

GETTING STARTED IN GENEALOGY

Genealogical research involves looking for specific people in specific places at specific times. The best place to start is with living family members.

Collect information from your family through interviews, Bible and other family records, and cemetery inscriptions. Using this information, fill in an ancestor chart with names of known ancestors. Record your name in space 1, your father's name in space 2, and your mother's maiden name in space 3. Add the names of your father's parents in spaces 4 and 5 and the names of your mother's parents in spaces 6 and 7. Record the date and place for each birth, marriage, and death known, as well as the sources of your information. Add new ancestors in the same manner as they are discovered and proven.

Begin your research in the Government and Heritage Library by checking the [catalog](http://catalog.ncdcr.gov) (<http://catalog.ncdcr.gov>) to see if there is a compiled genealogy of your family. Check to see if there are published indexes, abstracts, or transcriptions of records for a specific place and time. For information on organizing your research, consult *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy*, by Christine Rose and Kay Germain Ingalls (2nd ed., 2005).

Continue to trace the family through vital records, census records, wills, estates records, marriage records, land records, tax records, and court records.

Vital records (births/deaths) were not kept in North Carolina on a statewide basis before October 1913. For most counties, microfilm indexes of births and deaths (1913-) are available to researchers who visit the Archives Search Room. Death certificates, 1913-1975, are in the custody of the North Carolina State Archives. All birth certificates (1913-) and death certificates (c1975-) are held by Vital Records, NC Department of Health and Human Services.

An essential tool in researching your family's history is the United States census, the official count of our country's population taken every 10 years since 1790 to determine each state's number of Congressional representatives. Each census locates an ancestor in a specific place at a specific time and often points the way to further searches in other records. Federal population census schedules may be searched through electronic databases such as *HeritageQuest* and *Ancestry.com* or *Ancestry Library Edition*, or by using microfilm of these records and printed or microfilm indexes available at many libraries. Privacy laws prohibit public access of federal census population records for 72 years after the date taken.

Systematically find and record each ancestor and his/her household in all censuses. Be imaginative and open to variations in spelling of names. Begin with the latest available census in which your earliest proven ancestor might have appeared. Systematically work backward in each preceding census, noting changes in households through the years.

Always look at the census record, not just the database record preview or the index. Copy the entire census image or if reading microfilm, make printouts or use census forms to record all information for the entire household. Record neighbors in 10 to 15 households on each side of the ancestor. Data collected by enumerators varies by census year and may include relationship, occupation, value/ownership of real estate and/or personal property, literacy, ownership of slaves, and neighbors. This data identifies a particular person and can help to distinguish two people with the same name as well as give clues to other sources of information.

- The 1940, 1930, 1920, 1910, 1900, and 1880 censuses state the relationship of each person in the household to the head of the household and can be used as substitutes for nonexistent birth certificates. The 1890 census has been destroyed except for a few fragments; a partial census of Union veterans survives.
- Both 1900 and 1910 censuses indicate the number of years a couple has been married. The 1930 census indicates age at first marriage. Use this information to search county marriage records. Marriage licenses (after 1872 in North Carolina) should indicate the names of the parents of the bride and groom.
- **1870 is the first census naming all African-Americans.** To research families thought to have been slaves, look at all their neighbors (regardless of race) for other family members and possible former owners. For information about slaves before 1865, study records of the slave owners: census schedules (slave and free), wills, estates records, deeds, bills of sale, and any family papers which may be found in manuscript collections. For further strategies and a list of suggested readings, consult our handout "[Finding Slave Records](#)," available also on our website.
- Beginning in 1850 the census form recorded the birthplace of each individual; though generally limited to the state or country, this information provides important clues to place of previous residence and approximate year of migration from the earlier residence.

Censuses from 1840 backward to 1790 listed only heads of households by name but divided everyone into age groups by male and female.

- Despite the absence of names for others, this data must be recorded and analyzed in comparison with the information found on later censuses. Search for an individual or family 10 years younger in each earlier census.
- Search databases or published statewide census indexes to locate earlier states and counties in which your ancestor appears. Look for all households of the same surname in the same county or adjacent counties and for surnames of neighbors recorded in later censuses. Copy or record all information for everyone in the household, both free and slave.
- The neighbors will help you determine the previous county of residence, where you will search for records of your ancestor. For further suggestions in finding the North Carolina county from which your ancestor came, see our handout "[Tracking an Ancestor Back to North Carolina](#)" (also on our website) and the article "People Finders for North Carolina" by Jeffrey L. Haines in *The North Carolina Genealogical Society Journal* 35 (February 2009): 5-14.

Next proceed to records of the county in which your ancestor lived. Search wills and/or settlements of estates of those who may have died. Look for marriage records of those who may have married. Look for deeds that record the ancestor's purchases, sales, or gifts of land. Also study tax lists, court records, bonds, and other county records. Extensive research in records of the county where your ancestors lived will help you recreate the lives of your ancestors and their families.