



## GEMS & JUNK

### *A Beginner's Guide to Online Research*

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Today's family historians have an amazing selection of online sources and resources for genealogical research. What are the best options and how do you differentiate between true “gems” and outright junk?

#### SOURCES vs. RESOURCES

What's the difference between a “source” and a “resource?”

A **source** is a container of information. In other words, anything that contains information to answer your family questions is a source!

- **Original source**—first time information is reported or recorded: government documents, church and cemetery records, family documents.
- **Derivative source**—information is repeated, summarized, or abbreviated from an earlier source: transcriptions, abstracts, indexes, databases.
- **Authored work** – presents an author's own interpretations and conclusions: books, magazine and newspaper articles, maps, websites, online family trees.

A **resource** is a place that may contain many sources: government offices, state archives, public libraries, the internet. **The internet is a resource** for finding all three types of sources: originals, derivatives, and authored works.

#### GETTING STARTED

Genealogy projects begin with gathering and organizing what we already know about our family, determining where gaps exist in our knowledge, then constructing a plan to find answers to our questions.

Effective research plans draw on a variety of sources, with preference given to original sources as generally considered most reliable.

With a plan in place, we determine where and how to access the sources we've identified. We access sources by visiting resources, either in person, or through communications, or by using the internet.

## ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

Not every source we need or want is online. Not everything we find online is true.

**Commercial websites** often over promise and under deliver. They will not “find it all” for you.

- They cannot and will not check every source on your behalf—only those to which they have immediate access.
- Computer algorithms are no substitute for your own thorough analysis of sources and information.

**Online family trees** are only as reliable as the research put into them. Unless they cite their sources, there's no way to determine the validity of the information they provide or the conclusions they've reached. Many are “copied & pasted” from someone else's undocumented online tree, perpetuating mistakes.

**Online databases and indexes** are finding aids, meant to lead you to the original source.

- These are not a substitute for original sources. Online databases and indexes summarize or abbreviate information. Errors and omissions occur.
- Online databases and indexes are often incomplete—a detail not always clearly stated by the website. It's easy to mistakenly conclude your ancestor isn't in a particular record set because the search engine didn't identify his name.

## STRATEGIES

With a thoughtful approach, online research can play a significant, positive role in any family project. Judicious use of online sources leads to reliable evidence for identities, relationships, and major life events. Originals, derivatives, and authored works are found in abundance online, bringing into our homes a world of sources and resources we might otherwise never access.

- Many websites provide a mixture of content—take a critical approach to what's offered.
- Give preference to websites that offer digital images of original records. Go beyond the obvious census and vital records, dig deep into a diverse range of original sources.
- Be skeptical of online family trees. Does the tree offer solid documentary evidence for each fact presented? While undocumented trees may hold potential clues, take care not to try making your family “fit” a scenario that may have absolutely no basis in fact.
- Make use of online indexes, databases, and search engines, but when in doubt, or if a database is unavailable, conduct page-by-page searches of online document images.
- Dig into online sources that offer historical, legal, societal, and cultural context. Take advantage of the thousands of free, out-of-copyright books, newspapers, and articles. Create your own digital reference library by downloading free materials to an external storage device.
- Use online card catalogs to locate materials available online and offline.
- Online educational opportunities, many free, can enhance your research skills and deepen your understanding of the records created by your ancestor.



### Portals (links to online resources) & volunteer projects

10. *The Ancestor Hunt*. Links to online records, newspaper resources. <https://theancestorhunt.com>
11. *Cyndi's List*. <https://cyndislist.com> Genealogy on Facebook. <https://cyndislist.com/facebook>
12. *USGenWeb Project*. State-by-state resources. <http://usgenweb.org>
13. *Genealogy Trails*. <http://genealogytrails.com>

### Currency conversions

14. *Historical Currency Conversions*. Alan Eliassen. <https://futureboy.us/fsp/dollar.fsp>
15. *Measuring Worth*. <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/>

### Archival collections

State archives, state libraries websites, public libraries, university & college libraries are invaluable for researchers. Content varies from state to state. Most include finding aids, online catalogs.

16. **State Historical Society of Iowa & State Archives**. <https://iowaculture.gov/history>  
Online catalog, finding aids.
17. **State Library of Iowa**. <https://www.statelibraryofiowa.gov>. Links to State Data Center, online catalog.  
*The Iowa Heritage Digital Collections*. <https://www.iowaheritage.org> Statewide digital collections.
18. **The Iowa Legislature**. Archives > Iowa Law & Rules. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/archives>

### The best subscription websites

19. *Ancestry*. <https://www.ancestry.com>
  - Databases, images of original records, research help, message boards
  - Learning tools & free forms. [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Research\\_Resources](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Research_Resources)
  - Online family trees (inconsistent quality)
  - Free message boards previously part of *RootsWeb*, *Genealogy.com GenForum* <https://www.genealogy.com/forum/>
20. *Fold3*. Owned by *Ancestry*. Emphasis on federal, military records. <https://www.fold3.com>
  - Databases, images of original records
  - Includes Australia, New Zealand, UK, & Canada
21. *GenealogyBank*. Owned by *NewsBank*. <https://genealogybank.com>
  - Earliest American newspapers, 1690 to present
  - Newspaper publications of passenger lists, immigration records, births & marriages
  - Search Congressional records, government publications
22. *Newspapers.com*. <https://www.newspapers.com>
  - Owned by *Ancestry*. If you don't find it for free, you might find it here.

### Online educational opportunities

23. **National Genealogical Society**. Mixture of free and pay to use content. <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/>
24. **Legacy Family Tree Webinars**. <https://familytreewebinars.com> Mixture of free and subscription content.
25. **Boston University Genealogy Studies Program**. <https://genealogyonline.bu.edu> Full courses of study.