

Getting Started with Genealogy



What are your research goals?

Consider your reasons for researching your genealogy. Your answer to this question will help guide you in building your research plan. Perhaps you are trying to solve a family mystery, you were adopted and you want to learn more about your birth family, or maybe you just want to learn more about your family in general. Once you have decided your goal, you can then begin on the path to reaching that goal.

Using a Pedigree Chart

The first, and probably most important tool you will use in your research is the Pedigree Chart. Whether you use a paper copy or fill in a digital chart online, this document will help keep you organized and give you a resource to help you organize all your research data and files. It is highly recommended that you **ALWAYS USE PENCIL** when working on your research. You will find yourself erasing something you thought to be 100% correct only to find that another document calls that data into question. By using pencil, you can update and make corrections much more easily.

Start with yourself and your immediate family, your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents if you know them. Work your way back generation to generation proving the information you have for each of your direct ancestors. Numbering your pedigree charts will help you stay organized as you continue to go farther back in your research.

Verify Your Data

This cannot be stressed enough when it comes to research. Until data is confirmed with a record source, you cannot be sure you are searching in the right place. Family information can and many times is incorrect. The best thing to do is verify **ALL** the data in your tree with proven records. There are a number of sites that allow you to attach the record source directly to your data. I also recommend downloading or printing a copy of the record as well. Keep in mind that just because something is carved in stone does not necessarily mean it is correct.

Name Formatting

All the names on your data should be consistent. If you use [First Name] [Last Name], do not record one of your records as [Last Name], [First Name]. Some names can be confusing, such as Scott Kelly. Perhaps his real name is Kelly Scott. You do not know unless you make sure you record all your data consistently. If you feel unsure that you may accidentally record a name incorrectly, you can use ALL CAPS for each record's [Last Name].

Examples:

- Margaret JOHNSON (First name LAST NAME)
- Margaret Johnson (First name Last name)
- Johnson, Margaret (Last name, First name) – *This format is NOT recommended*

It is good practice to use the name listed on the birth or baptism record as the primary name on your data. A common name may be used later in life on records, or you may even find census data with a completely different name!

Nicknames. Nicknames can be an important part of your research. Over the years, many names were commonly used to replace a formal name, including in census and other records. To assist your research, if an ancestor has a nickname, add it to your record, but differentiate it in some way. You can use parenthesis () or quotes “ ” to record nicknames. Whichever you choose, be consistent. You may also record nicknames or shortened names in an Also Known As (AKA) field if you have that available in your online family tree.

Examples:

- Terrance (Terry) Smith
- Terrance “Terry” Smith

Middle Names. If you happen to know a middle name or a middle initial for a record, add it to your data. Many families are known for naming their children with the same names, making research difficult. Having middle names or initials will assist with your research. In some cases, you may find that someone actually went by their middle name and used an initial for their first name, or that they had multiple middle names. Verify the name with birth or other records to confirm.

Maiden Names. Female ancestors should be recorded and researched primarily by their maiden name (the name prior to their marriage). You may record the marriage name on the record as well, but you should select one consistent way of recording the data. If you do not know the maiden name of a female ancestor, either leave the data blank, or add a question mark (?) to the record in place of the name.

Examples:

- Lois (LANE) KENT
- Leia (?) (ORGANA) SOLO
- Morticia Addams (nee Frump)

What does nee mean?

It comes from the French née which literally means “born.” It is used to indicate the maiden name or family name of a married woman.

Date Formats

The dates in your data are of utmost importance. For this reason, you should select ONE (1) format for all your dates. Common practices are to use the following format: DD MMM YYYY, where D is the day, M is the first three letters of the month and Y is the four digit year. If you are writing the data by hand, you should completely spell out May, June, and July so as not to have confusion if writing is illegible. You can also spell out all months completely if you do not use shorthand.

Examples:

- 20 JAN 1810
- 18 June 1824
- 9 October 1975

Abbreviations

You may find that you want to abbreviate when recording some of your data. This is okay, but it is recommended to use the common abbreviations (listed below) and also make a guide for others to understand your abbreviations if they are looking at your data later.

