

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