

# THE ROAD AHEAD: A GENEALOGICAL POTPOURRI

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The past few years have given family historians more change than ever before – and the rate of transformation is bound to increase in the years to come. Genealogists need to be ready.

How do we do that? Easy! Remember the basics of genealogical research, and live them every time you work on your ancestral challenges. Do not – repeat, do not – be fooled or distracted by the latest bright shiny things, which could be online trees, new websites or documents manipulated by artificial intelligence.

You might just say “Stay calm and carry on,” or you can consider the five basic points in every genealogist’s best friend, the Genealogical Proof Standard. The GPS shows the minimum that genealogists must do for their work to be credible, boiled down to these five elements:

1. Reasonably exhaustive research has been conducted.
2. Each statement of fact has a complete and accurate source citation.
3. The evidence is reliable and has been skillfully correlated and interpreted.
4. Any contradictory evidence has been resolved.
5. The conclusion has been soundly reasoned and coherently written.

And a reminder: Any proof statement is subject to re-evaluation when new evidence arises. Some elements of your research can be carved in stone, but much of what you do might be changed over time. Keep your mind open.

The basics are important because there will be a rush of new resources that will help us make progress faster than ever before. But be careful. In the rush to add to our trees, it might be tempting to accept new information without ensuring its accuracy, or that it applies to our family. Avoid accepting information without question, especially if it confirms what we already believe to be true. Be skeptical and always double-check.

In the decade ahead, we will have better access to records than ever before. More will be digitized, and more comprehensive indexes will be available. These records will not always be on the standard family history sites – FamilySearch and the major commercial ones – so we need to check with others to ensure we do not miss the best new releases.

(Let’s not try to predict specific changes; anyone a decade ago, asked to forecast what 2023 would be like, would have been too conservative, too extreme, or would have missed the mark entirely.)

Have you used Ancestry’s Thrulines? The photo tools on MyHeritage? Those features are made possible by artificial intelligence, also known as AI. You have probably heard a lot about

AI in the past few months, but it has been with us for many years. Another common example is the auto-complete function on a Google search.

What's changed in the past year is that AI tools, once the exclusive domain of big business, are now in the hands of the masses. This democratization of a powerful tool could have both positive and negative effects. It is easier than ever to fake photographs; think of Donald Trump in a scene from the Bible. It is possible to fake videos; it is possible to show Barack Obama saying something that he would never say. Want to hear the Beatles performing a Taylor Swift song? That's also possible, thanks to AI.

If AI can be used in those cases, which are much more complex than the documents we use in genealogical research, we have extra reason to proceed with caution. If something seems too good to be true, and does not come from a reputable source, be wary.

A personal note: The past two years have been the most productive in my forty-five years of family history research. You might think I would have found everything by now, but clearly that is not the case. There are more records available than ever before, DNA matches have helped, and indexes are making a big difference in what I can do.

But beyond that, what has prompted my success? Two weeks in Salt Lake City, the first in November 2021 and the second in the summer of 2023. The FamilySearch library remains the most important site for much of our research. Digitized records, records on microfilm and books are only part of it; the staff members and volunteers have knowledge that can help almost everyone advance their work.

When I stress the value of a trip to Salt Lake City, the usual response is, "But Dave, it's all online." Nonsense! I recommend a week in Salt Lake to anyone who can afford the time and the money – and I am well aware of what is available online.

For example: I have done DNA tests on five sites, and I check all of them, plus GEDMatch, regularly. I have subscriptions to Ancestry, MyHeritage, FindMyPast, The Genealogist, Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchive.com, GenealogyBank, NewsLibrary, the Ulster Genealogical and Historical Guild, the Society of Genealogists, JewishGen, the Society for German Genealogy in Eastern Europe, and two German societies. I am also a major donor to the Mennonite Historical Society of B.C. and Geneteka in Poland. I use all these sites regularly, along with free ones such as FamilySearch, Szukajwarchiwach in Poland and the Bundesarchiv in Germany.

All those online sources came in handy during the pandemic. We could not visit our relatives or travel to ancestral areas. Many archives and libraries were closed or imposed restrictive rules of access. Despite that, I broke through several brick walls, found many more relatives, and added about 4,000 names to my family tree. The information was at my fingertips.

I did not do it all myself. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I paid a friend in Zhytomyr to find documents in the archives there. He uploaded more than 200 documents to Google Drive in the six months before the war started. Today, he is living with his family in Edmonton.

