



**Genealogy<sup>TV</sup>**

**Trace Your  
Family Tree  
For Free!**

By  
**Constance H. Knox**

**FamilySearch**  
**MyHeritage**  
**Ancestry**  
**Find My Past**

**Easy  
5 Step  
Process!**

**Begin Your  
Family History**

# Genealogy<sup>TV</sup>

## Start Your Family History for Free: Five Step Process for Beginner Genealogist

Recommendations to Get Started with Your Family Tree *for Free*

April 2020

By Constance Henley Knox

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're always talking about the "research question" as being the start to every research project. So, what brought you here? What is it that you're curious about? For some it's 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'll undertake. You'll discover stories that read like a good book or you'll imagine what it was like living in the past as if you're watching a cinematic adventure. The cool part is that it's real and it's your family... it runs in your DNA! It's 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. However, there are a host of other companies that offer free access to some of their services and or records.

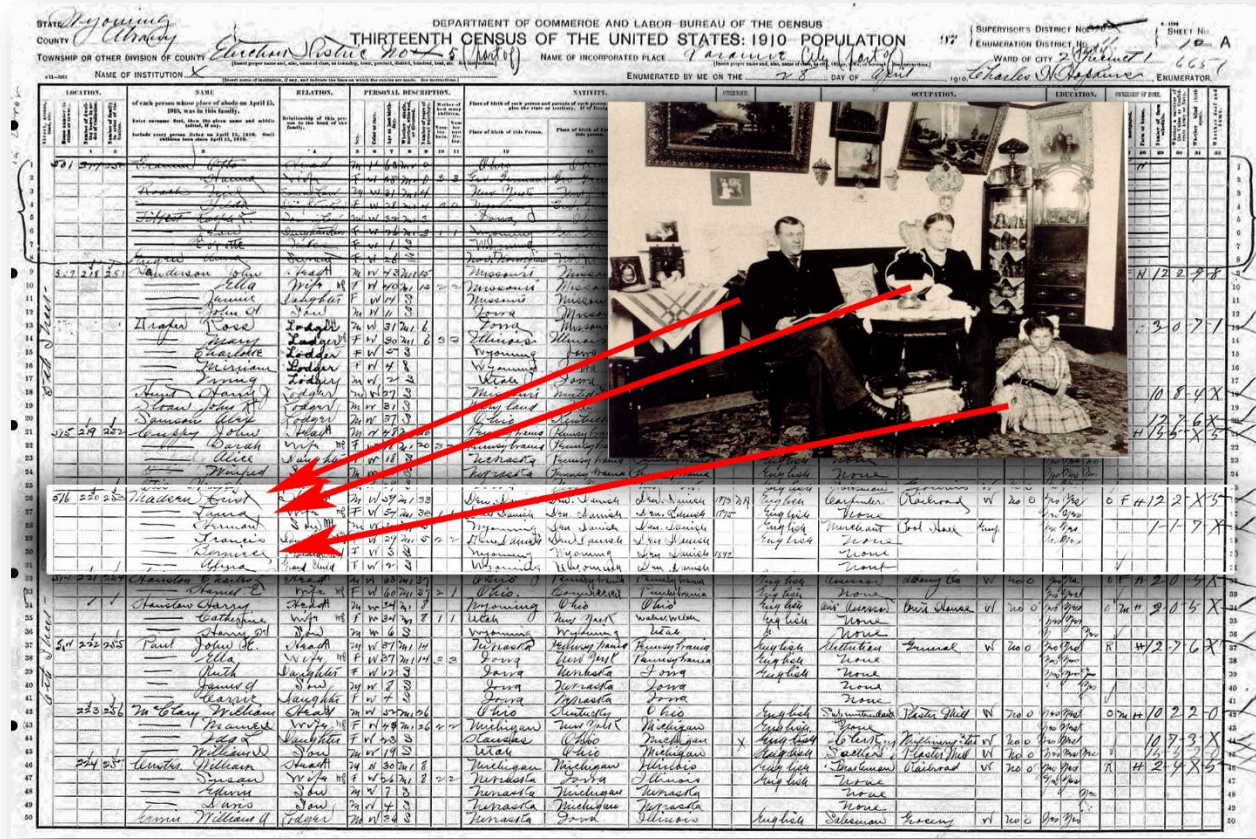


Figure 1 Christopher Madsen Family - 1910 U.S. Census, Laramie, WY. Image from family archives.

## 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. As a result, many 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 1940. Therefore, you can access 1790-1940 census schedules today for free. The 1950 U.S. Census will become public on April 1st, 2022.

# Where to Find Free Records



Almost all online genealogy companies have some free records available that you can access right now.

