Ancestry.com:

Genealogy on the Internet

![ancestry.com]

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Whitridge Room

New York Society Library

Instructor: Matthew Haugen

Introduction:

Genealogy focuses on the past, and a large reason many people enjoy researching family history is the excitement of encountering their heritage and uncovering forgotten bits of information in dusty old files, photo albums, letters, and other family memorabilia. So, computers may seem like the last place to look, especially because few if any of our ancestors used them; but in fact modern software and communication technologies are helping genealogists in important ways:

Digital copies of historical records:

Many genealogists have been frustrated to learn that the information they need is in a far away repository with limited hours of operation, restrictive access policies, or even language barriers. However, many repositories are now making their historical records available on the Internet. Digital copies minimize unnecessary handling of the original and serve as a backup in case the original is lost or damaged. This also means researchers can access more information from a home computer without having to travel to a distant repository or make research appointments. Also, digital records are often more thoroughly described and organized, making them easier to search and browse.

Computer tools for organizing genealogical information:

Once the information is found, one of the most satisfying parts of genealogy is placing that information into its place on a branch of a family tree and seeing the picture become more complete. Several free and paid tools are available online for saving and arranging your data (names, dates, places, pictures, source citations) into a family tree.

Sharing and collaborating with other genealogists and distant relatives:

Another way the Internet has helped genealogists is by connecting them to each other. A number of forums and groups exist across the internet where genealogists and family historians search for information, share discoveries, ask for help, offer advice, and even reconnect with distant relatives. Expert genealogists can help beginners develop search strategies, discover helpful resources, or translate and interpret confusing records. Or, you may discover that a distant cousin might have already researched some common branches of the same family tree!

Collaborating on a family history project can be a fun and rewarding way to grow closer to your relatives. Bringing your family record into the computer age will also help it survive into the future, and make it easier for your descendants to preserve and discover their legacy.

This technology class will focus on Ancestry.com, a website which offers the most complete array of the features discussed above. A vast number of other online resources, communities, and software offer similar features, which may meet your needs better or worse depending on your particular needs, expertise, and ability to pay.

Ancestry.com hosts extensive records databases including: Census Records; Voter Lists; Immigration and Emigration Records;Birth, Marriage, and Death Records; Military Records; Newspapers and Periodicals; Court, Land, & Financial records; Wills; maps, Atlases, & Gazetteers; Photo Collections; National and Public Library Collections; and Other Public Family Trees on Ancestry.com. Full access to these databases requires a paid subscription.

Some other options:

Rootsweb (www.rootsweb.ancestry.com) was originally a separate service now managed by ancestry.com, and offers a range of free tools such as search engines, message boards, and finding aids, but does not include a family tree builder.

Geni (www.geni.com) functions like a social network, and allows users to develop a family tree, save data, share photos, and collaborate with other family members. Most services are free, but no record database services are included beyond profiles created by other Geni users. Paid "pro" services include instant profile matching, advanced searching, and priority support.

My Heritage (www.myheritage.com) offers a free downloadable software feature, and unique aggregate searching tools which search other databases, but does not provide its own record databases. You can generate a free tree with up to 250 individuals and limited photo storage. Paid services allow for 2,500 individuals, enhanced photo storage capacity, advertisement-free site, priority support, and advanced search features.

Data Standard

GEDCOM (GEnealogical **D**ata **COM**munications) is a standard format for genealogical data which allows exchange between different software and websites. It was first developed by the Mormon Church as an aid to genealogical research. If you decide to start using one site or software program and want to transfer your data to another site or program, many, including Ancestry.com, allow you to import or export your data in this standard format (some may charge for this service) so that you can transfer your tree from one program to the next.

Beginning on Ancestry.com

To begin, go to **www.ancestry.com** in your Internet Browser. You may want to save the link to your bookmarks, too.

Enter your first and last name and gender, and click "**Start my Tree.**"

In your tree, each individual is represented by a small box with a face icon, and relationships are indicated by the lines between them.

You will then be prompted to fill out some basic information about you and your immediate family. To add or edit an individual record (including your own), click on that individual's box.

As you begin, enter all the information you know. Even approximate guesses may help ancestry.com search for matches in its database. You will be able to change or add more information later.

When possible, enter names, dates and places according to the suggested formats.

Click **"Save"** to save the data to your family tree.

The first time you save a record, you will be prompted to **create an account.** To do so, enter your tree name, your first and last name, and email address, read the privacy statement, and indicate whether or not you wish your tree to be viewed publicly, and click **"Save my Tree."**

An automatically-generated user name and password will be displayed to you and emailed to you at the email address you provided. There is also a link to change your username and password, or you can change them later under the "My Account" menu (see p. 4)

Signing in and Out: Next time you visit ancestry.com, enter your username and password on top and click **"Sign In"** to access your tree, and **"Sign Out"** when you're done, or you will remain logged in.