Common abbreviations:

b = born

bpt = baptized

dob = date of birth

pob = place of birth

d = died

bur = buried/burial

dod = date of death

pod = place of death

m = married

pom = place of marriage

bef = before

aft = after

abt = about

Place Name Formats

When recording a place, there are a few things to remember. First, place names should always be listed from smallest geographic location to the largest. If you have a church or hospital, that should be listed first, followed by the town, village or city, county, state, and country. Record the place name by what it was in the year of your record.

Place names can change over time when areas are annexed, renamed, or when borders change.

Examples:

- Dahlgren Township, Carver, Minnesota, USA
- St Francis Regional Medical Center, Shakopee, Scott, Minnesota, USA
- Hennepin County, Minnesota, USA
- Weimer Republic, East Germany, West Germany, Germany

Unverified Data Recording

There will be times when doing research that you want to record an approximate date, but do not have a record to verify it yet. In these circumstances, using before [DATE], after [DATE], and about [DATE] can be helpful. You may also want to list a place name in your unverified data. Here you should potentially list only the largest, most verified area you can. If you know the state but not the county or city, list the state and country. Once you have confirmed the county or city, you can add that information.

Examples:

- bef 1840
- aft Dec 1899
- abt 1829
- Madison County, Montana, USA

DO NOT LIST A DEATH DATE, EVEN AN APPROXIMATED ONE, ON A RECORD OF SOMEONE WHO MAY STILL BE LIVING.

Research Documents

Your documents are the heart of your research. There will be a lot of information you may find for each person you do research on, and keeping it all straight can be a daunting task. Using a Documentation Record for each individual you are researching can help you to organize your findings and quickly determine other areas you have yet to search. The Documentation Record provided includes sections to record various Birth, Marriage, Death, Federal Census, State and Territory Census, Courthouse, Military, Employment, Citizenship, Immigration, Education, and Miscellaneous records. Remember to record where you found the record (the source).

Organization of Files and Data

Along with documenting your findings, you will also want to have an organization structure to save your information. This organization method uses your pedigree chart to organize your records and data. Each individual on your pedigree chart will have a chart and individual number associated with them. This starts with yourself as number 1. Your father will be number 2 and your mother will be number 3. (See the example below.) Using these numbers, you will create folders to store the records and files associated with your family members. (Note that this organization method can be used for paper organization as well as digital files.)

Your first folder will start with your parents, e.g. "2-3 John Drew Barrymore/Ildikó Makó." (We will use the Barrymore family as an example.) In this folder you will store information about the couple and their children, including yourself. Information on children is kept in their parents' folder until the children are married (or have children of their own).