So, what's 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.

However, if the company was permitted access to already public records, or the information was obtained by volunteers (like you and me when we add data to our online trees) then that information is available to the public generally for free.



For example, at Ancestry.com, you can search other member trees for free if the member has set their tree to "public." I highly encourage you check them out. But more on that shortly.

# Ready, Set, Go!

Hold on to your hat... I'm going to run through a lot of information to help you find your ancestors for free. Feel free to rewind and watch sections of the accompanying video *"Trace Your Family Tree for Free: Five Step Process for Beginner Genealogists"* again if you need to take notes or missed something, but much of the information is provided for you in this eBook.

You'll 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'll also take this approach with each person's life and timeline.

You'll 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'll 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. 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've 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 eBook before starting. Think of it like a recipe, you always want to read the recipe before you start cooking.



## 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's your work.*

**I recommend that you build your free tree on Ancestry.com and keep it as your *Primary Tree*.** Your *Primary Tree* is where you'll always keep the most up-to-date information in your family tree, first and foremost. 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've found, your notes, images and documents.***



Creating a free tree on FamilySearch.org, for example, well that's a collaborative tree...and you're adding to a world tree and it may not be accurate or others may change what information you've entered.

Don't get me wrong. FamilySearch is an awesome resource, and we'll discuss why shortly.

Note: Any public user trees, no matter 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'll 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.

To set up a free [Ancestry Guest Account... go here](#).

Here is my affiliate link for a [Free Trial at Ancestry.com](#). This will give you access to all the records for the duration of the free trial. Typically, the free trial is 14 days. If you're following

this method, don't exercise the free trial until a later step. See the bonus section in this document as to why.

**FREE**

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

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'll 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. **Don't get frustrated if Ancestry pops up and says you can't access that record because you don't have a paid subscription.** You'll 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 for further investigation later. KEEP A LIST! You'll 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, don't worry about making a mistake, you can always see those hints again, even if you ignored them.

I did an entire video based on Ancestry's own document called...

[\*\*10 Free Things on Ancestry.com.\*\*](#)

- Here's a link to start a [Free Guest Account on Ancestry](#).
- Here's a link to start a [FREE TRIAL at Ancestry!](#) (This is a Genealogy TV affiliate link but costs you nothing).
- Here's a link to the **video** [10 Free Things on Ancestry.com](#).
- Here's a link to **Ancestry's documentation** about [10 Free Things To Do On Ancestry](#).

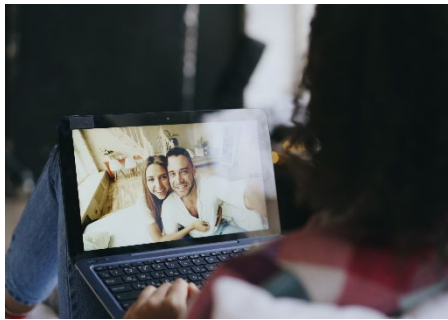
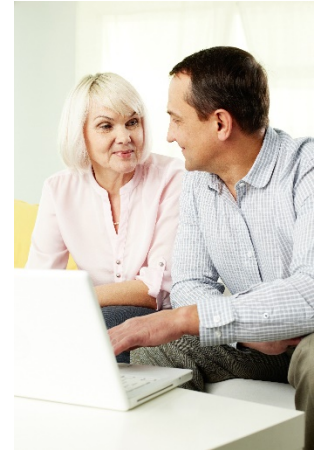
## STEP TWO

### 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're comfortable with... but do so in a quiet space... and TAKE NOTES. Don't rely on the recordings. The audio may not be clear.

If you can't meet with family in person, you can set up free [Skype](#) or [Zoom](#) accounts 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's not hard - I promise!



Record the sessions either on the [Skype](#) or [Zoom](#) platform or use screen capture software to record the session. Often web camera software will have a recording option as another alternative.

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

While it's not free, consider asking the elder family to take a DNA test. I've 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.ORG 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're looking for clues and records about the ancestors that match those that you've entered in the tree you're building on Ancestry.com.

**Remember you're building your *Primary Tree* on Ancestry.com. Right now, you're 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 didn't find (or didn't have access to) on Ancestry.

You could build a family tree on FamilySearch, but at this stage I don't recommend it. The reason is that on FamilySearch it is not your personal tree, it is one huge collaborative world tree and others can modify it. For some, that can be frustrating. Thus, I recommend you use Ancestry for building your *Primary Tree*. We'll talk about sharing your tree on *FamilySearch* 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, don't assume that just because you found it 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, and your conclusions (from the evidence).