Now that you have an account, you can begin using ancestry.com and building your family tree!

Tools and Menus

Click **"Messages"** to view your messages from other ancestry.com users.

Click **"My Account"** to update your subscription, public profile, contact and privacy preferences, and change your username and password, and manage other account features.

Click **"To Do"** and then click "Add a to do," to enter a task or reminder for yourself. Drag the saved tasks to re-order them. Click the check mark box when the task is completed, or the trash icon to delete it.

Use the **"Quick Link"** tab to access sites you use frequently. When on an ancestry.com page you want to remember, click "Add to quick links" to add it to your quick link list.

Click **"Help"** for a menu of help and support options if you have any questions or problems on the site.

Click **"Home"** to go to the homepage which includes summaries of your recent activity and connections.

Click **"Family Trees"** to view your family tree, to create a new one, or upload a GEDCOM file

Click **"Search"** to search through Ancestry.com's resources, records, and other public family trees.

Click **"Collaborate"** to access message boards, private messages, and recent connections with other members including family members and others you've allowed to share all or part of your family tree.

The **"Learning Center"** tab includes Ancestry.com's educational resources such as how to develop search strategies, how to understand historic records, and other help.

The **DNA**, **Publish**, **Shop**, and **Hire an Expert** buttons offer other paid services, including DNA testing, custom family tree publications and souvenirs, other genealogy resources, and expert guidance.

Subscribe: Most of the above features are free, including building, sharing, and saving a family tree; uploading photos, documents, and stories to your tree; sharing access to your tree with family members; limited viewing of matches and hints in records and other public trees; access to free learning center resources and message boards. Additional features including full searching and viewing of records, and collaboration with other members, require a paid Deluxe Membership subscription:

U.S. Deluxe Membership: unlimited access to all U.S. record collections on Ancestry.com; full view of hints from U.S. Records and other trees; . **Rates:** Annual: $155.40; 3-month: $50.85; Monthly: $19.95

World Deluxe Membership: U.S. Deluxe features, plus unlimited access to records from UK, Ireland, Canada, and other worldwide content. **Rates:** Annual: $299.40; 3-month: $83.85; Monthly: $29.95.

A 14-day free trial of all deluxe services is available, after which you will be billed for paid services at the selected rate, after which you will be billed unless you cancel. All plans will automatically renew unless you cancel.

Building your Family Tree:

When you click on the **Family Tree** tab, you will see your family tree and several options related to it.

The **Home person** (normally you) is the focal point of the tree. To navigate around your tree, you can click on an individual's tab to move them into the home position, and see their previous generations and other relationships (Spouses, children, and siblings) displayed.

Clicking "**Home Person**" on top will bring you back to that place on the tree (normally the home person is you). You can also use the **"find a person in this tree"** search box to go to a specific individual in your tree.

You can click "**Print**" to print a 5-generation ancestry of the person currently in the home position.

In the **Tree Settings** Menu, you can choose a different home person, rename your tree, download the GEDCOM file of your tree, or delete your tree.

Whenever you are on another page, click "**View My Tree**" to get back to your tree.

Click **"Invite Family Members"** to send an e-mail granting permission to your family members to view or edit your tree along with you.

Click on **+** symbols to add parents, spouses, children, or siblings. Click on arrows to navigate the tree in that direction.

When you move your mouse over an individual's record, a window will pop up with more information about that individual, including options to view or edit his or her profile, or search records.

Viewing a Profile

When you view a profile**,** you will see a summary of that individual's information you have entered, such as timeline, immediate family, and other facts. You can also **print** a profile summary and **search records**, and use the "Facts and Sources" tab to see, edit, and add more facts about that person and view your sources. You can also add public **comments**, and private **notes** about that individual and your research. The **Media Gallery** allows you to upload photos, videos, or audio recordings.

Editing a Profile:

If you click Edit on a tab in the family tree, a "Quick Edit" window will pop up allowing you to edit the individual's name, gender, and birth and death dates and places. You can also click "Delete this person" or "Edit More about this Person" in the Quick Edit Window, or click "Save" or "Cancel" to save or discard your changes.

Include as much as you know, and in the recommended format if possible, to help ancestry.com find matches in its database. If you don't have exact information, include possible date ranges, or approximate locations if that is all you know, because that can still help a search. Click "Submit" to save the fact, or cancel to discard it.

When Viewing a profile, click "**Add a Fact**" to add other facts including adoption, baptism, bar or bat mitzvah, divorce, education, immigration, military service, physical description, etc. Most fields include date, location, and description such as anecdotes or other information about the source of your data (such as a book, family album, or other source not on ancestry.com). You can also add something as an alternate fact, if your information is disputable or in doubt.

