

Beginning Genealogy Step 3: Locate a Useful Source, Part II

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In the MGS Beginning Genealogy Course, we encourage students to work through five steps:

1. Write down and organize what you know
2. Decide what you want to learn
3. Locate a useful source
4. Learn from the source
5. Use what you learned.

Last time, we inventoried the essential genealogical sources for beginners—census records, vital records, church and cemetery records, immigration records and naturalization records—and described how to locate original and published versions of them. Of the many genealogical sources available on the Internet, this column focuses on my top five websites for beginners.

Number One: Ancestry.com. Because of its sponsorship of NBC's popular *Who Do You Think You Are* series, *Ancestry.com* <<http://www.ancestry.com>> is the most widely recognized family history website. *Ancestry* offers all five of the essential sources: all U.S. and many state censuses; collections of vital, church, and cemetery records; U.S. incoming passenger lists; and naturalization records. In addition, *Ancestry* has historic newspapers, digitized books, and more, including user-contributed family trees,¹ message boards, free articles, video tutorials, and webinars.

Look for *Ancestry's Red Book*² and *The Source*³ in the *Ancestry* wiki, housed in *Ancestry's* free Learning Center. *Red Book*, first published in 1989, surveys the major records available for each state and summarizes this history of boundaries and availability of records for each county. *The Source* is a guidebook with in-depth information about finding and using all the major genealogical record types.

You can access *Ancestry.com* via your own subscription—several types of subscription are available, at varying costs. You can watch for free trials of the home version or use the Library Edition at no cost in many public libraries, including the MGS Library and Research Center.

Number Two: FamilySearch.org. *FamilySearch* <<http://www.familysearch.org>> is a free service of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It hosts the catalog of Salt Lake City's Family History Library (FHL). The online catalog is the essential resource for learning what records are available from the FHL. The site is also home to millions of

historical records, in the form of index entries and digital images of original sources. At *FamilySearch*, you can search for your ancestors in U.S. and state censuses. Like *Ancestry*, *FamilySearch* offers all five essential sources, including many state censuses that aren't available on *Ancestry.com*. The site also includes collections of vital records, church and cemetery records, immigration records, naturalization records and more. You can see what historical records are available for the geographical areas you are interested in by clicking "Browse" on the Home page and selecting your area of interest. The collections available are constantly expanding, so if you don't see what you want, check back later.

In addition to its historical records and library catalog, *FamilySearch* has a notable collection of learning resources. Look for the "Learn" link (located at the top of each page as this article goes to press). You will find *FamilySearch's* own wiki, a growing collection of free video courses, and an information series especially for beginners.

Number Three: Rootsweb. *Rootsweb* <<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com>> is another collection of free resources, including a learning library, message boards, and user-contributed family trees. (As at *Ancestry*, use the contributed trees with care.) *Rootsweb* is full of useful tools and information. Do you need to know what county a town is located in? Try *Rootsweb's* Town/County Locator. Do you need to figure a Soundex code? Use *Rootsweb's* Soundex Converter. Take time to explore what's available. You can even get space to set up your own website.

Number Four: USGenWeb. *USGenWeb* <<http://www.usgenweb.org>> is a volunteer-maintained collection of geographically based information. From the home page, click the state you are interested in. Each state's page links to statewide resources and county-level sites. Follow the county links to learn what's available for your county. County sites typically have historical information and maps; information on churches, cemeteries, and burials; and links to area libraries, museums, and historical or genealogical societies. You may even find extractions from county records—censuses; early birth, marriage, or death records; naturalization indexes; and lists of probates.

Number Five: Cyndi's List. *Cyndi's List* <<http://www.cyndislist.com>> is entirely made up of links to other websites. Whether you want to learn what's available on a geographical area, a topic (such as

immigration or technology), or a kind of record (e.g., passenger lists, newspapers), look here. Started by genealogist Cyndi Howells in 1996, the site contains more than 190,000 links. As we go to press, the site has received a facelift, making it even easier to use.

Notes:

1. Be a discriminating consumer of the information from these or any other online tree. Examine the relationships presented — are they logical? Are parents old enough to have produced the children listed? Are sources provided for the information in the tree?
2. Alice Eichholz, Ph.D., CG, ed., *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*, 3rd ed. (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004). Use this book to learn about the records created for the area being researched, along with the history of its jurisdictions (e.g., dates counties were formed).
3. Sandra Hargreaves Luebking and Loretto Dennis Szucs, eds., *The Source: a Guidebook to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed., (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2006).

An Unusual Obituary

Editor's note: In the last issue of Minnesota Genealogist, Gayle Geber wrote about the challenges of writing about uncomfortable events in family history. The author of a recent obituary, and probably also the departed loved one, apparently thought that a little humor can help. These three paragraphs are excerpted from an obituary published in the Williamsport (PA) *Sun-Gazette* <http://Sun-Gazette.com>).

"Mary was crazy. She had always been crazy. No, she never got over it. Being crazy was her full-time job. That and surviving were what she did, along with writing, the occasional post for Shakesville (a blog where she was known as Maud). She dropped out of school after her 2nd year of not attending the 10th grade, took an odd variety of courses at a variety of (mostly) community colleges, and was once fairly well-read, but had forgotten most of it."

"She was long-winded, discursive, and had a tendency to be too liberal, in some folks estimation, particularly with commas, supposing that is possible, and italics. Her favorite person EVAR was a beagle. Named Maud. She was incredibly creative and talented, especially with her poetry and gave better Christmas presents than even Santa, two years running. She loved the color purple."

"Mary knew some of you dislike the word crazy, preferring the term mentally ill, where warranted, which it was in Mary's case. She apologizes, posthumously, to anyone for whom it is unpleasant, but being it, she claims the right to own it, and this is her obituary."

Contributed by J. H. Fonkert, Editor