

Researching your family – getting started

Recall and Record Information About Your Family

With a pedigree chart in hand, recall as much information as you can about yourself and your family members. Fill in your name and information about yourself. Then fill in the names of and information about your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents, and so on as far back as you can. Estimate dates and guess at places if you have some idea of what they might be.

Record the information on the pedigree chart and family group record in the following way, using pencil so you can update information later.

Names: Robert Thomas Myers [first name, middle name, surname]

Dates: 4 Oct. 1896 [day, month, year]

Places: Tryon, Polk, NC [city, county, two-letter state abbreviation]

When you fill out a pedigree chart for the first time, you will probably notice that it does not have lines for some family history information, such as a brother's name or child's birth date. That information goes on a family group record.

In time you will want to fill out a family group record for each set of parents that you identify on your pedigree chart. To begin, fill out a family group record for yourself, for your immediate family, and for each ancestor. If you know the name of your grandfather and his siblings but not the names of their parents, you can leave the top of a form blank and begin with a list of children in that family.

Gather Information Within Your Family

Gather information about yourself and your immediate family. Sort through scrapbooks, photo albums, dresser drawers, closets, and boxes in storage. Some of the following items may be especially useful:

- Certificates of birth, marriage, or death
- Family Bibles
- Journals and diaries
- Letters and cards
- Photographs
- Obituaries and funeral programs
- Announcements of births and weddings
- Wills and deeds
- Military records
- Passports and citizenship documents
- School records

Look for anything that shows family names, dates (birth, marriage, and death), places, or relationships.

Visit your relatives, especially the older ones. Ask them to tell you stories and experiences that are a part of your family history, and write down or tape record what they say. Relatives can often identify faces in old photographs and clarify details in your family history that are not clear to you. Even if they do not know the specific facts, relatives can sometimes give clues. For example, they may know where family members are buried, and cemeteries are often a good source of birth and death dates. Relatives may also be able to help you contact others who remember more about your ancestors.

Select Specific Record(s) to Search

The following paragraphs describe some compiled and original records available in the United States. In other countries similar records are available. As you work on family history research, generally you should search compiled records first.

Compiled Records

Published Family Histories. Many families have written histories of their ancestry. These written accounts of families often contain records of several generations, along with photographs and family stories. Family histories can be found at some archives, at public and private libraries, and in the collections of genealogical and historical societies.

Biographies, Genealogies, and Local Histories. A biography is a written account of a person's life. A genealogy is a record of the descendants or ancestors of a person or family. Local histories most often contain descriptions of prominent people and families within a community. These types of compiled records can be found in the collections of public and university libraries and in the collections of genealogical and historical societies.

Original Records

Vital Records. Birth, marriage, and death records are known as vital records. Most states started keeping them around 1900, and some states kept them earlier. One place to begin your search for this type of record is at a state office of vital statistics. For earlier records, especially marriage records, the clerk's office at the county courthouse may be the best source.

Church Records. A church your ancestors attended might have kept records of their christenings, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, or burials. Church records are especially important if civil vital records are unavailable for that time and region. If you know an ancestor's religion and where he or she lived, you can visit or write to churches in that area.

Cemetery Records. A cemetery might provide names and dates available nowhere else. You may be able to learn the names of family members on headstones or in cemetery records. Headstone groupings and epitaphs might help you to establish the relationships between ancestors. Many cemetery records have been abstracted, published in genealogical periodicals, and microfilmed.

Census Records. The United States federal government has taken a census every ten years since 1790, and many states have taken their own censuses. Until 1850, federal census records named only the head of each household. Beginning with the 1850 census, every member of the household has been listed, along with sex, age, country or state of birth, and occupation. Census records are especially helpful because most have been indexed. The federal censuses through 1930 are available to the public. Many public, historical, and genealogical libraries have copies. A few states took their census in other years. Iowa is one of those.

Military Records. The names of millions of Americans who served in the military (or were eligible to serve) appear in military records. Some of these records are kept in federal archives, others by the states.

Probate Records. When a person dies, court records are often created containing a copy of the person's will (if one exists) and the court's decision about how the estate is to be distributed among heirs. These are called probate records, and they often provide names and family relationships. Probate records are usually filed at county courthouses.

Immigration Records. If you would like to learn the date, port, and ship on which an immigrant ancestor arrived in the United States, and if this ancestor arrived before 1820, you might be able to find these facts in printed sources. If your ancestor arrived after 1820, you can search passenger lists that were kept by the federal government.

This is just an introduction to researching.