

Discovering Your Roots: Getting Started with Central and South American Family History

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History

The history of this region has significantly shaped its genealogical records. As the Spanish and Portuguese empires explored and colonized the Americas, they introduced Christianity (Catholicism) and established structured record-keeping systems. The widespread influence of Catholicism led to the early creation of detailed church records as early as the 1500s, documenting not only European settlers but also Indigenous peoples, Africans, and the interactions among these groups. In the 19th century, most countries implemented civil registration, which mirrored church records in documenting births, marriages, and deaths. A solid understanding of the region's history is essential for interpreting the context and evolution of these vital records.

FamilySearch Research Wiki

The FamilySearch Research Wiki is an online resource designed to help researchers learn about a country's history and the genealogical records available for that region. It features country- and record-specific pages, similar to Wikipedia, providing valuable guidance on where and how to access records. Regularly updated with new information, the Wiki serves as an essential starting point for anyone beginning research in a new location.

Paleography

Paleography is a fancy word for handwriting reading, and it's an essential skill in family history research since most of it involves working with records that must first be read. One of the best resources available for learning paleography is the BYU Script Tutorial website (byu.script.edu). It offers examples of historical documents, alphabet charts, and helpful tips for interpreting these records.

My top tip for mastering paleography is to practice—and practice a lot. The best way to improve at anything is through repetition, and paleography is no exception. Here are a few other tips:

- Don't spend too much time on any one letter or word. If you get stuck, skip it and come back later.
- Use an alphabet chart to familiarize yourself with the letters and how they were formed.
- Know what to expect in a record, and use that knowledge as a guide.
- Remember that standard spelling is a modern idea. Be prepared for spelling variations, especially phonetic spellings.

With practice and persistence, you'll become more comfortable with deciphering historical handwriting!

Records

The most important record types for Central and South American research are Church Records and Civil Registration. These records have covered the majority of the population for the last 500 years and contain almost all the genealogical information you'll need. The best place to start your search is on FamilySearch, as many of these records have been indexed. If the records aren't indexed or you're not finding good matches in your search results, try looking at the images directly on FamilySearch.

If FamilySearch doesn't have the records you're seeking, you'll likely need to contact the local church or archive. The FamilySearch Research Wiki is a great resource for learning how to find these archives and how to reach out to them.

Once you've explored Church and Civil records, you can expand your research into other types of records like census, notarial, military, and immigration records. While these are often not digitized and harder to locate, they can still provide valuable genealogical details.