

Genealogy Information on the Web: A Hands-On Tutorial for SCLS Librarians and Their Patrons

Note to librarians - instructions to the librarians are given in square brackets and [underlined] Links in the .pdf are blue but they are not really working links.

Genealogists doing research on the web find an embarrassment of riches - there are an almost overwhelming number of resources available. Genealogists have flocked to the web, and even a simple search engine search on a family name can retrieve thousands of hits, although, of course, the usefulness of this information is highly questionable! Both genealogy research tools, and the results of genealogical research can be found on the Web. For example, there are quite a few genealogy databases that have information on millions of names, as well as web sites where you can make your own family tree, post it, and see other family trees. There is special software for genealogy, email discussion lists, and researchers for hire, who will do genealogy research for a fee. Some libraries and historical societies, including the Wisconsin Historical Society, also offer for-fee genealogy services, from printing copies of your family documents to conducting research for you.

In addition, in the manner of Web resources, many genealogy resources link to each other in an intertwining fashion. This is especially confusing when you start trying to search various genealogy databases – you might think you are searching the name index at Ancestry.com, and then find that you are actually searching the Social Security Death Index. This is because, first of all, many genealogy web sites are providing a web interfaces to a genealogy database created elsewhere. The Social Security Death Index is free, public information, so many link to it. Also, some of the web sites enable cross database searching, a good intention to save the researcher’s time, but one that can give users the feeling of starting one place and ending up somewhere else. Another caveat to remember is that some information is free, some requires a free login, and a great deal is by subscription. Sometimes not all the information retrieved in one search will be accessible, depending on the type of logins and subscriptions you have set up and/or purchased.

Let’s start trying to sift some of this out!

SCLS Licensed Databases

South Central Library System has two licensed databases, **Ancestry Library** and **HeritageQuest**, that may not contain the answers to every genealogical question, but certainly are the best place to start! They are available from the SCLS

Reference Databases screen:

<http://www.scls.info/resources>

One thing to remember about both of these databases is that they point to genealogical information that IS available elsewhere, sometimes for free, and both databases do contain some of the same resources, for example the US Census, but the coverage may vary.

Ancestry Library

<http://www.scls.info/resources/index.html#ancestrylibrary>

Ancestry Library is only available in the Library; you cannot use it from home (you can get a limited selection of its resources for free at Ancestry.com, referred to later, or they would certainly be happy to sell you your own subscription).

Ancestry Library contains over 4,000 resources and is being updated constantly.

One of the key things to check is US Census records. These have been digitized and indexed, so that you can do keyword searches, as well as see the original, sometimes handwritten census documents.

[Click U.S. Census Records & Images to get started. The 1930 census works best as an example, so choose that from the list. You can also just choose "1930" from the first page. Try some searches on names; things to remember are there is no truncation, so first initials won't work, and also you are searching an indexer's best guess at the spelling in the original handwritten document, so if you know alternate spellings, try them. Last names of people born outside the US may not always be spelled the way you expect. Combining with place names, place of birth, or age can work pretty well, if you know them, but they are not always completely accurate in the Census, or not what you expect - you can search on state, township, and county names, but not city. Printing the images is tricky, since they are from huge sheets. If you have a detail displayed, the best thing to do is use the browser's print command; if you use the print button in Ancestry Library you will get the whole sheet, too small to read. Remember you are searching an index, then displaying the document. It can be a little frustrating to scroll around in the document, and you feel as if you are looking through a peephole. Counsel patrons to be patient.]

In addition to the Census, using Ancestry Library, you can access the Social Security Death Index, which has accurate records for people who died in the 1960s or later. There are also other vital records, military records, biographies and histories. [When you search any type of resource besides the census, a list of database categories will appear in the right-hand side.]

[In addition to some frustrations working with images of historical documents, probably the biggest problem you will encounter with Ancestry Library is that it includes so much material; patrons may run into time limits and have to free up a workstation before they are ready.]

HeritageQuest Online

<http://www.scls.info/resources/index.html#heritagequest>

HeritageQuest is smaller than Ancestry Library, but still includes a great many resources, and HeritageQuest can be accessed from home. HeritageQuest includes over 25,000 books, biographies and histories, the US Census and military records. Eventually, since it is made by a company (ProQuest) that manufactures microfilm and indexes to newspapers, HeritageQuest will include newspaper obituaries from hundreds of US newspapers.

The image display of census record in HeritageQuest is a little easier to use than Ancestry Library; the searching is perhaps a little more difficult. Some Census data is not entirely loaded yet so this can lead to some quirky search results - if you use a state name that is not indexed yet, you will not get good results. [For example, once I knew that Staten Island NY, where my father's family lived, is in Richmond county, I found them easily in the 1930 Census via Ancestry Library, but New York is not loaded in HeritageQuest, so no luck. Click the what's new link to see how they are progressing] HeritageQuest can do fast searches on limited search keys, say combining a first name with a place of birth, but you can only display results lists of 1,000 or less, so be sure to construct a broad search to retrieve less than 1,000.

