



Getting Started with U.S. Genealogy: Finding Your American Roots

FamilySearch Library United States and Canada Team

Curious about your American ancestors but not sure where to begin? This beginner-friendly class will guide you through the essential steps of U.S. genealogy research. Learn how to find and use key records like the census, vital records, and more, and discover practical tools to start building your family tree with confidence.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand the historical context and record keeping systems in U.S. genealogy.
- Identify the main types of U.S. genealogical records and their value.
- Learn practical strategies for finding and using records to build your family tree.
- Explore online and offline resources for U.S. research.

Why History Matters in Genealogy

Understanding the past helps you know which records exist, who created them, and where they are stored.

- *Example:* Before birth certificates, church baptism records were often the only birth documentation.
- **Tip:** Always consider the historical period and local jurisdiction when searching for records

Major Eras in U.S. Recordkeeping

Era	Key Features and Record Types
Colonial America (pre-1776)	Church records (baptisms, marriages, burials), land grants, tax lists, wills. Records often fragmented.
Early Nationhood (1776–1850)	First federal census (1790), local land deeds, tax rolls, probate files, church books. Few vital records.
Growing Nation (1850–1900)	1850 Census lists all household members, Civil War military records, gradual adoption of vital records.
Modern Era (1900–present)	Standardized birth, marriage, and death certificates, Social Security, detailed censuses (1900–1950).

Understanding Jurisdictions

- **Records may be held at:** Town, county, state, or federal level.
- **Example:** Land deeds are typically at the county level; U.S. census is federal

Main U.S. Genealogical Record Types

Record Type	What It Includes and Why It Matters
Census Records	Every-10-year snapshots of households. Track locations, relationships, ages, occupations, migration.
Vital Records	Birth, marriage, and death certificates. Provide names, dates, places, and family relationships.
Land and Probate Records	Deeds, land grants, wills, estate inventories. Establish property ownership, family ties, and inheritance.
Military Records	Service and pension files, draft cards. Offer personal details, family connections, and migration clues.
Immigration and Naturalization	Passenger lists, naturalization papers. Reveal origins, arrival details, and sometimes family members.
Social Security Records	Applications, death index. Useful for 20th-century research and confirming identities.

Where to Find U.S. Genealogy Records

Three Major Places:

- **Online Databases:** FamilySearch.com, Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, Fold3, American Ancestors.
- **Local Repositories:** County courthouses, libraries, state archives, historical societies.
- **Government Archives:** National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), state and federal repositories

How to Get Started: Step-by-Step

1. **Start with What You Know**
 - Begin with yourself, parents, and grandparents.
 - Gather details from family Bibles, photos, letters, and conversations.
2. **Work Backward, One Generation at a Time**
 - Prove each relationship with a reliable record (e.g., birth certificate, census, marriage record).
 - Avoid guessing or skipping generations.

3. **Use the Census as a Roadmap**
 - Start with the most recent available census (usually 1950) and work backward.
 - Trace your family every ten years to see changes and migration.
4. **Search by Location**
 - Many records are kept at the county or town level.
 - Know where your ancestor lived at the time of each event.
5. **Not Everything Is Online**
 - Some records are only available in person or on microfilm.
 - Use online catalogs and finding aids to learn what exists and where.

Using Online Tools

- **FamilySearch Catalog:** Search by place, surname, or keyword for available records.
- **[Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com):** Search by name, date, and place; use filters for record types.
- **Other Platforms:** MyHeritage, Fold3, American Ancestors, Internet Archive, HathiTrust for digital books and newspapers.

Tips for Research Success

- **Read the Full Document:** Don't stop at the name or date—look for additional clues and relationships.
- **Be Flexible:** Names may be misspelled, ages may vary, and places can change.
- **Organize Your Research:** Use folders, notebooks, or online trees. Build timelines to spot gaps or errors.
- **Record Your Sources:** Always note where you found each piece of information.

When You Need to Visit Archives

- **Prepare in Advance:** Do as much online research as possible first.
- **Know What to Look For:** Make a list of collections or documents you want to see.
- **Check Hours and Policies:** Some archives require appointments or have limited hours.
- **Bring Essentials:** ID, research notes, and a plan for taking notes or photos

Key Takeaways

- **Work backward, one generation at a time.**
- **Use the census as your starting point.**
- **Seek out original records whenever possible.**
- **Be patient and persistent—genealogy is a journey!**

Additional Resources

FamilySearch Catalog

[Explore FamilySearch Catalog to Find Genealogy Resources](#)

FamilySearch Wiki

[FamilySearch Research Wiki](#)

United States Census Wiki Page

[United States Census • FamilySearch](#)

For more help, visit the FamilySearch Wiki or your local FamilySearch Library staff.