FamilySearch.org: A Great Place to Start Your Research

If you are new to family history research, Melody Amsel-Arieli suggests exploring the extensive resources this powerhouse has to offer

FAMILYSEARCH IS A MASSIVE, FREELY ACCESSED GENEALOGY RESEARCH site. Though affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is open to all researchers regardless of their level of research experience or their religious beliefs. This volunteer-based enterprise, which is located at *http://FamilySearch.org*, currently boasts a database of more than 4 billion names, gleaned from largest collection of historical and genealogical documents in existence. These include birth, marriage, death, census, immigration, military, and newspaper records – along with scores of others. Though its data sets span the world, most relate to the United States, Mexico, the British Isles, and Europe.

Connect Generations

With a FamilySearch account, a world of family history possibilities comes to life. Start making connections today.

Many FamilySearch features, including several of its Search options and its Get Help do not require membership. Free onsite member registration, through the Free Account tab to the right, however, allows users not only to seek ancestors, but also to build, organize, edit, and save their family trees online.
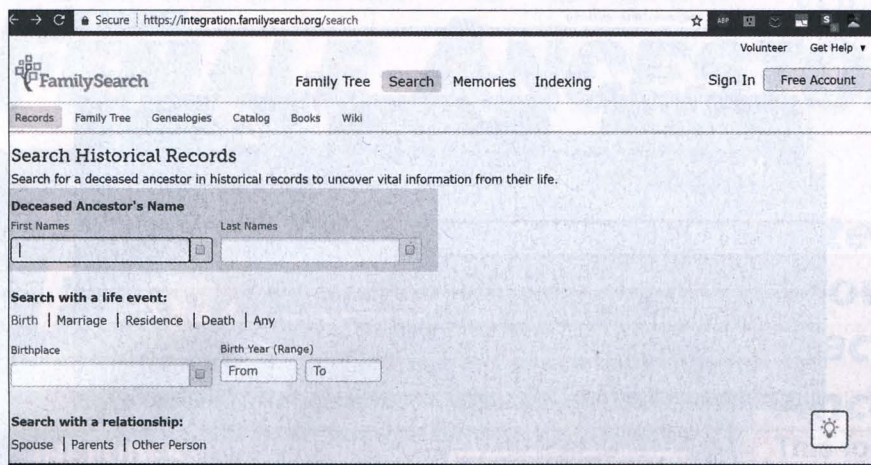
Family tree entries connect to related source documents, notes, discussions, Record Hints, Research Suggestions, and various print possibilities. They also link directly to partner organization database searches. If an entry also includes the Attach Historical Records tab, members can seamlessly attach relevant documents to their FamilySearch tree. A match found in user-submitted family trees, however, must be added manually.

Each member's tree is actually part of a huge, dynamic communal forest – with no entry duplication. Moreover, it is public. In other words, any registered FamilySearch member can review, edit, amend, and correct any entry, as well as add notes and initiate dialogues. If any data changes have been made, the Latest Changes tab notes and dates them. Authenticated changes link to their record sources. Unauthenticated changes note names of their contributors, along with links for messaging them directly.

Alternately, instead of creating trees onsite from scratch, researchers can upload their GEDCOMs, standardized text files of trees that were created through other genealogical programs. All trees, whether built or uploaded, can be enhanced with documents, photographs, and/or audio files. From the Family Tree tab, members can also seamlessly share their discoveries, memories, and stories with other site members. From here too, by specifying names, event dates and locations, and/or familial relationships, they can seek relatives among the leaves and branches of others. At the same time, their software automatically scours both online resources and family trees for possible matches. Researchers can also seek ancestors in online family trees through the 'Family Tree' tab, found under Search.

In addition, users can preserve the valuable information gathered in their trees by creating free, personalized Family Booklets entitled *My Family: Stories That Bring Us Together*, in a wide selection of languages.

The FamilySearch Search tab, which is found beside the Family Tree tab, links to six key research areas: Records, Family Tree, Genealogies, Catalog, Books, and Research WIKI. Records accesses the Historical Records Collection, which includes birth, marriage, death, census, and military records, most indexed by names of people

who are deceased. Filters include life events with locations and dates, familial relationships, record types, and batch numbers, which refer to source types.

FamilySearch databases often return thousands upon thousands of hits. So researchers are advised to narrow searches by filtering search parameters. Checking the Exact Search boxes alongside facts that have been verified, or indicating Match All Terms Exactly certainly limits results. Specifying a death date, however, returns only documents that note dates of death. Specifying a particular location or the name of a spouse may be just as limiting. In some cases, ambiguity may yield results. If exact names (or their spellings) are unknown, use of wildcards (? to replace a single unknown character and * to replace one or more characters) anywhere within a first or last name in either a regular or exact search, may prove helpful.

From Historical Records too, researchers can explore specific collections dating from the pre-1700s through the present, like Ireland Births and Baptisms 1620-1881, Oklahoma School Records 1895-1936, and Ghana Census 1984. Alternately, they can locate available material by pinpointing areas of interest on the onsite, interactive world map.