When viewing a profile, click on a fact in the *Overview* or *Facts and Sources* tab for a fuller view of that fact. You can then view, edit, or delete that fact, or add media such as a related photo or video.

Hints:

As you enter information, Ancestry.com automatically suggests matches in its records databases and other public trees that closely resemble the information you entered. These "**hints**" are indicated by a **leaf symbol** on the upper right corner of an individual's tab on the tree. Click on the leaf to view the hints.

Note: Unless you have a paid deluxe subscription membership, many of the facts of the hint will be hidden from view.

When you review a hint, your record and the hint source will be displayed side by side. Information in the Hint which differs from that in your record will be underlined in yellow**.**

You can choose whether to accept or ignore it by checking the hint and clicking **"Accept"** or **"Combine Family Tree."**

Then, click "**Show Options**" to choose which information you want to copy from the hint source into your own tree's profile for that individual, and whether the record will be stored as a "**source**" for that individual. If information about relatives of that individual is also available, you can also choose to **merge their records** into your tree as well. Then click "**Add to Your Tree**" to save the new information in your tree.

Adding Media:

To add documents, photos, audio, or video, to a profile:

To add a profile photo, click on the face icon on their profile. Or, when viewing a profile, click **"Media Gallery"** to upload or record additional media to that profile. Or, when viewing a specific fact, click **"Add Media"**

Then, accept the content submission agreement (with respect to copyright, privacy, obscenity, and technical compatibility, etc.) and click "**Select Files**" to browse your computer for a photo, document, sound, or video file. Choose the file on your computer and click "Open."

The file will automatically upload. You can then title the file, categorize it, include a date and location, and other description, and attach it to other events, facts, or individuals.

Or, if you have a microphone or camera attached to your computer, you can click "Record" to record an audio interview or video directly onto your ancestry.com tree.

You and other individuals authorized to view your tree and photos can comment on the profile or on specific photos and media.

Searching Records:

If you click "Search Records" on an individual profile, Ancestry.com will search its full database with the information you've entered on the profile.

Or, click "Search Records" on top to start a new search for any individual. Click "Tell us More to get better results" for advanced search options. Then click **Search** to see your results, including a summary of the document, and a ranking of how closely the result matches your search. Move your mouse cursor over the record title to see a preview of the document.

If you're getting incorrect results, or too many results, or are unsure about the information, click "Edit Search" to add or change the search terms, to try out different possibilities. Click Narrow by category to narrow down to specific types of records (census, immigration, etc.)

Collaborating and Using Message Boards:

Click "Collaborate" to see a summary of recent member connect activity. If you've previously merged a branch of your tree with another public user's tree, you will get updates if they add more information or sources to their record.

Also, if another user sends you a message, you will see updates about those messages here, and can view and respond to them.

Also, under the Collaborate Tab, click "Message Boards" to view, search, and participate in public message boards to find others seeking or offering help or discussing topics of interest. Message boards are organized by surname, location, and topic, or you can search. Click on a topic or thread to view it, "Reply" to reply to it. When replying, you can choose to upload an attachment, and select whether to be notified if anyone else replies after you. You can also report abuse or print a thread, and click "Begin New Thread" to start your own topic or query.

Click "Community Guidelines, Board Help, and Board FAQ" at the bottom of this page for more information on how to use the message boards.

Overcoming Common Roadblocks:

Family historians often run into impasses when certain information is absent, contradictory, ambiguous, or difficult to distinguish from mistakes, guesswork, or legends. In some cases, there may simply be no record; documents may have been falsified, destroyed, or lost, if they ever existed. Or, there may be too many records to choose from, and perhaps there was more than one person in town (or even in the family) with the same name. Or, records may appear to contradict each other, or the facts you've already established. While frustrating, overcoming these challenges can be particularly satisfying and can reveal some of the most interesting family stories.

As with anything on the Internet, sources can be hard to find, and even harder to trust. Sometimes the documents you need are out there somewhere, but they are poorly organized, unlabeled, hidden behind access protocols, or undiscoverable by search engines like Google. And sometimes even the most authoritative sources contain mistakes. Other genealogists are helpful, but they make mistakes, too. When in doubt, look for confirmation and second opinions in other places, and cite your sources. And don't be afraid to ask for help!

If you get stuck, try revising your search strategy, or backtracking to a previous point of uncertainty: Test out spelling variants and name changes, or adjust the chronological or geographic scope. Guesswork may lead you on the right path or the wrong one, so be sure to record your sources and methods as much as possible, in case you need to go back and verify or change something later. Leaving a trail can also help others in search of the same information, and they may be able to reveal something to you in return.

Historical and social forces may have altered your family tree or interrupted the record: Many people arrived in the United States to escape political or religious exile, slavery, genocide, famine, war, oppression, and discrimination; others faced those same problems when they got here, and lost their documents--or worse, their families--in the process. In other cases, language barriers, inaccurate record-keeping, or changing social pressures led to misspelled or anglicized names, or attempts to conceal one's ethnicity or lie about one's age. For these and similar reasons, many individuals unwillingly lost their family or ethnic ties, or actively tried to disguise them, leaving quite a detour for the genealogist.