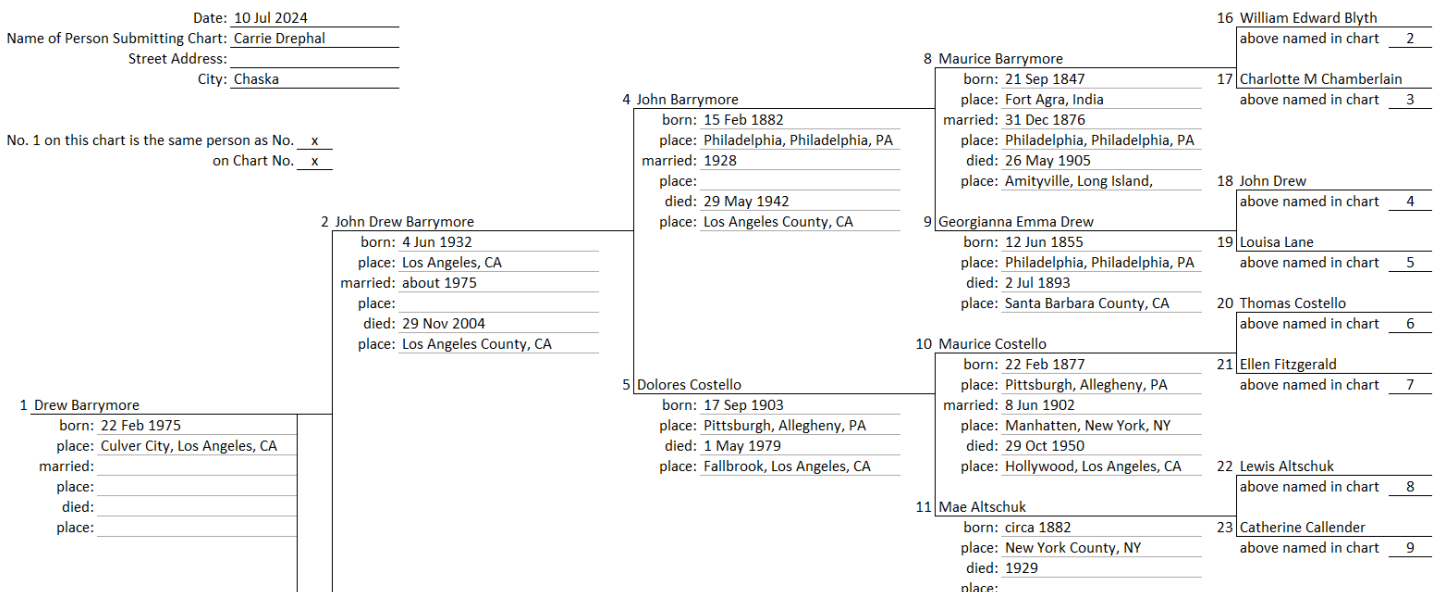


Figure 1: Drew Barrymore Pedigree Chart (1)

The next two folders will be for each set of your grandparents, e.g. “4-5 John Barrymore/Dolores Costello.” The records for your parents will be stored in their parents’ (your grandparents’) folder until their marriage (or the birth of their first child). In this example, the birth record of John Drew would be stored in the “4-5 John Barrymore/Dolores Costello” folder. His marriage record would be stored in the “2-3 John Drew Barrymore/Ildikó Makó” folder as well as the birth record of his daughter, Drew Barrymore. John (#4 on Chart 1) would have his death record stored in the “4-5 John Barrymore/Dolores Costello” folder.

Continue creating folders in this manner, matching them to names and numbers on the pedigree charts and storing your records where you can easily review them if needed.

Where should I store the following documents?

- Vital Records – Store a couple’s marriage and death records and the birth records of their children in the parents’ folder (e.g. Drew Barrymore’s birth record would be stored in the “2-3 John Drew Barrymore/Ildikó Makó” folder). Records for siblings not included directly on your pedigree chart can be stored in the child’s folder under their parents, including marriage and death records.
- Census Records – Store the census record in the head of household’s folder, unless someone is a boarder, then the record can be stored in that person’s folder.
- Newspaper Information – Store obituaries and other newspaper clippings/files in the folder for that person, unless it is a child, then it should be stored in the parents’ folder.
- Naturalization Papers & Passenger Lists – Children on a passenger list should be included in their parents’ folder unless the child traveled alone without parents, in which the document should be included in the individual’s folder.
- Plat Maps & Land Records – Store property ownership information in the folder of the named individual.
- Court Records – Wills, Probate, and Divorce records should be stored in the folder of the named individual.
- Military Records – These should be included in the folder for the individual, NOT his/her parents. Example: The military records for Dwight Eisenhower would be stored in the folder for Dwight Eisenhower & Mamie Doud (his wife), not David Eisenhower & Ida Stover (his parents).

Additional tips on organizing your data:

- Never use highlighter on an original document. Make a copy of the document if highlighting is required. Use either blue or yellow highlighters as these will not appear too dark if the document is copied again.
- Do not punch holes in original documents or photos. Use sheet protectors where applicable.
- It is recommended to use copies of original documents to carry around as you work on your research. Leave the originals at home.
- If you add your name and contact information to your research documents, etc., you will be more likely to have them returned if you accidentally leave something behind.
- Do not use Post-it or adhesive backed notes. The adhesive will remain on the page after it is removed which could harm the document or photograph in the long term.
- Never use ink pens or markers on photographs. Given a long enough period of time, the ink will bleed through the photograph.
- Spelling doesn’t count. Many of ancestors couldn’t spell, and many could barely write, so how a name sounds is more important than how it is spelled.

Chart 1 - Drew Barrymore

- 2-3 John Drew Barrymore Ildikó Makó
- 4-5 John Barrymore Dolores Costello
- 8-9 Maurice Barrymore Georgianna Drew
- 10-11 Maurice Costello Mae Altschuk
- 16-17 William Blyth Charlotte Chamberlain
- 18-19 John Drew Louisa Lane
- 20-21 Thomas Costello Ellen Fitzgerald
- 22-23 Lewis Altschuk Catherine Callender

Figure 2: Digital Folder Structure