

Finding the Living: Doing Descendancy Research

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What is descendancy research?

Traditionally, genealogists work from the present to the past—from the known to the unknown. Descendancy research flips this concept around, working from the past to the present. Rather than trying to identify all the *ancestors* of a known individual, descendancy research works to identify the *descendants* of a known individual.

Common goals of a descendancy research project include:

1. Bringing one individual's line to the present day on all branches.
2. Locating living relatives.
3. Identifying the total number of blood descendants of a single individual.

Why do descendancy research?

Descendancy research projects can help answer a number of questions that are not necessarily the focus of a traditional genealogy or family tree project. By undertaking a descendancy research project, you can:

1. Build out your ancestors' families to better understand kinship networks and generational relationships.
2. Participate in a family association or study project that aims to identify all the descendants of one individual or a group of individuals.
3. Better understand DNA matches or test out a paper-trail hypothesis by locating a potential cousin to test against.
4. Determine and locate next-of-kin in matters of heirship and inheritance.
5. Connect with previously unknown cousins to compare research notes, exchange photos, and swap stories.
6. Break down brick walls by getting a new perspective on your family.

Descendancy Research Resources

Doing descendancy research involves consulting many of the same repositories and resources as used in traditional genealogy. Vital records, land records, census records, city directories, church records, and cemetery records all play an important role in descendancy research. Just like in traditional genealogy, descendancy research aims to use records to document each generation, but the goal is to bring the line closer to the present day rather than further back in time.

Understanding research strategies, standards, resources, and record types for traditional genealogy is an important part of successfully doing descendancy research.

General Genealogy Guides

NEHGS has published subject guides on a variety of research topics and geographic locations. The complete list can be found at <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read>. Particularly useful are:

- “Getting Started” by Ann Lawthers
- “Getting Organized” by Rhonda R. McClure
- “Choosing a Genealogical Software Program”
- “Using AmericanAncestors.org” by Molly Rogers
- “DNA and Genealogy” by Tom Dreyer

Previous webinars covering various aspects of genealogy are also available for viewing at <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/watch>. Recommended lectures are:

- “First Steps in Family History” by Ann Lawthers (June 11, 2020)
- “NextGen Tools for Advancing Your Family History Research” by Melanie McComb (September 19, 2019)
- “Raising the Dead: Finding Clues to Ancestors from Headstones, Family Plots, and Burial Records” by David Allen Lambert (November 15, 2018)
- “Using New England Probate Records” by David Allen Lambert (May 31, 2016)
- “Using the U.S. Federal Census” by Lindsay Fulton (February 18, 2016)
- “Mining the Treasures in Newspapers” by Rhonda R. McClure (September 30, 2015)

General Genealogy Websites

These websites contain extensive collections covering a wide variety of record types, including but not limited to vital, census, land, church, cemetery, and probate records; city directories; local and regional history books; published genealogies; and more.

- <https://www.americanancestors.org/>
- <https://www.ancestry.com/>
- <https://www.familysearch.org/search/>
 - Access the catalog (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>) and enter a place name such as a county to view all collections related to that location.

Some record types can be particularly useful for descendency research projects. For earlier generations, these include probate records, court records, and newspapers. Information on more recent generations and living descendants can also be found by examining online directories and profiles, public records, tax or property assessments, and general internet searches.

Probate Records

Probate records are key to 18th- and 19th-century descendency research. In the pre-vital record era, these may be the only records in existence that explicitly name family members and their relationships to one another. Probate records include a variety of document types created by the probate court. Most common are wills and documents related to the administration of an estate. However, probate courts in some locations also handled matters of guardianship, adoption, dower rights, and divorce. Probate records are typically held at the county level.

