



Genealogy^{TV}

**Trace Your
Family Tree
For Free!**

By
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FamilySearch
MyHeritage
Ancestry
WikiTree

**Easy
5 Steps!**

2024 Edition

Trace Your Family Tree for Free

By Constance Henley Knox

[Video Link](#)

Author's Comment: Please know that this is not sponsored by anyone. The opinions and strategies are that of my own.



What Inspired You to Start This Journey?

As professional genealogists, we are always talking about the “research question” as being the start to every research project. So, what brought you here? What is it that you are curious about? For some it is finding their biological parents. For others, it might be the desire to learn more about a grandparent. For others it might be to prove or disprove family lore.

Whatever your reason for starting your family history... know this, it is one of the most rewarding adventures you will undertake. You will discover stories that are read like a good book, or you will imagine what it was like living in the past as if you are watching. cinematic adventure. The cool part is that it is real, and it is your family... it runs in your DNA! It has made you who you are today.

About Free Records, What's Free and What is Not?

Typically, U.S. Federal Census records, many items in libraries, and archives are free (but not always). However, there are a host of companies that offer free access to some of the same records for free.



Figure 1 Christopher Madsen Family - 1910 U.S. Census, Laramie, WY. Image from family archives.

The U.S. 72 Year Privacy Act

You should know, due to the 72-Year Privacy Act and concerns over the privacy of living individuals, some records may not be available... yet. The 72-Year Privacy Act was created in 1978 to protect the information of living individuals. At the time it was created, 72 years was the average lifespan of a person. Thus, it is believed this was the reason that 72 years was chosen. Many countries outside of the U.S. have similar acts, typically one hundred years.

As a result, many U.S. census records newer than 72 years, may not be open to the public. For example, as of this writing, the U.S. Census records are only available up through 1950.

Therefore, you can access 1790-1950 census schedules today for free. One exception is the 1890 U.S. Federal Census which was mostly destroyed in a fire.

Where to Find Free Records



Almost all online genealogy companies have some free records available that you can access right now. Yep! That is right. You can find a ton of family history records for free.

What is free and what is not? Well for companies like **Ancestry.com**, **FindMyPast.com**, and **MyHeritage.com**, the general rule is if the company had to pay for rights to the records, then access to those records will be behind a paywall or subscription service.



Think Outside the Box

There are a ton of free resources that are not the big four noted above. Here is a brief list of free resources to keep in mind as you are researching.

- Federal Archives (In the U.S. [NARA](https://www.archives.gov))
- State Archives
- County Libraries
- State or County Court Records
- [Archive Grid/OCLC](https://www.archive.org/)
- [Internet Archive](https://www.archive.org/) (a.k.a. The WayBackMachine)
- [Find a Grave](https://www.findagrave.com/) or [Billion Graves](https://www.billiongraves.com/)
- [USGenWeb](https://www.usgenweb.org/)
- [Geneanet](https://www.geneanet.org/)
- [Wikitree](https://www.wikitree.com/)



Ready, Set, Go!

Hold on to your hat... You will be working backwards in every step of the process.

Start with yourself, then your parents (if you know them), **then your grandparents** and so on. **You will also take this approach with each person's life and timeline.**

You will start with death and burial information and work backwards in a person's lifetime. The reason for this is the most information (facts and evidence) you find is in the most recent records.

Get in the habit of reviewing every detail for accuracy. For example, on a death certificate, information about the deceased person's parents may not be accurate, as the informant on the death certificate may have been distraught at the time, may not have known the information, or just simply got it wrong. Question everything.

Also know that you will run into conflicts about dates and the spelling of names. Expect it. Make note of the discrepancies and resolve them once you have all the information you can find. In some cases, you may never resolve the conflict.

Lastly, before we get started, if you want to get the most out of your free options, do these steps in the order as I have presented them and build out as much of your family tree as you can in each step, before moving to the next step.

Having said that, **make sure you read this entire handout before starting.** Think of it like a recipe, you always want to read the recipe before you start cooking.

These steps below are my recommendations. After researching for nearly 50 years, I have found lots of tricks for researching for next to nothing.



