



# DIGGING UP ROOTS

**The INS and OUTS of creating your own family tree.**

**WARNING:** Delving into your family's history is bound to cause sleep deprivation, delight in visiting cemeteries, and obsessive tendencies when it comes to scraps of paper and online hints. Genealogical searches are fascinating journeys revealing the illustrious—and sometimes infamous—characters that weave the fibers of each generation. *By Amy Grisak*

**“It has become a very popular hobby,”** notes Sherri (Souleyrette) Bradley, an avid genealogist and the national coordinator of the USGenWeb Project, an all-volunteer organization whose goal is to provide information, free of charge, for those looking to unearth their family’s history.

Bradley dove headlong into family research when she wanted to present her father with a special gift for his 75th birthday. Initially, she thought there were roughly 45 members in her family; little did she realize there was a big branch no one knew existed.

“We have a very distinctive last name,” she says. But there were 4 different spellings starting before her family emigrated from France. Throughout the generations, mothers died in childbirth, and there were many half siblings. To make the matter more confusing, Bradley’s great great-grandfather and his sibling were alienated from the others.

“Nobody knew anything about anyone else,” she says. “There was a break in the family. Evidently there was no contact with the half siblings.”

By the time Bradley connected the pieces of the puzzle, she found a great-aunt in the county next to her, and had 165 relatives from 11 states join the family reunion. As with many genealogical projects, what starts as a seemingly simple endeavor is full of surprises.

## How to start



**T**he hardest part of a genealogical project is determining where to start. One initial consideration is how you’re going to keep all of the information in order, and the best method completely depends on your personal preference.

Some researchers prefer a good old-fashioned spiral-bound notebook or a 3-ring binder where they can physically write down the information, often in pencil. This

information is easily hauled to interviews and reunions. If a blank piece of paper intimidates you there are a number of spreadsheets and forms available on various websites.

There are also computer-based programs that organize your information automatically. This takes out the guesswork on where people go in the whole scheme of things, although you have to be more careful because if you accidentally put someone in the wrong spot it can affect the entire tree.

Whether you handwrite it or upload information on the computer, you can opt for a pedigree form, which is the classic family tree look with the branches reaching out and growing up; or you can opt for family sheets that list the information in greater detail. You’ll need a sheet for every family member so it can become bulky. There’s really no right or wrong way to do it as long as you can keep it organized.

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## What to record



**T**he best way to start is to go with what you know. This means you. Record the relevant dates—birth, marriage, divorce (if applicable), and your children’s birthdates.

After your information is entered, start down the line. Talk to your parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Take notes, or better yet, use a digital recorder or video camera when you talk to them so you have a permanent reference.

When relatives are willing to talk to you about details, take full advantage of this valuable resource. Go beyond the basics by recording family stories. The personalities and a better understanding of family members come alive when there are stories to enhance the names and dates. Ask questions such as, “What was it like growing up with a dozen siblings? What did you do for fun?” Details that seem mundane now are delightful bits of information for future generations.

Because families are often spread out, it’s helpful to enlist willing relatives to do some of the legwork for you. Marjorie (Puzon) Gillis of Montana worked on her husband’s family tree, which involved several states and more than a century-long timeline.

Gillis explains, “I worked with one person in each family.” This way she collected stories and names to add to her notebook even on deceased distant members.

An intriguing addition to a well-rounded family tree is the cause of death. Gillis included copies of death certificates because it demonstrates patterns of family health. If multiple uncles died of heart disease or four generations of the women in the family battled breast cancer, they are obviously conditions worth noting.

Accept whatever photos you can get from relatives. Be absolutely certain to take notes somehow—either on the photo or on a copy of it—identifying who is in the photo, where it was taken, when if possible, and what’s happening. Do not trust your memory. When you’re pulling together the final project, it’s a very nice touch to copy them and include them in the family pages.