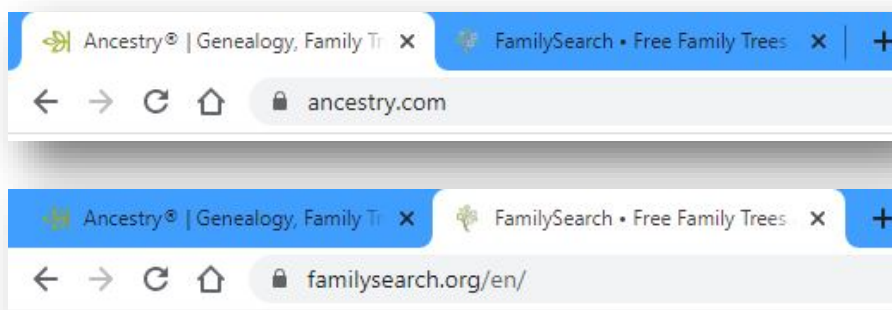
If you find errors in trees, please be kind. Don't get frustrated with the genealogy companies thinking it's their fault if the data is wrong. It is likely a mistake by people like you and me who mistakenly uploaded the wrong information. Keep an open mind. Consider this, you might be wrong too. So, before you fire off an angry note to another member, take a breath and think twice... again be kind. We're 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've discovered discrepancies between their data and yours... and you'd like to discuss it. This will open a dialog between you and the other member where you can exchange data, ideas, and evidence supporting it. From there you can create 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're no longer active on the account or they've shut off notifications and never received your message. In that case, they won't see your note until they login again. It could be they may have passed away but their account is still online or they just choose not to respond at this time.

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

While searching in your browser you can keep two tabs open on your computer, one for Ancestry where your tree is located and one for the other service in which you're researching. This way you can hop back and forth from your tree (in one tab) to items you're researching (in other tabs).



One trick I use a lot... is when I'm 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 can open everything in the list that looks promising in individual tabs and close them out when you're done reviewing each one methodically. By doing it this way, it allows you to preserve your original list that you searched in the first tab on your browser.

When you find something like a record or image that matches your ancestor, download it to your computer. Keep everything filed properly so you can find it again when you need it. Keep good notes and files. That's another set of free videos I have for you.

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

- ["Research Notes" - Learn Genealogy Series - Episode 6](#)
- ["Good Filing from the Start" - Learn Genealogy Series- Episode 3](#)

## STEP FOUR

### WHAT RECORDS TO RESEARCH and WHERE TO FIND THEM?

When you're getting started and throughout your genealogical journey, what types of things are you looking for?