Step One

BUILD A **FREE TREE** ON THE **ANCESTRY** WEBSITE

If you reside or are researching in the U.S., I recommend you **build your free tree on Ancestry.com** as a *guest account*. Why?



Because it is *your tree* and *only you* (and those you assign as contributors) can modify it. *It is your work*. And yes, you can build a tree for free in Ancestry.

I recommend that you build your free tree on Ancestry.com and keep it as your *Primary Tree*. Your *Primary Tree* is where you will always keep the most up-to-date information in your family tree, first. You might have other trees on other services, but your ***Primary Tree on Ancestry is the one tree you know is up to date, has all the information you have found, your notes, images and documents.***



information you have entered. Do not get me wrong. **FamilySearch is an impressive resource**, and we will discuss why shortly.

Creating a free tree on FamilySearch.org, for example, well **that is a collaborative tree**...and you are adding to a shared world-tree, and it may not be completely accurate, or others may change what

Note: Any public user tree, no matter what the company, will have errors in it. The information in user trees is only as accurate as the family historian who entered it. Also keep in mind that genealogists of the past may not have had all the information that is available to us today. Therefore, family historians may have entered information that they knew at the time, leaving us a bread crumb trail to follow.

ANCESTRY Free Trial vs. Guest Account



A **free trial** will expire, and you will need to give them a credit card to secure the “free trial” and then once the free trial is over, your credit card will be charged unless you cancel.

With a “**guest account**,” you can use the tree building services without ever paying for it.

FREE

If you are just getting started, I recommend you set up a free [Ancestry Guest Account... go here.](#)

Per Ancestry’s support page “Because registered **guest accounts are free**, there is no need to cancel them; you will never be billed for a free registered guest account. Simply discontinue use whenever you would like.”

If you want to jump in with both feet and sign up with a [free trial, go here.](#) (U.S. affiliate) Typically, the free trial is 14 days. If you are following this free method, do not exercise the free trial until a later step.

For more information about **what you get in your free Ancestry Guest Account...** [Go Here.](#)

Even if you only know a few things about your family, once you start entering information into your tree on Ancestry, you will find you know more information than you realized. Now as soon as you do, in a few hours, you may see those little green leaves popping up.

Those are “hints that Ancestry is suggesting that they might have records that match your people. Clicking on those leaves will lead you to records that **may or may not match your ancestors**. If they do, you can import them or link them to your tree. If they are census records, any free-to-the-public record, or other public member trees, you should have access to those records for free.



Just a tip... Census records will become the backbone of your genealogy! They are wildly valuable.



Chase all the hints you can for free. **Do not get frustrated if Ancestry pops up and says you cannot access that record because you do not have a paid subscription.** You will likely see enough information in the index to know if it looks promising. **You should make a note of the record if it looks like a match, then mark it for further investigation later. KEEP A LIST! You will need it in a later step.**

As you work through the hints you have the choice to “accept” it, “ignore” it, or choose “undecided.” No matter what you choose, do not worry about making a mistake, you can always see those hints again, even if you ignored them.

To start a [Free Guest Account on Ancestry.](#)

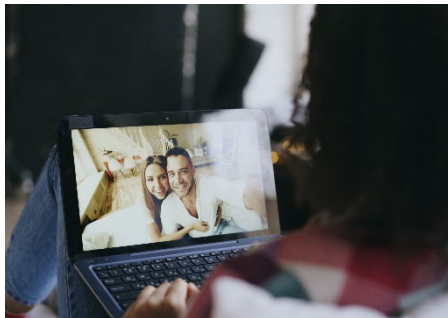
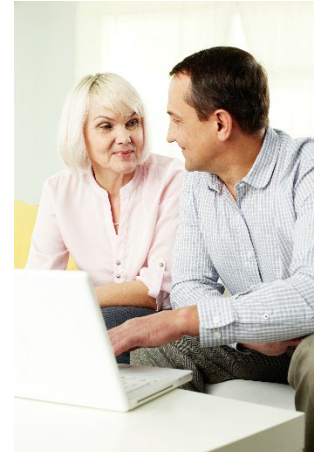
STEP TWO

TALK TO FAMILY!

