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St. Louis Genealogical Society

Tips on Tracing Your Family Tree

1. **Begin with YOU.** Always begin with yourself: your full name, date of birth, and any other important dates. Add the full names of your parents and their birth, death, and marriage dates.
2. **Keep your records straight.** Use legal pads, loose-leaf binders, computer apps, or whatever system is convenient. Enter all information you find, so that when you need it, you can find it.
3. **Take one step at a time.** Prove the facts as you go; **don't skip generations**. You cannot prove that John Henry Morgan was your great-grandfather unless you can show positive evidence that your grandfather was his son or your grandmother was his daughter.
4. **Pencil, pen, or computer?** You need all three. Keep unproven written records in pencil so they can be changed. Don't make a permanent record until you are sure of your facts. Keep as much as possible on computer so it can be changed, updated, archived, and shared. Not proficient on computer? Classes are widely available.
5. **Make it a family affair.** Enlist the help of relatives. If they are nearby, visit them. If they are far away, send an email or call them. Get reacquainted with distant cousins. Learn family stories and traditions. Ask questions.
6. **Dates and places are vital.** Exact dates and places of birth, death, or marriage may be found in the family Bible or on tombstones, family albums, letters, and other family papers, or in federal, state, county or local records. Approximate ages appear in the census. Try every source.
7. **"They went thataway!"** Whichaway? Census records since 1850 show place of birth. Newspaper obituaries, county histories, some land and probate records, immigration and naturalization records also may give clues to former residences showing family migration.
8. **Where there's a will . . .** Probate records can be proof positive of a relationship. Even when there is no will, records of estate settlements may show heirs, relationships, and residence.
9. **Names are sometimes on the land.** Land transactions have been recorded with great care through most of our history. Records of deeds may show not only owners but heirs and relationships. Tax lists help too. And be sure to look at the neighbors; they might be relatives.
10. **Pension papers pay dividends.** They are full of names, dates and places. If an ancestor served in any war up to the Civil War, pension papers are on record and you may be able to get a copy.
11. **Check religious records.** Some groups kept marriage and burial records, baptismal and other ceremonial data. Some congregations maintain cemeteries with the data you need carved in stone.
12. **Don't assume that everything is online.** Learn to love libraries, courthouses, and archives**.** Much of the research you need may have been done already and is waiting for you in some repository. Although much is available online, there is much more outside of your home.
13. **Last but not least,** always remember to source every fact. If you do not cite your sources, no one, including yourself, will know where you got your information. Without source information, you are just saving stories and anecdotes rather than verifiable facts.