

Getting Started Part 1: Using and Preserving Family Sources

Joseph B. Everett, AG®, MLS
Megan Nusink

Overview

Getting started with family history begins with what you know from living memory and family sources (documents, photos, etc.). This session includes tips for gathering family records and interviewing relatives as well as ideas for organizing, preserving, and sharing your discoveries. You will also learn tips for building on family sources to identify your next research goals.

Getting Started

FamilySearch has long recommended these steps for beginning your family history research:

1. Identifying what you know (from family memories and sources)
2. Deciding what you want to learn
3. Selecting records to search
4. Obtaining and searching the records
5. Using the information (evaluating, making conclusions, organizing, and sharing)

This class will focus on the first step in this process, but the later steps also apply to working with family sources. Other classes in this beginner track will focus on the later steps as you move from family sources to other types of records.

What are Family Sources?

We all have stuff we have saved in our homes. Things of sentimental value, old documents, things to help us to remember stuff. Some of these may be things we have gathered ourselves and some we have inherited from others. Some people may look at these types of things as merely clutter, but these kinds of things can hold valuable clues about our family history.

Types of Family Sources

- Biographies and family histories
- Photos (prints, slides, digital, etc.)
- Diaries, journals, and letters
- Book of remembrance
- Scrapbooks
- Genealogy charts
- Home movies
- Audio recordings
- Heirlooms
- Clothing
- Official Documents
 - Birth, marriage, and death certificates
 - Legal documents
 - Passports or other IDs
 - Military service records
- Church, school, society, or other organization papers
- Newspaper clippings
- Honorary distinctions (awards, etc.)
- Yearbooks

Living memory is also an important family source!

Where to Look for Family Sources

- Your home: file cabinets, attic & basement, closets, bookshelves, etc.
- Your computer and devices: phone camera roll, texts & other messages, email history
- Immediate family members: Parents, grandparents, siblings, children
- Other relatives: Cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, etc. (including distant ones)
- FAN Network: Friends, neighbors, and associates of family members. This may include the descendants of those in the FAN network.
- Family sources shared on social media, online trees, and other compiled sources.

Strategies for Connecting with Family & FANs

The purpose of contacting family members and the FAN network is to access family sources that they may have in their possession and to interview them to find out their memories. Here are some strategies for making these connections.

- Get the word out to your family that you are a family historian willing to take care of family records and to listen to their stories.
- Start by visiting or contacting family members that you know well.
- Connect with extended family members to build your family network.
 - Ask your family to introduce you to other family or FANs.
 - Contact them through social media, phone, email, or at family gatherings such as reunions, weddings, funerals, family parties, etc.
 - Contact relatives via online genealogy sites such as FamilySearch or Ancestry. Look at contributors to a common relative in an online tree and contact them via the site's messaging feature.
 - Create something to share with extended family to open the door.
 - For example: Create a website, post to an online family tree, create a family Facebook group, compile a family history, digitize family memories to share, create a family newsletter, etc.

Tips for Building Trust with Extended Family and FANs

These days, people are wary of people they don't know who contact them out of the blue. They may suspect a scam. It is important to be sensitive to this, and to think about ways to help build trust and avoid scaring people off. A few tips:

- It helps a lot to have a referral from someone they know and trust. Rather than cold calling or texting someone, you could have a family member they know contact them first. When contacting them, begin with an introduction that establishes the connection.
- Respect their time and privacy. Don't immediately expect them to be willing to respond right away, to talk at length or read long emails.
- Build trust before asking them to share. They may not be willing to be interviewed or give you access to family sources right away.
- Be ready to give as well as receive. If you are asking them to share, be ready to share what you know and what you have gathered.
- Be willing to offer to do whatever you can to make the process easier for them, such as offering to do the legwork of making copies of things, etc.

Tips for Gathering & Preserving Family Sources

Once you have identified family sources in your possession or belonging to others in your family or FAN network, how do you go about gathering and preserving these sources?

Original Sources

- We recommend preserving originals. Digital copies are for sharing rather than replacing originals.
- Follow best practices for storing originals.
 - They should be kept in a clean and dry place, using acid free materials.
 - Carefully clean items to remove dust & dirt. Use appropriate tools for cleaning to avoid damaging items in the cleaning process. In most cases, just a dry brush or cloth without any cleaning solution or water is best.
 - Avoid using things that could damage materials, such as tape, glue, sticky notes, paper clips, staples, etc. Remove these if possible, unless doing so would damage the materials more.
 - Remove originals from containers that may contribute to their degradation and replace with containers that will protect them.
 - Avoid writing on originals if possible. Instead use housing materials (boxes, folders, cover sheets, etc.) to label them. If you do write on materials, write on the back near the edge with a soft graphite pencil. Avoid pressing too hard.
- Determine a system for organizing the originals based on your preference. You may want to organize materials by such thing as the format, family surname, time period, etc.
- Here are a couple of helpful guides for preserving original family sources:
 - Library of Congress, "Preserving Family Documents, Artifacts and More", *LOC.gov*, <https://guides.loc.gov/family-history-for-kids/preservation#s-lib-ctab-28695630-0>
 - The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, "How to Preserve Family Archives (papers and photographs)," *Archives.org*, <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

Digital Copies

- Make digital copies of originals using appropriate equipment. There are a variety of devices available for scanning or digitizing family sources, including photos, documents, video, and audio in various formats.
- Use your phone.
 - Modern phones can produce very high quality reproductions of photos and documents with proper lighting and setup. Have a plain white or black background. Place light to avoid shadows. Use a tripod or other camera holder to keep the camera steady. Consider using a photo light box.
 - Phones can be great for capturing audio or video interviews.
 - Apps are available to facilitate scanning as well as capturing audio or video memories.