Guides to probate records:

- Portable Genealogist: Using Probate Records by Tricia Healy Mitchell, available for purchase from the NEHGS bookstore.
- NEHGS Lecture: “Using New England Probate Records” by David Allen Lambert (May 31, 2016).
- “U.S. Probate Records,” FamilySearch, https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Probate_Records.
- Stuart A. Raymond, *Words from wills and other probate records, 1500-1800 : a glossary*, (Bury: Federation of Family History Societies Ltd, 2004).

Locating probate records:

- Search the database catalog of AmericanAncestors.org (<https://www.americanancestors.org/browse-database>) or Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog>) for “probate” and the location you are researching, for example, “Essex County Probate” to find the relevant collection
- Search the FamilySearch.org catalog (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>) in the same manner using a Keyword search, or search by place and then navigate to the associated “Probate records” collection
- Check the FamilySearchWiki page (https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page) for your location to determine what probate records are extant

Newspapers

Historically, newspapers reported not just the news, but what was going on in the day-to-day lives of local residents and are therefore a rich resource for both traditional genealogy and descendant research. They are particularly useful when doing 19th- and 20th-century research, but can also be helpful for 18th- and 21st-century research projects.

An obituary—a notice of a person’s death containing a short biographical sketch—can help prove family relationships and provide a last known residence, as well as other identifying details such as occupation, religion, or origins. However, by reading other types of newspaper articles closely (birth, marriage, birthday, promotion, or graduation announcements; notices regarding comings and goings of town residents; and more) there is much to be found in newspaper archives beyond the obituary.

Guides to newspaper research:

- NEHGS Lecture: “Mining the Treasures in Newspapers” by Rhonda R. McClure (September 30, 2015).
- Loretto Dennis Szucs and James L. Hansen, “Overview of Newspapers in Family History,” RootsWeb, https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Overview_of_Newspapers_in_Family_History
- “U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present,” Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>
- “Newspapers,” Cyndi’s List, <https://www.cyndislist.com/newspapers/>
- Ian C. Lohrman, *Chronicling the legacy of your ancestors : how to establish descendant records through obituary research*, (Salem, Ore.: PFRE Media LLC, 2016).
- James M. Biedler, *The family tree historical newspapers guide: how to find your ancestors in archived newspapers*, (Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2018).

Digital newspaper archives (incomplete list):

- Chronicling America (Free) - <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
- Newspapers.com (\$) - <https://newspapers.com/>
- GenealogyBank.com (\$) - <https://www.genealogybank.com/>
- NewspaperArchive.com (\$) - <https://newspaperarchive.com/>
- Early American Newspapers, Series I, 1690-1876 (Institution @ NEHGS) - <https://www.americanancestors.org/Search/External-Databases>
- 19th Century U.S. Newspapers (Institution @ NEHGS) - <https://www.americanancestors.org/Search/External-Databases>
- Google News Archive (Free) - <https://news.google.com/newspapers>
- NYS Historic Newspapers (Free, New York State) - <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>
- Fulton History (Free, U.S. & Canada, mostly New York State) - <https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>
- Georgia Historic Newspapers (Free, Georgia) - <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>
- Illinois Digital Newspaper Collection (Free, Illinois) - <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/>
- California Digital Newspaper Collection (Free, California) - <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc>



- Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection (Free, Colorado) - <https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/>
- Check public libraries for digital or physical collections of local papers.

U.S. Public Records

The “U.S. Public Records Index” on Ancestry.com and similarly-named “United States Public Records, 1970-2009” on FamilySearch.org are searchable databases that contain information extracted from city directories, phone books, property tax assessments, and other public records between about the 1950s and the 2000s. Database entries may contain a name, birth date (or birth month and year), address, and phone number. Some of the entries also give a residence year.

The Ancestry.com databases can also be searched by address, by entering the street address in quotes as the Keyword “10 Main,” entering the town as the Location, and setting both search parameters to *Exact*. When searching this way, it is not necessary to also enter a name, although searching with both a surname and address can be useful. Performing an address search can help identify other family members.

