

Part 1



The Fundamentals



If You're New to Genealogy

Just by picking up this book, you've revealed that you're curious about your roots. And if you're curious about your roots, you're in good company! Millions of people are digging into the past, and the good news is that it's easier today than ever before. In fact, we tend to tell so-called newbies that they were smart to wait! One of us has been researching her family for 33 years and has learned more in the past 8 years than in the first quarter of a century.

This is largely because of the impressive and ever-growing collection of online and other resources. In fact, we recently conducted an experiment involving 33 popular genealogical resources. When we inspected the list, we discovered that 11 of them were not available a decade ago (such as www.ellisland.org, www.findagrave.com, and the 1930 U.S. census released in 2002) and 22 of them existed, but were less accessible (such as resources now searchable at www.familysearch.org, the *Social Security Death Index*, which conveniently lists most Americans who have died since 1962,

and every name indexes for the 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1930 U.S. census). Just 10 years ago, the notion of being able to search fully indexed and digitized records at home in your pj's was a wild fantasy. But it's reality now, and like good 21st-century citizens, we already take this previously unimaginable ability for granted!

If you're new to the game of family history research, we invite you to spend a little time with us as we cover the basics. You may be anxious to jump right into DNA testing, but a bit of genealogical effort invested upfront will ensure that you won't find yourself staring at a report with a bunch of numbers and scratching your head. Your venture into genealogy will be much more fruitful if you learn some ABCs. Even if you're an old pro, you may wish to consider giving this chapter a skim to acquaint yourself with some genealogical nuances as they pertain to DNA testing.

Thousands of books and millions of Web sites are devoted to family history, so we won't go into great depth (although you'll be able to find more resources in Appendix A). Rather, we'll share enough to help you avoid the most common pitfalls that even seasoned roots-seekers occasionally fall prey to. Developing a few good habits early can save you days, weeks, and even months of frustration, so we'll start with some useful guidelines.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

We know. You want to get a running start. You want to jump on the Internet or dash out to the nearest library or archive to find everything you can on your family. So don't hate us for telling you that you need to start at home.

Surfing the Internet is so easy—and on the surface—so gratifying, but it's apt to be a time-waster if you haven't done your groundwork. If you have a common name, you'll find yourself overwhelmed with the millions of sites that might shelter tidbits about your family. And even if your name is somewhat unusual, you'll probably be startled by how many hits you get when you type it in. A search on the borderline freakish name of Smolenyak will serve up almost 1,500 listings to wade through, so heaven help you if your name is Van Aalst (20,000+), Smithson (175,000+),

Pennington (1 million+), or Nichols (2.4 million+)! Maybe there aren't a lot of people with your name in your town, but there are a lot on the planet, and researching or contacting them all is an inefficient method of learning about the ones in your family tree.

And while conducting on-site research in records repositories should definitely be on your genealogical to-do list, it's best to look first for the treasures that may be lurking in your closets, drawers, basements, and attics—and especially the minds of your older relatives. Many a genealogist has been chagrined to finally discover an elusive maiden name, birth date, or village of origin after a year of research, only to find this same information in a suitcase of old papers tucked into the corner of their own cellar. And there's nothing quite as deflating as calling your great-aunt Mildred to announce your latest discovery only to have her reply, "I could have told you that."

To give you a feel of what you're looking for when you play detective in your own home (or maybe your parents', if they'll let you), here are a few items that are the equivalent of genealogical gold:

- Birth, marriage, and death certificates
- Newspaper clippings including obituaries and wedding and anniversary announcements
- Naturalization and citizenship papers, including passports and visas
- Religious records (baptismal, Bar Mitzvah)
- Family bible
- Letters and addressed envelopes
- Diaries and journals
- Photo albums
- Any other documents pertaining to your ancestors (military, school, occupational, business, land, legal)
- Heirlooms such as engraved items, samplers, and quilts

And if there's anyone in the family your age or older (and by family, we mean even that second cousin who lives in Denver whom you haven't seen since your sister's wedding back in 1984), pick up the phone! Not next week or next month—today! Talk with them immediately, if only to arrange a time to meet or call to learn more. Do not allow yourself to become one of the millions who bemoan the fact that they didn't ask questions when their parents/grandparents/aunts/uncles/cousins were still alive. If you were to eavesdrop at a genealogical conference or research venue, you'd be amazed how many times you'd hear comments starting with "If only I had . . ."

Draw up an initial list of questions you'd like answered, and be sure to ask about anyone else they think you should contact. Virtually every family has an avid genealogist, and you can be sure that older family members will know who that person is because they will have already spoken with him. Canvassing the relatives like this will turn up countless details that may not have trickled down your direct line. Your mother may not know that her grandmother had the maiden name of Doran, but there's a reasonable chance that one of her cousins does.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR OR READ

Yes, we've just asked you to contact your assorted kinfolk and pummel them with questions, but that doesn't mean you have to accept everything they say as fact. We know this in everyday life, but for some reason, we seem to forget this when it comes to our family history. Because we obtain much of this information from relatives—and everyone knows that Great-aunt Tillie never lies—our family lore takes on the veneer of absolute truth. Many of us will accept oral tradition over the documented paper trail.

How many of us, for instance, have a family legend about our names being changed at Ellis Island? Great-grandpa couldn't speak English and had a difficult time communicating, so the inspectors listed him with the same name as the fellow in line before him. Or the immigration officials couldn't pronounce the surname, so they lopped off the last syllable or two. The reality is that the manifests