Get the family to help fill in the blanks in your tree. **Collect COPIES of photos and records.** (See Step Four for what types of records to collect.) **Scan or take pictures of the originals** (in good light) with your cell phone or camera... **label the files, and file them properly.**

Record the conversations on whatever medium you are comfortable with... but do so in a quiet space... and **TAKE NOTES.** Do not rely on the recordings. The audio may not be clear.

If you cannot meet with your family in person, you can set up a free Zoom or Google Meet account to do **video chats.** Just be mindful of the technical understanding of those you are interviewing or seek help from other family to help set up video chat sessions. It is not hard - I promise!



Record the sessions. Often web camera software or the web service will have a recording option.

Make sure you inform all those on the call that the session is being recorded and how you will use that recording. It is the law, not to mention ethical.

While it is not free, **consider asking**

the elder family to take a DNA test. I have done a series of videos on DNA tests and how to use them for your family research.

Here are two links about DNA Research that may be helpful.

- [What DNA Test Should You Take? DNA Companies Compared.](#)
- [Genealogy TV's DNA Series of Videos](#)
- [Ancestry DNA Test Here](#)



Great tips for Interviewing the family can be found in this video called:
[12 Tips for Interviewing Family, Part 1 - Learn Genealogy Series, Episode 10](#)
[Family Interview, Part 2 \(Recording\) – Learn Genealogy Series, Episode 11](#)

STEP THREE

RESEARCH THE WORLD TREE ON FAMILYSEARCH FOR CLUES



Everything is FREE at FamilySearch, even the records. In this next step, research the world tree and its records at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org). Remember this is a collaborative tree where everyone contributes

their data to one huge tree. Here you are looking for clues and records about the ancestors that match those that you have entered on the tree you are building on Ancestry.com.

If you have not been on FamilySearch before, you will need to sign up with a free account. They will walk you through a set up wizard to get you started with a basic tree. Go ahead and do that. If you know who your parents and grandparents are, this will be a great start and help connect you to the world collaborative tree. After that, I would use FamilySearch for research for now.

Remember, my recommendation is that you are building your *Primary Tree* on Ancestry.com. Right now, you are using FamilySearch.org for clues and finding evidence, records, and images, etc.

You can upload your tree and data on FamilySearch later. For now, **look on FamilySearch for information that you did not find (or did not have access to) on Ancestry.**

You could build a family tree on FamilySearch, but at this stage I do not recommend it. The reason is that on FamilySearch it is not your personal tree, it is one huge collaborative worldwide tree that others can modify. For some, that can be frustrating. Thus, I recommend you use Ancestry for building your *Primary* "go to" tree. We will talk about sharing your tree on *FamilySearch* and *MyHeritage* in a later step.



Also know that *all* public trees, on *any* service, are *not* perfect. You will find errors.

The trees and the data in them are only as good as the person who entered it.

Therefore, **do not assume that just because you found information in a member tree on a tree at Ancestry, FamilySearch, MyHeritage or any others, that it is the gospel truth. You need to evaluate the evidence for yourself and build your tree based on facts, evidence (records), and your conclusions (from the evidence).**

If you find errors in trees, please be kind. Do not get frustrated with the genealogy companies thinking it is their fault if the information is wrong. It is likely a mistake by people like you and me who mistakenly uploaded the wrong information. Keep an open mind.

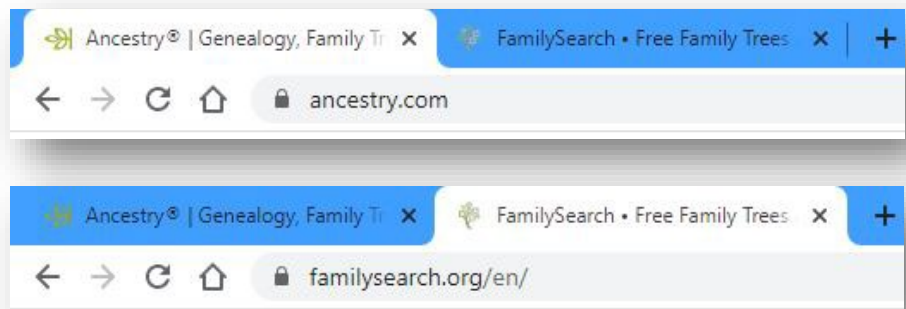
Consider this, you might be wrong too. So, before you fire off an angry note to another member, take a breath and think twice... again, be kind. We are all one big happy genealogical family.