HeritageQuest also includes e-book versions of a large number of books. These are published family, local histories, and biographies, that may work nicely if you are researching a somewhat famous ancestor or locale, that have had a book written about them. [use quotation marks around words you want to search as a phrase; "frank lloyd wright; when you get your results, if you choose view citation, you can see where the hits on your search term occur in the book you searched]

Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) Genealogy home page

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/genealogy/index.html>

For genealogists in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) is probably a required stop. To quote from their web site, "The Society possesses one of the largest genealogical collections in the country. The collection is not limited to Wisconsin history and genealogy but includes family and local history material pertaining to all regions of North America." The WHS Genealogy home page is a good place for researchers to get started. [Some resources at the site to point out are:]

- ◆ Wisconsin Name Index

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wni/>

This is really an index that allows you to search for personal names from 100,000 obituaries, personal sketches, and other short biographies of Wisconsin people, dating about 1870 - 1970, from newspapers and standard sources that are available in many Wisconsin libraries. You cannot view the original articles, but you can order a photocopy or printout if you wish. Entries include the name and where the reference appears; if it is a book, the title and page number are given, so you may be able to get it in your own library.

- ◆ Wisconsin Local History and Biography Articles

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wlhba/>

Using this resource, you can search through 16,000 articles on 50,000 pages, published between 1860 and 1940. You can view digital versions of the originals, but you are searching catalog records rather than the full text, so finding a name depends on if the cataloger included it in a record.

- ◆ Beginning Your Family History

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/genealogy/beginners/>

10 steps to get you started uncovering your family history

- ◆ See the listing of various types of records such as Cemetery, Census, Church, Immigration, Naturalization, etc. with instructions on how to use each type for genealogical work, and what the Society has of each type.

The WHS web site also links you to library catalogs, such as UW-Madison's MadCat, and WHS ArCat [catalog records for archival collections, so similar to searching the History and biography articles - it is NOT full text, so there may be references to a person's name in an archival collection, even if searching the person's name doesn't retrieve anything - the search results only mean that the person's name did not show up in the catalog record. You may need to search by

dates, or locations, or types of records – e.g. you could look for probate records for the dates covering your grandfather’s will, but not his name]

FamilySearch

<http://www.familysearch.org/>

FamilySearch is the main web site for all the genealogy resources collected by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). LDS has done major work in compiling family history records (for all people, not limited to Mormons). At the site, you can read a guide on how to start your family history, search for family members in a variety of databases, find a wide variety of maps, forms, guides, and other research helps, in a list that can be sorted by place, title, subject, or document type, and find links to other Web sites containing family history information. In fact, when you begin searching what you think are **other** genealogical resources on the web, it will start to seem as if all roads lead to family search, since you will often find yourself back at the “search for your ancestors” search screen at FamilySearch.

[show Research Helps:

http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/Rg/frameset_rhelps.asp The list defaults to place, can show sort by title. Can also show some examples of forms to keep track of your research, or maps, and if there is an item number in the far right column, the item can be purchased from LDS]

[show ancestor search

http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset_search.asp

try a (dead) parent, or grandparent; note that if you fill in too many fields you may not get what you want, but too few, and depending on how common the name is you may get too much. There is also a tips or help section. First thing it goes out to search is US Social Security Death index]

Cyndi's List

<http://www.cyndislist.com/>

Cyndi's List is the megasite of genealogy research, with links to all kinds of genealogical stuff. It is maintained by a real Cyndi; the labor of love of one person. She will not do your research for you, but provides advice about hiring a professional researcher [try this as a search in the search box on the main page "hiring researcher" no quotes - choose the first hit, and you can show that there are related links, like tutorials and beginners] There are links to just about everything a genealogist could need at Cyndi's list, from GEDCOM software, [<http://www.cyndislist.com/gedcom.htm>] to listservs [<http://www.cyndislist.com/ mailing.htm>] to FAQs and information about Cyndi herself. Perhaps one of the most helpful sections of the site is the Cyndi's

List list of genealogical databases [you can show this as a search, type databases in the search box, OR go to <http://www.cyndislist.com/database.htm> The databases are grouped by category, and when you go into a category, like Birth, there is a list of sites with a description of what each one is like]

If you use the “Search Cyndi’s List” box , the search defaults to FreeFind, but there are actually FOUR search engines on Cyndi’s List; clicking the text takes you to a screen where you can choose FreeFind, Google, Atomz or PicoSearch. One navigational note about Cyndi’s List – it has very long pages with lots of in-page links, so often when you are clicking a link that you think is taking you to another page, you are actually going further down the same page!