## Dig into records

Once you've exhausted your living resources, it's time to hit the records. There are websites, both paid and free of charge, which offer vital record information. It's truly remarkable to find a draft record or marriage license with your relative's own signature. Like the personal stories, it's those details that bring them to life.

"Church records are really good," says Gillis. There you will find baptismal and wedding records, which provide important dates, particularly during the era when many children were born at home and birth records were few.

The online resources make initial searches tremendously easier, but they're not perfect. What you can't find online is probably waiting for you in county courthouses, churches, or local libraries. Call ahead to inform the office staff what you're looking for, since the older records might take longer to find.

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**FREE SITES** There are a multitude of websites to help you start and continue your search, as well as provide opportunities for you to help others. Here are a handful that will undoubtedly hook you.

- **USGenWeb Project** – [www.usgenweb.org](http://www.usgenweb.org) – This all-volunteer group has coordinators in every state and offers thousands of websites brimming with information. They're also involved in the Tombstone Project and considerable work in Civil War information.
- **Family Search** – [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is renowned for their diligent work in genealogical research. They also have over 4,500 FamilySearch centers where knowledgeable volunteers offer classes and can assist in your family history quest.
- **Cyndi's List** – [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com) With hundreds of thousands of links to genealogical sites, this is the proverbial one-stop shopping for family history research.
- **Find-a-Grave** – [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com) – There are millions of tombstone listings on this site. It's a great way to find dates of

births, deaths, and sometimes marriages, as well as previously unknown children's names (sometimes the babies who passed away aren't listed in records).

**There are plenty of places where you can find free family tree forms. Here are a few options:**

- **Family Tree Magazine** – <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/FREEFORMS> They offer pages to keep track of your sources, source lists to record where you found specific information, as well as family correspondence pages to organize your discussions.
- **Brigham Young University Broadcasting** <http://www.byub.org/ancestors/charts/> They have excellent family page and pedigree forms in PDF formats, as well as resource pages.
- **Ancestry.com** – [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) Go to the Learning Center and "Building a tree" to download free forms and charts.

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## **What to do if you're stuck**

**D**espite diligent searches online and in person, sometimes you hit the proverbial “brick wall.” There are situations where information is lost because of a disaster, or family members leave due to unknown circumstances.

When you are searching documents, be flexible. “If you have a census page, check the page before and the page after,” says Bradley. “My best suggestion is to post your queries online,” says Bradley. Although it might feel like you’re the only one delving into your family’s history, you’ll be amazed at the others who are searching.

And if you’re still not finding an answer she says, “A lot of times, just a fresh look will make a difference.” Set aside that particular person or question and continue on another path.

## **Pay it forward**

**A**s government agencies tighten the availability of vital record information due to identity theft concerns, Bradley said it’s increasingly more important to have these records on genealogical websites so they remain available to those looking for their family history.

“They’re cutting down the information we can get on the Social Security death index,” she says. It’s equally important because old records can be lost forever. “If you lose all of the records in the courthouse to a fire or flood, they are gone,” says Bradley. “I can’t locate the marriage license of my grandparents. In 1924, the courthouse where they were married burned, and all of the records were destroyed.” This is why it’s critical to have digitized copies that are easily shared.

The USGenWeb Project, which started its efforts in 1996, is one example of how genealogists help one another. “We are a wonderful group, totally volunteers,” says Bradley. “It’s something very special.”

Bradley explains the USGenWeb Project would like to start a service where people throughout the country can look up records and peruse cemeteries for those who live out of town, but it takes willing volunteers. “It’s genealogists helping genealogists,” she says. “If you find a record that’s part of your family, transcribe it and donate it. If you go to a cemetery take tombstone photos of your family, and submit it.”

At the USGenWeb Project volunteers can “adopt” counties where they look up information for researchers and continually upload new data. There are also special projects, such as the Archives Project, where you can donate the information you find on your own family to include in the database.

“That’s how we grow,” says Bradley. “We will be here, we will not go away, and we will not charge for the information we have.”

Researching the family tree is a special project. “It’s surprising where it might lead you,” says Gillis.