If you want to reach out to another member about errors you found in their tree, take the approach that you have discovered discrepancies between their data and yours... and you would like to work together to resolve the differences in the information. This will open a dialog between you and the other members where you can exchange data, ideas, and evidence supporting it. From there you can draw your own conclusions. You never know, you may just make a new friend in the process.

Also know that **you may not get a response**. This could be because they are no longer active on the account, they have shut off notifications and never received your message, or they have passed away.

The great part about **FamilySearch** is **you might find some records** that are behind the paywall at *other* subscription services (like **birth, marriage, and death** records). **You might find them for free on FamilySearch**. That is why you were keeping a list of those records you found for further investigation, from the previous steps.

While searching in your browser you can **keep two tabs open** on your computer, one for **Ancestry tree** and one for the other service in which you are **researching** (like FamilySearch, the archives, etc.). This way you can hop back and forth from your tree (in one tab) to items you are researching (in other tabs).



One trick I use a lot... is when I am looking at a list of possible records, instead of just clicking on one of the links, **right click and choose “open in a new tab”** instead. That way, you preserve your list in one tab while researching in another.

When you find something like a record or image that matches your ancestor, download it to your computer. Keep everything filed properly.

To learn about filing habits and how to take good notes, I recommend you watch:

- [“Research Notes”](#)
- ["Good Filing from the Start"](#)

STEP FOUR

WHAT RECORDS TO RESEARCH & WHERE TO FIND THEM

START WITH YOUR OWN FILES!

You likely have a ton of documents, images and heirlooms to begin your research. Pull them out, copy them to a digital file and file them in surname folders.

Look at each document for information like birth, marriage, death, divorce, burial, military, religious affiliations, and other family members. Remember to note witnesses as they are often family or close friends.



Records Online

Next, you are searching the various places discussed in the previous steps for:

- **Vital records** (birth, marriage, death, and divorce)
- **Census records** (federal and state)
- **Military records** (indexes or actual records)
- **Religious** (surrounding events like, births, baptismal/christening, burial, marriages, etc.)
- **Evidence of Residence** (in every record you find)