#### 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're 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)

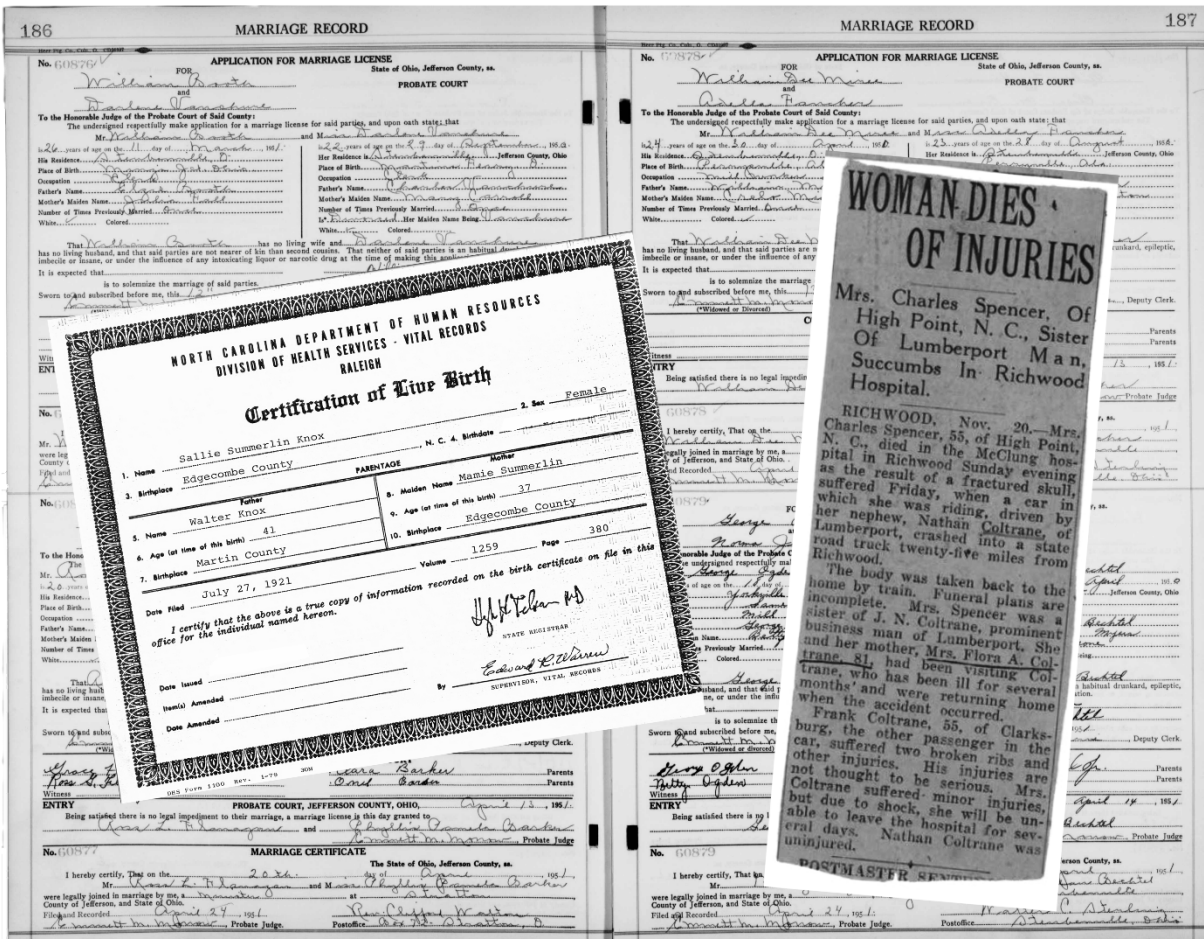


#### Timeline

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

## Free Records to find might Include...

- **Census Records** at [Ancestry](#), [FamilySearch](#), [MyHeritage](#) and [Census.gov](#) to name a few. If you've created a tree at Ancestry, it will be easiest to search it there.
- 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](#), [MyHeritage](#) or [FamilySearch](#).
- Look at other family **Genealogies** at Ancestry, FamilySearch, MyHeritage

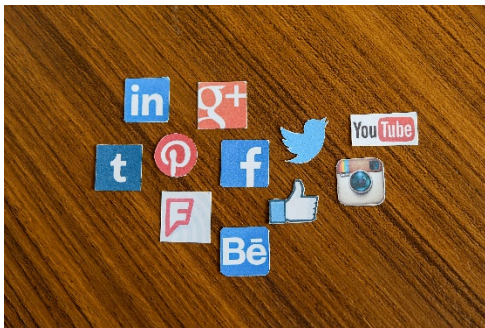


## STEP FIVE

### 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're searching

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



Social media places to look:

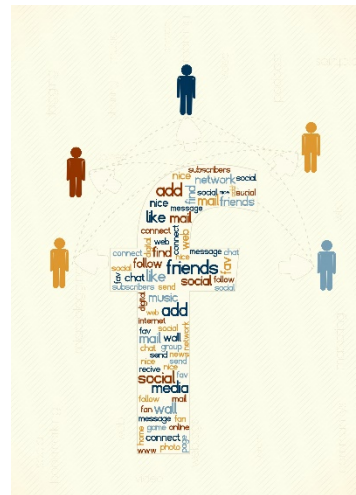
- Facebook Genealogy Groups
- Pinterest Family Groups
- Instagram
- Readit
- YouTube
- Blog posts on places like Blogger.com.

Consider starting your own Facebook group to share your family history discoveries with family and friends. You can make them public or private. I have several of these where we share photos, stories and memories.

If you do create a social media page, remember to capture those stories for your family history archives on your computer. Don't rely on Facebook to be your family history archive forever.

They're also a great way to write and share mini articles about your family, complete with pictures. Save these stories in one document, as it might become your genealogy book!

Also, don't forget search your ancestors with Google. You never know where it may lead you.



## BONUS TIPS

### Bonus Tip #1

#### Free Trials

Now that you've come this far and you've created a **"list of records for further investigation"**, now is the **time to turn on some free trials**. As a reminder, that list... is the list of records you couldn't access because they were behind the paywall or a subscription was required at Ancestry or other services. Now with a free trial, you should be able to get to those records.



In some cases, you'll 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'll be required to give them a credit card, although it won't be charged until your free trial expires.

If you choose *not* to continue with the subscription, you'll 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'll 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. Once you stop the free trial (without paying for it), 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'll 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.