While access to records has changed dramatically over the years, the fundamentals of genealogical research have not. The same methods that we used when we started our research, the same need to work objectively and thoroughly, still apply; it's just the tools that have changed.

Consider these wise words, first published almost a century ago:

“Every family has a favorite tradition as to its origin. These traditions are from the twilight zone of history. In the uncertain light of tradition, it is difficult to distinguish the flickering shadow from the outlines of the reality. Traditions may be precious heirlooms of truth, treasured up and passed on by each generation, which have gathered some of the rust of error and have faded somewhat in the course of the years – they may be but modern imitations, having all the appearance of age upon them, that have mistakenly been substituted for the real thing.”

– *From Seeking After Our Dead: Our Greatest Responsibility*,  
published by the Genealogical Society of Utah in 1928.

**With all that in mind, some sources. Which ones are you NOT using?**

1. DNA tests. Not just on one site, but on several; not just for yourself, but for your family members as well. If you can find someone of your parents’ generation, test right away, do not delay.
2. Check the usual genealogical websites regularly for new additions.
3. Look for unusual sites that might help. Explore new archives, like local and regional ones, historical societies or university libraries in places where your ancestors lived. You might find databases, maps or photo collections on their sites.
4. Sorry, but it’s not all online. You might need to make a road trip or enlist the help of a researcher close to where the records are. And a road trip would include the library in Salt Lake City.
5. Reach out to your relatives. (Again, sorry.) Not just your immediate family, but second or third cousins. Odds are that some of them are keen family historians.

(And a special thanks for attending this session, and for reading this far.)

**A bonus: milestones in the history of genealogical research**

- 1538: Parish registers started in England
- 1666: First census taken in New France
- 1802: John Field Debrett publishes his first book of the peerage
- 1828: First guide to genealogical research published in England
- 1837: Civil registration begins in England
- 1845: New England Historic Genealogical Society founded
- 1862: *Handbook of American Genealogy* published
- 1894: The Genealogical Society of Utah starts collecting material
- 1903: National Genealogical Society founded
- 1911: Society of Genealogists founded
- 1938: Genealogy Library starts microfilming old records
- 1947: *Genealogical Helper* magazine is launched
- 1961: Ontario Genealogical Society founded
- 1963: Granite Mountain Records Vault opens south of Salt Lake City
- 1969: International Genealogical Index (known as Computer File Index) started

1974: Federation of Family History Societies founded  
1977: Television show based on Alex Haley's *Roots* stirs interest in genealogy  
1982: Computers in Genealogy newsletter started  
1984: GEDCOM specification introduced  
1984: English *Family Tree* magazine launched  
1988: ROOTS-L mailing group started  
1990: Infobase, the predecessor of Ancestry, goes online  
1995: GENUKI, Rootsweb and Find A Grave websites started  
1996: Cyndi Ingle launches her famous list  
1997: Ancestry.com offers a new database every day  
1997: Y-DNA theory proved  
1998: FreeBMD and Origins.net (the first pay-per-view genealogy site) started  
2000: Family Tree DNA offers Y-DNA and mtDNA tests  
2000: Genealogical Proof Standard introduced  
2001: Index to 1881 Canadian census available on CD-ROM  
2003: MyHeritage.com started  
2004: *Who Do You Think You Are?* show started in England  
2006: Ancestry.ca, with indexed Canadian records, launched  
2007: 23andMe and Ancestry offer saliva-based consumer DNA tests  
2010: GEDmatch created, allowing matches across company lines  
2010: Family Tree DNA offers autosomal tests  
2011: First Rootstech held in Salt Lake City  
2012: Ancestry offers mass-market DNA kits in the United States  
2015: Ancestry starts selling DNA kits in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia  
2015: Blaine Bettinger introduces his SharedCM project  
2016: LivingDNA offers deep ancestry DNA project  
2017: FamilySearch announces the end of microfilm distribution  
2017: DNA Doe Project launched to identify unknown bodies  
2019: Ancestry ThruLines and MyHeritage Theories of Family Relativity started  
2019: GEDmatch used to solve a 1987 murder in Washington State

#### **Sources used in compiling this list:**

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Also [www.thegeneticgenealogist.com](http://www.thegeneticgenealogist.com), plus other websites, genealogy magazines, and a memory that is faulty.

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