Document icons, which appear in the Collection entries, link to transcribed record details. Camera icons, which often appear as well, link to digitized images of their original sources, which may offer additional data. Both transcribed and digitized results can be copied, printed, shared, and saved to FamilySearch family trees.

Under the Genealogies tab, also found under Search, everyone – registered or not – can search the massive FamilySearch genealogy collection, which is comprised of multiple databases. Its Ancestral File, a static, duplicate-free collection of family trees submitted before 2003, for example, features some 40 million entries searchable by names, relationships, as well as location and dates of life events. All may be filtered and searched with wildcards. The Genealogies Pedigree resource file, a user-submitted work-in-progress (featuring entries that have neither been corrected nor merged), may be searched by similar parameters. Genealogies also includes the Guild of One-Name Studies, which encompass lineage-linked sourced genealogies and "as is" oral genealogies gathered from interviews conducted around the world. Its International Genealogical Index, which was contributed by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, boasts over 430

million ancestor entries from around the world dating from the early 1500s through 1885. Its Community Trees, a database of original-sourced, lineage-linked genealogies compiled as community projects, reflect specific time periods and communities.

Though the Genealogies collection is so impressive, its data has not been verified by FamilySearch, nor may it be complete. So researchers are urged to confirm information on their own.

The massive FamilySearch Catalog, also located under Search, offers descriptions and images of digitized census, tax, land, probate, vital, marriage, church, town, and military records. It also comprises family and local histories, genealogical books, and related publications held online and by the largest genealogy library in the world, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. Catalog searches may be filtered by location, surname, title, author, subject, keyword, category, call number, and language.

Results, in addition to bibliographic details, may offer additional information. The book *Between Galicia and Hungary: The Jews of Stropkov*, found under "Stropkov, Slovakia" for example, provides a link to its entry in World Cat. This massive online, global cooperative catalog, besides providing a summary of its contents, searches for copies in libraries worldwide.

FamilySearch, instead of offering Catalog microfilm circulation services through its Family History Centers, is currently digitizing millions of their microfilmed collections and routinely digitizing new acquisitions, offering them online.

Researchers can access digital copies of books held at the Family History Library and more than 350,000 digitized Family History Books available from select partner

libraries, through their Books tab, also found under Search These include genealogy magazines, how-to books, gazetteers, pedigrees, along with family, local, county, and medieval histories.

The FamilySearch Research Wiki, a community-based information depository created by site users and other volunteers, is accessed through Search as well. It contains a huge amount of information concerning data sources and research for hundreds of locations, large and small, in multiple languages.

Though this wiki is massive in scope, articles such as Help: Keys to Success Using the Wiki, Rookie Mistakes, and Identify What You Know, ease the way. In addition, specifying "research guidance" in its search tab accesses step-by-step instructions for determining the best records to use, as well as the best order for searching them, their availability, and where to locate them. Specifying "research helps" accesses location-based search tips and strategies, various record-type guides, and articles featuring historic maps, foreign term glossaries, handwriting guides, and lists of name variations.

In addition to location – places ancestors worked, lived, or left – this wiki may be searched by specific topics and research methods. Researchers can specify single search words, strings of words with *and* or *or* between them, like "Nova Scotia or New Brunswick". Or they can enclose exact phrases, like "Nova Scotia marriage records and New Brunswick birth records", in quotation marks. They can also include minus signs to exclude specific search terms.

A single search, however simple, may result in many "hits". Even typing in a rarely sought entry, like "Raritan River", offers a large selection. "Kings Highway", one of

interest, describes how a network of Indian paths evolved into a continuous road from Massachusetts to South Carolina, reviews its historic background, delineates its route, includes a map, and links to a related Wikipedia article.

Wiki entries with broader scopes, of course, may be far more complex. "Somerset County, New Jersey Genealogy," in addition to offering maps and links to online and offline resources, reviews its history and boundary changes, describes local resources and records, and details repository and archive information. It also connects to related websites, neighboring counties, and scores of New Jersey-related wiki articles.

Much like leafing through an encyclopedia, family researchers can also browse the FamilySearch wiki either by country or by each US state individually. Each landing page offers overviews of relevant research along with links to entries of related topics.

The site's Memories Gallery, found under its Memory tab, arranges and preserves documents, stories, audio recordings, and photos in searchable albums. Tagging an ancestor in any of these audio-visuals automatically adds it to that person's page in Family Tree.

FamilySearch collections are often updated, individual ancestor entries may be expanded or amended, and

newly-digitized files are currently being added to its Catalog. So, it is worthwhile to revisit research sources from time to time.

Though FamilySearch often seems overwhelming, even to experienced researchers, its 'Get Help' tab, located at the upper right on each page, offers several user friendly, supportive portals. Getting Started, for example, answers basic questions about the site. Its Help Center explores its prime features, while its Learning Center offers hundreds of free, online, research-related lessons and articles. Contact Us, however, is the gateway to real, live assistance. From here, the genealogically-challenged, puzzled, bemused, or inquisitive among us can send messages, initiate online Live Chats, or call Customer Service, asking for research suggestions, directions, and answers to their questions. (iG)

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