Biographical sources and genealogical methods reflect the cultures which produced them: In many types of records, maiden names and other information about women is unrecorded, or wives may be identified only as "Mrs." with their husbands' names, reflecting a social organization which considered women and children less important. Churches, synagogues, and other religious and ethnic communities may observe calendars, marital statuses, and naming conventions which differ from civil records. In some cultures, kinship is matrilineal rather than patrilineal, and degrees of relation are not always considered with respect to the nuclear family model of modern Western cultures, but rather with

respect to extended households, caste structures, or nobility titles. In some countries, family names are patronyms based on the father's first name and thus change with each generation. Some cultures count age inclusively, and consider children to be the age of 1 at birth. Other variations from the expected norms may be confusing, but it's also a chance to learn more about the cultures of your ancestors.

No two family trees are alike: Like the individuals in them, families are diverse and complex than a uniform, symmetrical tree would suggest. In some cases, divorces, remarriages, adoptions, children born out of wedlock, polygamous households, same-sex relationships, interreligious or inter-ethnic marriages, and other kinships and relationships that didn't "fit the mold" may have been kept secret out of fear of scandal or other repercussions, or may have had no way to be properly documented in census or church records. Individuals who didn't marry or have kids along the expected model sometimes get forgotten in genealogy, but they can also be interesting and important branches on your tree.

As a hub of immigration and a cultural crossroads, New York offers a number of repositories of use to genealogists. Many public records offices, research libraries, archives, museums, religious communities, ethnic organizations, historical societies are open to visitors and researchers, and offer services online as well.

Ellis Island: http://www.ellisisland.org/genealogy/index.asp

New York Public Library--Irma and Paul Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History & Genealogy: http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/chss/lhg/research.html

Queens Public Library Long Island Division Archives: http://queenslibrary.org/index.aspx?section_id=5&page_id=52

New-York Historical Society: www.nyhistory.org

New York State Archives: www.archives.nysed.gov/a/research/res_topics_genealogy.shtml

New York City Dept. of Records: www.nyc.gov/html/records/home.html

NY Dept. of Health: www.health.state.ny.us/vital_records/genealogy.htm

U.S. Census Bureau: www.census.gov

American National Biography Online (with library barcode): www.anb.org/articles/index.html

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (with library barcode): www.oxforddnb.com/

New York Times database (with barcode): http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?RQT=302&cfc=1

Other tips:

Respect privacy: share your family history on the web only to the extent that it is consistent with your privacy and intellectual property as well as that of the originator of the information (e.g. don't put information up that you don't want others to know, and don't put your sister's diary, a copyrighted book, or sensitive information about living individuals without permission). Even in public trees, ancestry.com suppresses records for living individuals from public view.

Protect your resources: photos, home films, audio tapes, slides, diaries, letters, and other family records may not have been intended to survive very long. Obvious threats like fire, flood, or theft aside, the conditions in which many home records are kept may be damaging. Even in the best conditions, paper, film, and magnetic media all degrade over time, or the technology needed to view them (projectors, computers, playback devices, etc.) may become obsolete. Avoid exposure to extremes in temperature and humidity, rusty paper clips, rubber bands, glues and tapes. Use acid-free or mylar enclosures when possible. Keep items well-preserved and when possible, reformat or duplicate them. Scanners are increasingly affordable and easy to use, so you can make digital copies of your photos and documents, which you can share on your ancestry.com tree or on a blog or other website you can share with your family and friends.

Similarly, there is no guarantee that ancestry.com or other websites and repositories will stay in business forever, so whenever you can, print out copies, and keep backup records somewhere, including exporting your GEDCOM file (Under Tree settings)

Make new memories together: old documents may be short-lived, but genealogists stress the importance of connecting with your living family members; they and their memories won't be around forever either. Spending some time learning from your family members can be a source of rewarding new memories in their own right. Record conversations, take photos, or write blogs or diaries to document and share what you've learned with your descendants so that your work isn't lost.

Consider supporting the repositories that helped you in your research. Unlike ancestry.com, most libraries, archives and historical societies do not profit from revenue from advertisements or subscription fees. Many are at risk of losing funding. Your financial support can show your appreciation and ensure that the records and services they provided you will be available to future researchers, including your own descendants.

In addition, if you discover prominent or interesting family records, or other rare or valuable items in your possession, you may want to speak to an appropriate repository about bequeathing your family papers, as they may be able to better preserve them and make them available to other researchers. Even if the repository is unequipped to house your family records, they may be able to point you to other appropriate resources or repositories.

Good luck, and have fun!