

# Tracing Your Family History

Some Suggested Steps  
& Resources



Local History & Genealogy  
Department

Robert P. Kinchen Central Library  
The Galleries of Syracuse  
447 S. Salina St., Syracuse, NY 13202  
435-1900 [www.onlib.org](http://www.onlib.org)

Few of us can walk into a library and trace our family history without having some knowledge of our ancestry. Even considerable information about our ancestors does not guarantee that we will document our lineage in short order. Usually, diligent research is needed, and it may take years to establish a lineage.

For the most part, published family histories or genealogies deal with Colonial American and 19th-century families. The lineages have been researched and printed by interested family members or compiled by professional genealogists. If no history has been published on your family, chances are none of your relatives ever undertook the task. Perhaps you are the one to do it! Genealogy can be a rewarding hobby, but requires time and effort to do well. This brochure is designed to get you off to the right start by suggesting some steps to take as you begin your research.

The Onondaga County Public Library (OCPL) is one of the few public libraries in the country to maintain a genealogical collection. The Local History/Genealogy department of the Central Library offers a wide range of genealogical resources and staff trained to assist you using those resources. While staff members do not perform individualized research, they will help you put library and community resources to work for you . . . and your family!

## **Suggested Steps for Starting to Research Your Family History**

### **STEP 1 DATA COLLECTION**

Always proceed from the present to the past. Gather all possible information on your family from relatives and family friends: names, relationships, dates and places of births, marriages and deaths, places of residence, church affiliations, and nationalities. Also consult family Bibles, letters, diaries, account books, photos, obituaries, tombstones, and any other source of family records. Note variations in the spellings of names.

### **STEP 2 CHARTS & RECORDS**

Organize the information you have gathered by charting it to clarify relationships and to show omissions. OCPL's collection includes many how-to books for the beginning genealogist, including topic specific guides. You can ask a librarian to help you find genealogy charts, or visit one of the many websites with free charts available for download. Or, use a software program to help you organize your family tree. There are many available, such as Family Tree Maker, Legacy Family Tree, and more.

### **STEP 3 LIBRARY RESOURCES**

Once you have completed the steps suggested above, you are ready to seek more

purchases or sales, visits to relatives, accidents, criminal activity, and all kinds of "tidbits"! You can view microfilm of various Syracuse newspapers from the mid-1800's to the present or use the library's online subscription to NewspaperArchive.com. This database is available on-site or remotely if you have an OCPL Central or branch library card. You can also request historical newspaper microfilm from other towns to locate obituaries and news of your ancestors through OCPL's Interlibrary Loan service.

**OBITUARIES:** Obituaries can be extremely helpful when researching dates of births and deaths, causes of death, church affiliations, funeral home used, burial locations, and relatives' names; OCPL has a multi-volume clipping index containing selected obituaries from Syracuse newspapers from 1860-1996. You can also search newspaper microfilm and digital newspaper databases for obituaries.

**PERIODICALS:** Check the Periodical Source Index (PERSI), available in book and CD-Rom format, under the family name or the state and county for a list of relevant articles. Examine *New England Historic Genealogical Register*, *New York*

*Genealogical and Biographical Record*, *American Genealogist*, *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, and *Tree Talks*.

### **RECORDS OF NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND HEREDITARY SOCIETIES:**

Including Daughters of the American Revolution lineage books

### **CARD CATALOGS/Misc:**

OCPL also has three unique card catalogs, including:

**Cemetery**, lists Central New York cemeteries by county, town, and name of cemetery, and references to transcripts and name indexes

**Genealogy**, lists published genealogies available by family surname

**Onondaga Pioneer Index**, lists early Onondaga County settlers, with various vital details and referenced publications.

**The WPA file** (Works Progress Administration) contains biographical information for Onondaga County residents culled from 1814-1900 newspaper clippings.

**The Onondaga Vertical files** contain genealogical notes on various Onondaga County families.

#### STEP 4 LIBRARY ELECTRONIC (digital) DATABASES

OCPL provides researchers with free access to various electronic databases:

**Ancestry.com**, one of the largest and fastest growing family history web sites with over 1.9 billion names, is available on-site at the Central library and city branches through the library's paid subscription.

