

2007 Guerilla Genealogy

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As genealogists we are constantly asked, “If I want to start researching my family tree, how do I start?”. This is a quick and dirty guide to beginning genealogy. If you want to begin researching your ancestors for whatever reason, and recording what you find, this is the most organized and understandable way to get started. We have assumed three things in writing this article.

1. You have a modern computer.
2. You will acquire some genealogy software to record your information.
3. You will be joining a comprehensive on-line genealogy research site, where you will do much of your data research.

Most genealogists that we know have all three of these, or eventually get them. That’s not to say you can’t do any research without them (if you can’t afford them). It is just that this is the easiest and quickest way. Without the above three things, beginning genealogy research becomes much more time consuming, slower and possibly even more expensive (depending on travel). But, we will admit, the rewards of hands-on research are infinite and it is actually fun to do. Still, this article is to tell you the most organized and quickest way to start. So read on if you are completely serious about this hobby.

Step one - So, You Have a Computer and Need Some Genealogy Software?

Get one of these five (5) editions of genealogy record keeping software. Do not even look at any others. We do not endorse one over the other and get no advertising revenue from any company mentioned in this article. It is a good idea to get the software first so that you can immediately enter data as you find it. If you hand write notes on genealogy forms or take your own style of notes, when you get serious about this hobby you will eventually want some genealogy software to enter all of the data. So buy that first, before the notes pile up!

Some of these may come “free” with a subscription to a research service (such as Ancestry.com). You have to keep watch because these deals come and go. Totally free software (not in a package like the one just mentioned) usually has some limitations or reduced capabilities, but is still very useable for most people. Listed are the 2007 prices. Get the product shipped to you, if possible, and don’t just download from the Internet. This gives you a backup if the software is ever ruined on your computer.

1. PAF (free from Family Search)
<http://www.familysearch.org/>
2. Family Tree Maker (\$39.95)
<http://www.familytreemaker.com/>
3. Legacy (standard edition is free, otherwise \$29.99 & up)
<http://www.legacyfamilytree.com/>

4. Roots Magic (\$29.95 & up)
<http://www.rootsmagic.com/>
5. The Master Genealogists (\$34.00 & up)
<http://www.whollygenes.com/>

Don't want to make a decision or research the differences between these?

We use Family Tree Maker and like it well enough. Most of it we do not use though. Sometimes you can get it free when registering for a paid subscription to an on-line research site. You'll have to browse to these sites and find out or do a search using Google, Excite, Yahoo, etc. The on-line reviews pick Legacy version 6.0, Family Tree Maker and Roots Magic as the best deals. So either of those would be good! We've seen Roots Magic free with some paid research site registrations as well. Any of the below will do what you need 99% of the time, even if you don't get the latest version! Expect a learning curve for any software you use. Please take all the training provided with your software.

Step Two – Initial Gathering of Information

Gather and take notes of the information that you have personally as well as information from living members of your family. Don't be surprised if some family members are not happy about your research. Almost all genealogists encounter this! Your first job is to gather all of the reliable information you can, preferably before going on-line for research. What you learn will help you corroborate what you find on-line.

Record all of this information in your new genealogy software immediately as you gather it.

Step Three – On-line research Services

Look at the on-line services that offer complete census data, to see which one looks the best to join. Just make sure it has the most complete census data, preferably actual scans of the census records. You will be using census records as much or more than any other type of record, when starting out. There are only three on-line services / sites that have the complete census.

1. www.genealogy.com
2. www.ancestry.com
3. <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>

Heritage Quest (#3) is free to you if you go to a library or society that has a subscription to it. You can't get it at home. That makes this one the best deal of the three. But supposedly the indexes are not yet up to date or in place so it takes more manual searching.

Many people join both Genealogy.com and Ancestry.com. They are both owned by the same company. The reason for joining both is that one may have an advantage over the other in certain areas. Ancestry.com has the best indexes overall, and supposedly Genealogy.com has the best printing capabilities and the best 1900 and 1910 census index. Take a look at both for yourself and get familiar with them. You'll need one or the other. One word of caution. Learn how to do searches, when you finally sign up for a service. The "help" link on the site will usually tell you all about searches. It is very important to understand how the searches work so you can find your ancestors when their names are misspelled. Simply entering in your ancestor's name the way it was always spelled many times yields no results!

Now work your way back through the census records, finding families in your line, and record this using your software.

Step Four – Recording Sources

Now you are researching and entering data. One imperative thing to do is to record the source of anything you enter into your software. **DO NOT** skip this step! If you don't know what we mean by entering the source, it is simply recording where you got the information that you entered! There is an entire book about how to record and format genealogy sources. We need not go into that amount of detail in this Guerilla guide. All of the family history software we mentioned in the first step has an area to record the source of information. Use it! If you don't know the formal method to record a source, just make up your own standard method and fully enter everything about that source. Entering sources will provide more help than you can imagine, in the future.

Conclusion

That's it. You are done with the Guerilla Genealogy guide and on your way! There is a lot more to genealogy, but this will get you started and organized.