- Use equipment at a local library or FamilySearch center.
 - Check your local library for available equipment and conditions for use.
- Purchase your own equipment.
 - Depending on how much material you have to digitize, you may consider purchasing your own equipment. Many products are available at reasonable cost for digitizing various types of materials. Or you may borrow equipment from someone.
- Store copies of digitals in multiple places. (Remember LOCKS: Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe). Options include cloud storage, external hard drives or flash drives.
- Migrate and refresh digital copies. Copy from older formats, such as older discs (including DVDs), to modern formats. Periodically refresh to new media (every few years) helps to avoid data loss.
- Organize digital copies into digital folders. You may consider following a similar organizing system to your originals.
- The National Archives guide to preserving family archives above also has a link to information about digitizing sources.

Materials Belonging to Others

Gathering and digitizing family sources is more straightforward when materials belong to you, but what if they belong to someone else? Here are some suggestions.

- Some people may be willing to give you the originals. This depends on the level of trust that you have established and their interest in preserving the originals themselves.
- If someone is unwilling to part with the originals, but is open to having copies made, you may consider various options, including:
 - Taking equipment to their home to make copies on site.
 - Meeting with the owner at another site, such as a library, to digitize the materials together.
 - Borrowing the materials to digitize and return them.
 - Asking the owner of the materials to digitize them and share copies with you.

Tips for Conducting an Oral History Interview

Interviewing relatives can be among the most rewarding experiences in your family history journey while providing valuable information that can help further your research.

- Come prepared with everything you will need for the interview:
 - Prepare a list of questions beforehand. These questions should be open-ended. These may be general questions or centered on a specific subject matter such as family life, childhood, job experiences, goals they have or have accomplished, spiritual experiences, what their everyday life is like, etc.
 - Most phones are equipped with cameras and sound recording apps that will be sufficient for recording an interview. You can use a separate voice recorder or camera if desired. When recording video, place camera/phone on a tripod, if possible. Consider using a separate microphone to record the audio clearly.

- Place the recording device so that you and the interviewee can be heard clearly.
- Bring any chargers, cords, or batteries that your devices may need. Consider taking notes even if you are recording to keep your thoughts organized or jot down questions or comments that come up during the interview.
- Before recording the interview, be sure to ask permission from the person you are interviewing. If they don't want to be recorded, respect their wishes and take notes as best you can.
- Other things to remember:
 - Start the interview with the person's name, birthdate, and the date and place of the interview.
 - Conduct the interview in a calm, quiet environment, free from distractions.
 - Remember you want the interview to feel natural and comfortable for the best results. Let the conversation flow. After you ask a question, give them time to think and don't rush their answer. If they start to deviate too much from the question, allow them to finish their thought and kindly remind them of the question.
 - Remember the person you are interviewing is giving their time, so be respectful of that. Offer to give them a copy of the interview recording and transcript, and send them a thank you card to show your appreciation.
- Suggested websites with guides, question ideas, and tips:
 - BYU Library reference guide to oral history:
<https://guides.lib.byu.edu/oralhistory/how-to>
 - Example interview questions (from the Edgewood Museum, IA):
<https://edgewoodmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Oral-History-Questions.pdf>. (One of many such lists you can find online.)

Gathering and Using Information from Family Sources

After you have gathered your family sources together, the next step is to begin collecting information from these sources that will provide evidence for your research. You may find a lot of information that will lead you to other sources, or you may only find clues, but every little bit of information may be helpful.

Here is information you should be looking for:

- Names, including surnames, nicknames, maiden names, married names, etc. Also consider what spelling variations names may have.
- Dates, such as birth, marriage, death, baptism, immigration, travel, graduation, and dates when they lived at various places, when they moved, etc.
- Places, including where they lived, worked, places where major life events occurred, where they traveled, etc.
- Relationships: Write down relationships between people so that you don't forget or mix up their relationship later. Note not only family relationships, but also friends, neighbors, associates, etc. (FANs).

Here are some tips for using the information you find in family sources:

- As you identify information, you will want to organize it for future reference. Personal details and relationships should be recorded in a family tree, using online tools or software, or if desired, on paper.
- Information and evidence you derive from family sources should be recorded in research logs or other notes. Be sure to write down your thinking as you analyze family sources. Distinguish between what the sources themselves say and your conclusions about them.
- As you compile the information you have found, you will begin to see where there are gaps. For example, you may note a missing birth date or place, or an unknown mother's maiden name. These will become your questions to answer in further research.
- Be mindful that information derived from family sources, including records and interviews, may include inaccuracies. Memories are not perfect, especially when referring to events that happened long ago.
- When gathering information from written sources or interviews, consider whether the information is primary or secondary. Primary information comes from a person who experienced the event firsthand. Secondary information comes from someone who heard about the event but didn't experience it themselves. Also consider how much time passed between the events and the recording of the events.

Despite possible limitations, family sources can provide very valuable information and evidence, some of which may not be found from any other source, as well as vital clues for further research, even when incomplete or not entirely accurate. Other sessions in this beginner tracker will provide guidance for finding and evaluating information from other sources that may be compared to family sources as evidence to make the right conclusions about your family history.