Basic Genealogy
A guide to researching your family tree
By the Carnegie History Center staff

1. PREPARE

Before beginning your research, it helps to understand various types of records that might be available. Reading one or more basic "how-to" books or online tutorials will help ensure successful searching. Some examples are:

Cyndi's List: BEGINNERS www.cyndislist.com/beginner.htm
Rootsweb Guide To Tracing Family Trees. http://rwguide.rootsweb.ancestry.com/
Genealogist's Companion & Sourcebook. LJRL 929.107207 CROOM
Plugging Into Your Past. CMPL 929.10285 CROOM
Complete Beginners Guide To Genealogy. CMPL 929.10285 CLIFFORD
Record And Remember: Tracing Your Roots Through Oral History. BPL 929.1 EPSTEIN

2. GATHER

Begin with yourself, working backwards by generation. Interview parents, grandparents and other relatives. Anecdotes and memories are just as important as dates and relationships. Take notes! If possible, record or videotape interviews. Interviews, people identified in pictures, and family stories once lost are gone forever, so share them far and wide!

Gather family records and photographs. Include official records (birth/death/marriage certificates and legal documents), but don't forget informal records of family events such as photo albums, baby books, newspaper clippings, school program handouts and fraternal organization materials. Take the steps necessary to preserve and share these valuable records. The more you share, the more likely it is that the information will survive to be passed on to future generations.

3. ORGANIZE

Organize information and complete a generation chart (also called an ancestor or pedigree chart) for your ancestors. Using pencil makes it easier to correct mistakes. This will serve as your "road map" for research. For each couple on the generation chart, complete a family group sheet or family group record. The most complete record includes recording information for the children of a family group. Gather enough information that you will be able to go back and fill in the spaces later if desired. Genealogical software programs may be helpful but are not necessary.

Consider making a profile/timeline/biographical chart for everyone in your family tree. Include photographs, medical information, employment, religious affiliation—anything to form a mental picture of your ancestor.

4. RESEARCH
a. CENSUS

The United States has taken a census every ten years since 1790. Since privacy laws mandate that 72 years must pass before the census enumerations become available to the public, the 1930 is the most recent available to researchers. Not all censuses are available (most of the 1890 was destroyed after a fire) for a variety of reasons. The amount of information varies from year to year: 1850 was the first to list everyone in the household by name and 1880 was the first to give the birthplace for parents. Census takers wrote the name as they heard it, not necessarily as it was spelled. Now available in digitized formats as well as microfilm, most censuses can be researched. Various index sources are available but transcription errors exist, so check every version you can find!

b. STANDARDS

Evaluate the reliability of all information sources! Was the information recorded at the time of the event? Who gave the information? Under what circumstances was the information given? The previous questions become vital when conflicting information is received. For this reason, when at all possible use original information, not published excerpts. Until all pertinent information has been sifted through original documents, enter all facts (and variations) in pencil and record their source on your family group sheets.

Carefully record your source for all information. Your descriptions should be detailed enough that others can easily locate the same records. Keep a research log, and include

sources that contained no useful information. A research log can keep you from spending time looking at sources you have already used.

c. VITAL RECORDS
Many states did not keep records of births and deaths until 1910. There are, however, states that kept vital records much earlier. It is necessary to check each state for their availability. Marriage and divorce records are usually kept at the county level beginning at the time of county formation. Ease of access to information varies from state to state. Also remember to check church records in the area. Some church records are stored in archives or manuscript collections. Some religions and denominations keep no vital records. A growing problem is states restricting access to vital records.

d. COURT RECORDS
Court records can be found on national, state, county and local levels. They may include land, naturalization, probate, tax records and vital records. Deed or land record sources contain information that can be invaluable. Knowing the court record system in a particular state is essential for using these records.

Courthouses are as vulnerable to disaster as homes! Many courthouses, especially in the South, have had records destroyed by fire. When you are told the courthouse burned, always check to ensure which records may have survived or been rerecorded at later dates. Always check neighboring counties.

e. COUNTY HISTORIES
While county histories don't always contain information on all families, they are invaluable as a source of information on the county's history. Again, the information is only as accurate as what has been passed down by the families. Verify, verify, verify! The more familiar you are with the states and counties in which your ancestors resided, the more likely it becomes that you will find needed information. Remember, the earlier you are researching, the more likely it is that your family moved as one of a group. Especially useful are maps of the area, in the time period(s) your ancestors lived in an area. The maps are not always available in books, but some have been added to the different U S GenWeb sites http://www.usgenweb.com/.

When researching counties and states, always do a "genealogy" of the area in order to determine county boundary changes and name changes. Censuses can show families living in two counties (or worse, states) when they did not move, the boundary lines moved. Example: Greer County, Texas/Oklahoma and Miller County, Texas/Arkansas.

f. MILITARY
Compiled service records, pensions and unit histories, as well as personal papers, can be sources about military service.

g. IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION
Many passenger lists did not survive, especially in colonial times. Some customs passenger lists exist between 1820 – 1891. Immigration passenger lists may be found between 1891 – 1954. Before the Immigration and Naturalization Service was established in 1906, papers for obtaining naturalized citizenship could be found in various courts. Many immigrants filed first papers in one place, and completed their naturalization papers elsewhere.

5. INTERNET
The internet is not a genealogy mecca! Only a fraction of the existing holdings on genealogy has been published, and of that fraction only a very small percent is on the internet. It takes time and money to transcribe or digitize materials! Resources on the internet continue to grow, and sites such as Rootsweb, US GenWeb, and the pilot Family Search holdings are always worth visiting. However, in genealogy the motto of "Buyer Beware" should be "User Beware" and all sources carefully evaluated, just as you should carefully evaluate the content of all genealogy books. In today's digital world please be aware that even digitized records can be altered. Know the source of your information and
evaluate its' reliability.

6. SHARE
One of the greatest gifts you can leave your children, grandchildren and other relatives is a record of your family history research. Consider publishing your research and donating copies to a library or archive.