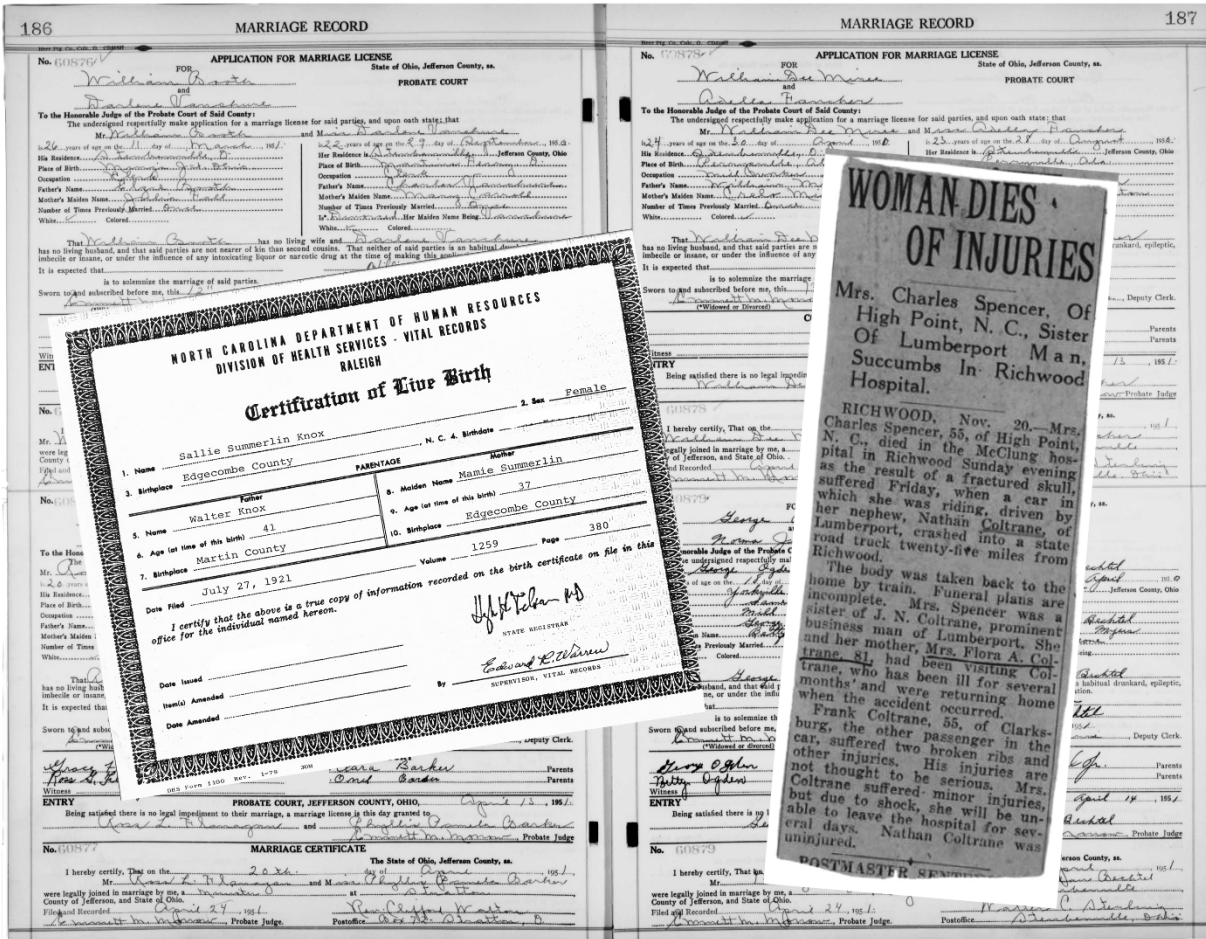
Timeline

These are all great places to start. Along the way you will start building a timeline of each ancestor's life to give perspective and migration patterns.

Free Records to find might Include...

- **U.S. Census Records** at [Ancestry](#), [FamilySearch](#), [MyHeritage](#) and [Archives.gov](#) to name a few. If you have created a tree at Ancestry, it will be easiest to search it there, but as of this writing, Ancestry is limited its free census access to roughly half of the records.
 - **TIP:** Download the **free census forms** [here](#). It helps with reading the column headers.
- Look for **Birth, Marriage, Death records** at **FamilySearch first!**
- Also Look for **Evidence of Death**
 - at [FindAGrave.com](#) & [BillionGraves.com](#)...
 - at Ancestry and FamilySearch.
- **Obituaries & Burial Records** found in
 - Newspapers at [Chronicling America](#) (part of the Library of Congress)
 - [Find-A-Grave](#) & [Billion Graves](#)
- Look for **Evidence of Residence** in
 - Censuses, City Directories and Yearbooks & more at [Ancestry](#), [FamilySearch](#), [MyHeritage](#) and [Archives.gov](#)
- Look at other family **Genealogies** at Ancestry, FamilySearch, MyHeritage.

- If you are looking for **ancestors in the UK**, then add [FindMyPast](#) and [MyHeritage](#) as part of your research strategy.



STEP FIVE

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media is a great place to find **surname groups, location groups, special interest groups (like DNA) history groups, genealogy or historical society pages...** all there to help share information about the families and locations you are searching

Just go to your favorite social media outlet and search for the surnames or locations you are researching with the keyword's "genealogy" or "family." You might just find a surname group where you can connect with others. I recommend starting with **Facebook**. That is where I have the most success.

BONUS STEPS

Bonus Step #1

Free Trials

Now that you have come this far and you have created a “**list of records for further investigation**,” now is the **time to turn on some free trials**. As a reminder, **that list** of records that you could not access in your free research... Now with a free trial, you should be able to get to those records quickly.



In some cases, you will have that free trial for 14 days and for some for one month. I suggest that you only **use one free trial at a time** starting with Ancestry.com. When that free trial is over, you can move on to the next service.

When you start most free trials, you will be required to give them a credit card, although it will not be charged until your free trial expires.

If you choose *not* to continue with the subscription, you will need to cancel it before your free trial ends, or it will automatically convert to a paid account and charge your credit card.