Online public records databases:

- U.S. Public Records Index, Vol. 1 (\$) - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1788/>
- U.S. Public Records Index, Vol. 2 (\$) - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1732/>
- United States Public Records, 1970-2009 (Free) - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2199956>

Directories and Online “People Finders”

City directories are a standard tool in traditional genealogy research. They can also be useful when doing descendancy research. As more information has gone online in recent years, digital directories and “people finder” websites have largely replaced traditional printed directories.

When searching for living relatives, using online “people finder” websites can provide clues to confirm an individual’s identity and determine their current place of residence. Many websites pull information from various public records and online profiles to create an online directory of people. Some of these websites are free, while others require subscriptions or a one-time fee to view the information (often termed a “report”). These websites typically provide a name, approximate age, current location, address or phone number, possible relatives, possible associates, and previous residences. Information obtained from these websites should be used as hints, to be verified against more reliable sources. These websites can conflate individuals—they do not do a good job of differentiating between two (distinct) individuals with the same or similar names. Some of these websites cannot handle a search for an individual who has more than one given name or surname (e.g. “John Robert Smith” or “Eleanor Scott Gilbert”).

Most of these websites will appear in search results when searching a name (e.g. “John Smith”) on a general web search engine (such as Google).

Guides to historic city directories:

- “Directories: City, County, Address, etc.,” Cyndi’s List, <https://www.cyndislist.com/directories/general/>.
- NEHGS Lecture: “City and Rural Directories: More Than Just Names,” by Rhonda R. McClure (October 19, 2017).
- Online Historical Directories Website, <https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite/>.

Online directories and “People Finder” websites:

- WhitePages - <https://www.whitepages.com/>
- AnyWho - <https://www.anywho.com/>
- Spokeo - <https://www.spokeo.com/>
- True People Search - <https://www.truepeoplesearch.com/>
- Been Verified - <https://www.beenverified.com/>
- Radaris - <https://radaris.com/>
- Intelius - <https://www.intelius.com/>
- PeopleFinders - <https://www.peoplefinders.com/>

Digital and digitized city directories:

- U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995 (\$) - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/>
- U.S., Phone and Address Directories, 1993-2002 (\$) - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7339/>
- United States City and Business Directories, ca. 1749-ca. 1990 (Free) - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3754697>

Property Assessor/Tax Assessor's Records

Property and tax assessments are created by a local government official to determine the value of and amount of tax owed on a property. However, this information can be useful to genealogists when searching for living relatives. Current tax or property assessment records are a great way to confirm an address located on a less-reliable or out-of-date website, like one of the online directories or “people finder” sites named above.

These records are often, but not always, available for free online. They can be maintained at the town, county, or state level. The best way to determine whether these records are available is to use an internet search engine (such as Google) to search for “[Location Name] Tax Assessor” or “[Location Name] Property Assessor.”

Tax or property assessment websites can often be searched by the owner name. This is the most helpful type of search. Some websites do not allow this and require a search be performed using an address.

Once a property assessment has been located, review the assessment for the current owner (or owners) names, the property address, and the *mailing* address of the owner, which may be different. Examining historic sales data for a property (often available as part of a property assessment) can also provide clues to locate a living relative.

Social Media

Once you have taken a line down to the present-day, social media can be a useful tool to both locate living relatives and connect with them. There are countless social media platforms available today, but Facebook and LinkedIn tend to be the most useful as genealogical resources.

Social media profiles—created by the user, unlike the online “people finder” profiles that are created by a computer harvesting data from other sites—can be used to verify someone’s identity. Profiles such as those on Facebook allow for the user to provide personal data, such as birthdate, hometown, current place of residence, occupation, and even list family members. The user can also determine how much of this information is available to anyone (the public) and how much is available only to their “Friends.”

People use social media to talk about various aspects of their life, and often celebrate and memorialize family members as well. Examining a user’s social media profile may reveal information about themselves or their family members such as: age, birthdate, anniversaries, death date, and relationships. Additionally, examining the Friends list of one user can lead you to new possible relatives.