## Here are my suggestions for free accounts and FREE TRIALS!

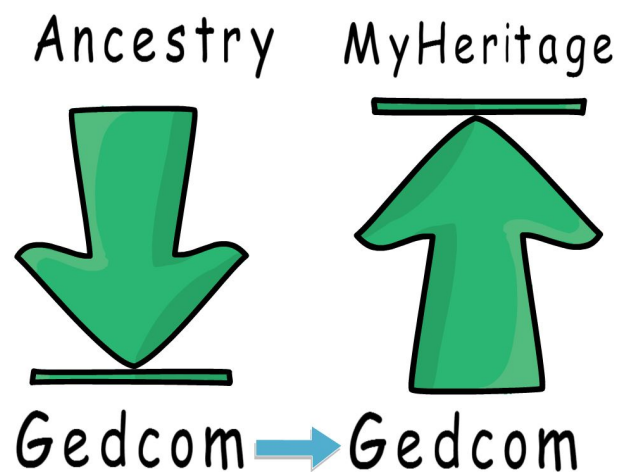
Full disclosure, two of these are the Genealogy TV affiliate links. Should you become a paid member through the Ancestry or the MyHeritage link, Genealogy TV will make a few pennies. I really appreciate you using affiliate links whenever possible. Every little bit helps support the Genealogy TV platform, so that I can continue to bring free educational resources to you. There is no extra cost to you by using affiliate links.

- To get started with a [FREE TRIAL at Ancestry GO HERE](#)
- [FamilySearch.org](#) is always free. Just go there and register.
- To get started with [a FREE TRIAL at MyHeritage.com - Complete Plan](#)

## BONUS TIP #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'll get the hint features for the records on the other services. I estimate that you'll find about 10-15% 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's done generating the file, you can click download. Just remember where you saved it. **Don't try to open it.** You'll then use that same file and upload 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](#).

## BONUS TIP #3

### FREE RESOURCES FROM GENEALOGY TV!

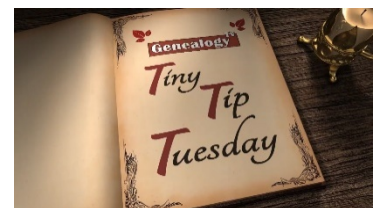
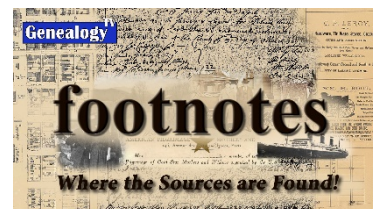


You can always find free educational resources here at Genealogy TV where you'll find multiple platforms to keep you informed.

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

At Genealogy TV, you'll find free videos on the YouTube channel for beginners to advanced genealogists. There are several programs produced there. Typically, there is a new video every Friday morning. These are usually either a ["footnotes"](#) or ["In Search of Your Family Tree"](#).

- The ["footnotes"](#) program is interviews with experts in their field. *"It's called footnotes, because it's in the footnotes where the real sources are!"*
- ["In Search of Your Family Tree"](#) is designed to educate you about the records, resources and how to use... various software and navigate websites to aid you in your research.
- ["Tiny Tip Tuesday's"](#) comes out... you guessed it... on Tuesday's in a short form video as information becomes available.
- ["Genealogy TV Live"](#) is the live show where viewers can ask questions in the chat window. It's just like live television, only it's on YouTube and is specifically designed for live interaction with the audience.



Times for the live show vary and are promoted to subscribers of the [Genealogy TV Newsletter](#), [Facebook page](#), and the [Genealogy TV YouTube Channel](#) in advance.



## Free resources on [GenealogyTV.org](https://www.genealogytv.org).

Here is where everything resides. There is a blog post for every video episode since February of 2018. If there is additional information about each episode, this is where it will be.

### Sign Up for the Free Newsletter.

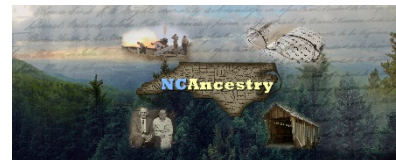
Each time there is a new video released, you can be notified by signing up for the newsletter [HERE](#).



**Genealogy TV Insiders** is group or individual coaching. These are conducted through virtual Zoom meetings and do have a fee. For more information about coaching sessions, go to <https://www.genealogytv.org/insiders/>.

**DONATIONS are always welcome.** You can use your credit card or Paypal account at [paypal.me/ConstanceKnox](https://www.paypal.me/ConstanceKnox). You do not need to have a Paypal account to use your credit card. I really appreciate it.

Lastly, for **North Carolina researchers**, check out the [NCAncestry.com](https://www.ncancestry.com) and [NC Ancestry on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...).



## That's a Wrap!

Whew! That was a lot of information to digest. Don't let the project be overwhelming. Take it a little bit at a time. Your ancestors aren't going anywhere. They'll 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!*