

Fitting the Pieces Together:  
The Puzzle of Genealogy  
January 14, 2007

There are many reasons someone starts down the path of genealogy research:

- To find out about their ancestors
- Historical research for a book or other publication
- Simply curious about something you saw, heard, read or perhaps purchased

Some of us are very lucky and have had family histories, family bibles, heirlooms, photographs, oral histories and more handed down from generation to generation. Many of more of us didn't.



Luckily, the ever growing internet offers an untold number of resources at your fingertips.

Subscription based genealogy sites like [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) and [Genealogy.com](http://Genealogy.com) have thousands of records, databases and histories to search. They include census records, maps, birth and death records, newspapers, military records, photos and more, almost any type of record you could hope to find, with more added every day. They also have downloadable forms to help you make sense of your research. New is genetic genealogy, helping you connect with your past and distant relatives based on your DNA! And while science is making strides, and the computer lets you do your research without leaving home, there are many records that technology still hasn't caught up with. Local, county and state facilities, like libraries, museums and cemeteries have a wealth of information that isn't available on line. Wills, deeds, headstones, local histories and more hold clues that you may not find anywhere else.

When you start down the path of researching your family tree, understand there's a plethora of information to sift through. It's important to keep in mind that everything you find on line may not be valid, and while old documents and records may be more fact-based, they aren't always 100% accurate either. Remember, many of the old records were hand written, so whether you've got the original, or a transcribed copy, you're still relying on the spelling and handwriting of the author or transcriber.

The federal census is probably one of the most consistent records we have, starting in 1790, and available to the public though 1930. But the census didn't always get things right either. They were taken at the federal level every 10 years, but ometimes the age differences don't support that math from one census to the next. In the early census records, only heads of household were listed, followed by categories of others

in the home, for example Males Under age 5 or Between 15 and 20. By 1850, names of all in the household were included, but the relationships between them weren't provided until 1880. And like the curiosities with the math from census to census, names aren't always, like the use of a first name on year, and a middle name another. And then there are people who are on one census record and are never seen again, and those who never made it to the census at all. That's where other records, like newspapers, maps, or legal documents. like birth or marriage records, wills and deeds can help fill in the blanks. Headstones, while they may be weathered and difficult to read, will offer information like birth and death years, the wife's maiden name, or the parents' names when the deceased was a young child. The grouping of headstones suggests that the individuals are somehow related, and many names inscribed on a single monument often provide you with links to generations.

Antique photographs, even if the subject is unidentified, can also provide clues. The carte de visite, or CDV, was introduced in the 1850's. It was usually a thin paper photograph mounted on a thicker 2.5 x 4 inch paper card. These were all the rage during the Civil War, and people traded and collected them like baseball cards. They were replaced, for the most part, by the larger cabinet cards in the 1870's. The cardstock and borders can also help narrow down the date. Photographers replenished their supply of card stock about every six months and card manufacturers encouraged this demand by bringing out a new line of decorative cards each year. A US Internal Revenue stamp can also date the image to the two year period between August 1, 1864 and August 1, 1866 when they were used.

As interesting, and sometimes addictive as genealogy research is, you very often will hit a brick wall. When that happens, it's important to understand where to look for other clues, and when to give it a rest for a while, especially when you have a family with a pervasive first name! Remember, two of the key components in genealogy research are patience and luck. Keep trying because you never know which nugget of information will set you on a path to breaking down your brick walls.