RootsWeb

<http://www.RootsWeb.com/>

Cyndi’s List is hosted by RootsWeb, which is supported by Ancestry.com, a subscription service related to Ancestry Library.

Ancestry.com

<http://www.ancestry.com/>

Ancestry.com is the free version of Ancestry Library. SCLS now subscribes to Ancestry Library, so that obviously supplies many more resources, and is the preferred source for SCLS patrons. The only reason someone **might** want to refer to Ancestry.com is that they can use it from home, and also some serious genealogists might have their own subscriptions. Even Ancestry.com is primarily set up as a subscription resource, but you can set up a guest login and get to more services. [One thing to note though, is that, when I set up a guest login, at the same time as I got the email confirmation, I got the Ancestry.com newsletter]

[Show the global search; just enter a name in the main search box, and you will get a combined hit list; sources with a padlock on the left require subscription]

[If you set up a guest login, you can show the online family tree creation; the advantage to these online family trees is that they are stored on Ancestry.com's server, so if your other family members are in other parts of the world, they can still see and add to the family tree as long as they have an Ancestry.com login. In Ancestry Library, this family tree part is shown under Trees & Community, and the information in there is only as reliable as those submitting it, e.g. probably about as good as doing a Google search on a family name]

RootsWeb Social Security Death Index

<http://ssdi.genealogy.RootsWeb.com/>

RootsWeb has a nice interface to the Social Security Death Index. To obtain a photocopy of the actual application for a Social Security card you can search the name and obtain the Social Security Number to include in a request to the Social Security Administration, or click on the SS-5 Letter link next to the person's record for a sample letter to send to the Social Security Administration. [Try the advanced search, if you know the death date, and last residence city and state of the person you are looking for]

National Archives and Records Administration Genealogy page

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/index.html

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has many records that are useful for genealogical research, such as the Federal population censuses, 1790-1920; military service and pension records, ca. 1776-1900; immigration records, 1820-1957; and naturalization records. Starting from the Genealogy page gets you help on using each type of record, similar to the WHS genealogy page. NARA suggests starting with census records, however, much of this is not online

in full text; you have to search catalogs for descriptions and request printouts from microfilm.

Two of the searchable catalogs at NARA are its Library Catalog, and the Microfilm Catalog. Both can be accessed from:

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/alic/

and there are descriptions of the content of each.

You can also use:

ARC (searchable catalog)

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/arc/

Which is the online catalog of NARA's holdings in the Washington, DC area, and nationwide in Regional Archives and Presidential Libraries.

Vital Records Information for United States (birth, death or marriage certificate)

<http://www.vitalrec.com/>

This site contains all the information you need to obtain vital records (such as birth, death & marriage certificates and divorce decrees) from each state, territory and county of the United States. Since these records are handled by individual states, the methods of requesting them can vary, so this site helps researchers through that process. There are also links (that vary by state) to a range of databases, although many of these require subscription. [Wisconsin is not listed, since we get this type of record from our state historical society, see the online service above] Vital Records provides another interface to the databases at Ancestry.com, and to the Social Security Death Index; you may find you like this one better. [participants can try the same search they used at RootsWeb SSDeath index, or at Ancestry.com's global search]

American Family Immigration History Center at Ellis Island

<http://www.ellisland.org>

From 1892 to 1924, more than 22 million immigrants, passengers, and crew members came through Ellis Island and the Port of New York. The ship companies that transported these passengers kept detailed passenger lists, called "ship manifests." These manifests have been transcribed (by the Mormons) into a

vast electronic archive, which you can easily search to find an individual passenger. For various reasons, such as changed spellings of names, names changed completely, and not all children being recorded, etc. not everyone who came through Ellis Island during those years can be found.

This site has a pleasant, museum-like interface, and there are other things to do here besides search – you can look at the immigrant experience section, really an online exhibition, with six families’ stories, and a timeline of immigration. Of course there is a gift shop, and if you join the Ellis Island Foundation, you can start an online scrapbook for your own family.

[Try an ancestor name. Once you have done a search, you can first expand the search by including alternate spellings, and then limit by selecting gender, year of arrival, age at arrival, etc.]

Life History Services

<http://lifehistoryservices.com>

Life History Services is a company in Madison, Wis. founded by Anita Hecht, a professional interviewer and researcher. Life History Services offers professional assistance to individuals who would like to have a family history, or narrative genealogy, of their family compiled and written. One of the first steps in this process is interviewing living family members so Hecht's interviewing experience is valuable.

Genealogy Resources - Public Pioneer

<http://pioneer.utah.gov/genealogies.html>

Genealogical resources from the State Library of Utah, some notable resources (not mentioned elsewhere) are ProGenealogists, links to free and fee-based U.S. genealogy research services and Interment.net, transcriptions of nearly 3 million records from over 5,000 cemeteries worldwide. There is also a Google search box that jumps you right into Cyndi's List.