In the case of Ancestry.com, you will have 14 days to use it. Should you decide to cancel within the 14-day Free Trial, you can do so by going to your account and clicking the “cancel” link below your account profile.

Well now that you have your ducks in a row, you can use free trials to explore the services for a few weeks and gather the records you wanted.

Be sure to download those records to your computer during the free trial. If you pause or cancel your subscription, you may not be able to see those records again in your free tree unless you turn on the paid subscription again.

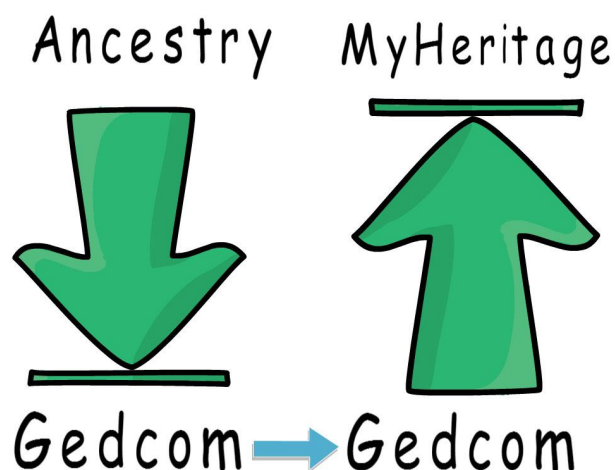
Once you stop the free trial (even without paying for it) **or if you stop a paid account, the records will remain linked to your ancestors within your family tree**. Should you decide to opt-in again (and pay for it this time), the records will be visible again. Typically, you will only get one free trial per company, per email address. Make the most of it.

Know that records you upload to the gallery in the ancestor profiles will remain visible regardless of your subscription status.

Bonus Step #2

Download Your Family Data and Upload it to Another Service

Once you've got these previous steps started and have created a foundation of your tree, consider downloading your Gedcom File from Ancestry and upload it to MyHeritage and FamilySearch (for free at the time of this writing).



By doing so, you will get the hint features for the records on the other services. I estimate that you will find about 50% of the same records on both services. However, you may discover new records, new member trees to explore, and possibly meet some new cousins.

Manage your tree

Export your family tree data, as a GEDCOM file, to your computer.

[Export tree](#)

[Downloading your Gedcom file from Ancestry](#) is easy. Simply go to the **tree settings on Ancestry**, click **Export Tree**, when it is done generating the file, you can click **download**. Just remember where you saved it. **Do not try to open it**. You will then use that same file and upload it to one of the other services.

- To upload a Gedcom file to FamilySearch.org [go here](#).
- To upload a Gedcom file to registered MyHeritage.com users [go here](#). Note, this uploads to MyHeritage's free tree builder software, then synchronizes to MyHeritage's website.

Bonus Step #3



WikiTree



MyHeritage

Research on [MyHeritage](#) and [WikiTree](#) for Free.

In fact, at MyHeritage you can download a free "Family Tree Builder" software to your computer that syncs with MyHeritage.

Family Tree Builder

Used by millions of people worldwide, Family Tree Builder helps you research your family history, build your family tree and add photos, historical records and more.

[Free Download](#)

FREE RESOURCES FROM GENEALOGY TV!



You can always find free educational resources here at Genealogy TV where you will find multiple platforms to keep you informed. As of this writing there are about 400 episodes on the [Genealogy TV YouTube Channel](#). Please [subscribe](#) (free) to help grow the channel.

Free video education on
[YouTube.com/GenealogyTV/](https://www.youtube.com/GenealogyTV/)!

At Genealogy TV, you will find free videos on the YouTube channel for beginner to advanced strategies. Typically, there is a new video almost every Friday morning.



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That's a Wrap!

Whew! That was a lot of information to digest. **Do not let the project be overwhelming.** Take it a little bit at a time. *Your ancestors aren't going anywhere.* They will be here when you get back to the project.

I hope that helped inspire you to chase your curiosity. Whatever question you had that brought you to start this genealogical journey... is your first research question... of many to come.

Enjoy the journey!

Connie Knox

A Lifelong Genealogist

Here to help you go further, faster, and factually with your family research!