

## **Getting Started With Your Family History**

Begin your family tree by gathering together everything you have -- papers, photos, documents and family heirlooms. Rummage through your attic or basement (don't we wish we had one!), the filing cabinet, the back of the closet.... Then check with your relatives to see if they have any family documents they are willing to share. Clues to your family history might be found on the backs of old photographs, in the family bible, or even on a postcard. If your relative is uneasy with lending an original, offer to have copies made.

While you're collecting family records, set aside some time to interview your relatives. Start with Mom and Dad (if they're still living, or consider any of the other older members of your family and then move on from there.) Try to collect stories, not just names and dates, and be sure to ask open-ended questions. This may be the most important step in researching your family history. It may sound cliché, but don't put it off until it's too late!

Look for the records of your ancestors including wills; birth, marriage and death records; land deeds; immigration records; etc. If you do not have these documents, you will probably want to order them.

Write down everything you have learned from your family and begin to enter the information in a pedigree chart and family group sheets. These charts provide a road map to your family, making it easy to track your research progress.

Select a single surname, individual, or family with which to begin. Focusing your family history search helps keep your research on track, and reduces the chance of missing important details. As much as you might want to, you can't do it all at once. Start with a manageable search.

Explore the Internet for information and leads on your ancestors. Good places to start include pedigree databases, message boards, and resources specific to your ancestor's location. In this class we have discussed many of these places on the internet, and we will again in the next few weeks.

Organize your new information -- take notes, make photocopies, etc. Make sure you save and date everything! Find an organizational tool that works for you. You may want to begin with 3-ring binders, or file folders.

Visit the place where your family lived -- look at cemeteries, courthouses, churches, etc. for information.

Make sure you continue to document everything, including taking pictures. You never know when you might need it.

When you have gone as far as you can go, step back and take a break. Maybe this is a good time to choose a new ancestor to start searching for.

Remember to have fun!