**NewspaperArchive.com**, a searchable database of historic articles from Syracuse and selected state and national newspapers

Other databases have been created in-house and provide quick and easy access to local information available at OCPL:

- **1855 & 1865 NY State Census -Syracuse - Head of Household index**
- **Biography index of prominent Central New Yorkers**
- **Necrology Database-**index to many pre-1900 deaths in Onondaga County
- **Onondaga County Time line** covering 1654-1990
- **St. Joseph's German Cemetery internment records**
- **Selective obituaries from 1860-1996**

- **Vital records from selected area/local churches**
- **Woodlawn Cemetery burials**
- **Index to selected 1800 Syracuse newspapers**
- **Civil War Index of Onondaga County soldiers & sailors**
- **Index to selected WPA files** (Workers Progress Administration)

#### STEP 5 GENEALOGY WEB SITES

**Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society**—An organization committed to the preservation of the history, genealogy, and culture of the African-ancestored populations of the local, national, and international community. [www.aahgs.org](http://www.aahgs.org)

**Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)**— The world's largest collection of family history, this massive genealogical database has more than 800 million names and is available to the public for free. [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

information. Search the OCPL catalog, either at the library or online at [www.onlib.org](http://www.onlib.org). Try searching by subject, such as the name of the family (e.g. MARTIN FAMILY), or the name of a geographic area followed by a subject heading (e.g. SYRACUSE, N.Y. – BIOGRAPHY).

The following genealogy subject headings may also be useful for searching in the catalog:

**Atlases**

**Bible Records**

**Cemeteries**

**Census**

**Church History**

**Court Records**

**Deeds**

**Gazetteers**

**Genealogy**

**Land Records**

**Maps**

**Military Records**

**Naturalizations**

**Newspapers**

**Obituaries**

**Passenger Lists**

**Pensions**

**Probate Records**

**Wills**

*Also look for:*

#### **CHURCH RECORDS:**

primarily Protestant; Some contain admissions, dismissals, baptisms, marriages, and burials.

**CITY DIRECTORIES:** From the mid-1800s to the present; Useful for locating or tracking individuals; Certain years also provide marriage and death dates.

#### **CIVIL RECORDS**

**CENSUS RECORDS:** Some records date before 1790, such as Rhode Island 1774. Federal census data is available beginning in 1790 and every 10 years thereafter to 1930. Keep in mind that a federal census is released 72 years after it was taken, so the 1940 census will not be available until 2012. OCPL has New York State census records from 1855 to 1925 for Onondaga County and selected holdings for other New York counties.

**PROBATE RECORDS:** Wills, letters of administration, guardianships

**LAND RECORDS:** Deeds, mortgages

**TOWN RECORDS:** Vital statistics & tax lists

## GENEALOGICAL COLUMNS, QUERIES AND ANSWERS IN NEWSPAPERS:

Such as the Boston Transcript, available on microfiche

**GENEALOGIES:** Look at both collective genealogies, such as those by Savage and by Cutter, and individual family histories.

## GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Study town, county, and state maps related to areas relevant to your family. Consult gazetteers to learn the history of boundary and name changes. Track migration routes followed by groups of settlers. Consult historical land owner maps to locate family members.

**HISTORIES:** Use town, county, and church histories, as well as cemetery records and inscriptions. These histories often include valuable biographical information.

**INDEXES:** Learn to use special indexes, such as:

- **American Genealogical-Biographical Index**
- **PERSI - PERiodical Source Index**, which indexes almost 2 million genealogy and history articles

- **New England Historical and Genealogical Register**, which began in 1847 (OCPL's holdings are complete.)

- **The Tree Talks Index**, which covers 50 years of county records across New York State.

**LDS MICROFILMS:** In 2011, OCPL became an LDS Affiliate Library. You can borrow any available LDS microfilm or fiche and have it sent to OCPL's Central Library for viewing at the library. You can search the LDS holdings at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

**MILITARY RECORDS:** OCPL has microfilm of selected records from *Revolutionary War Pension* and *Bounty Land Warrant Application* files. There is also a microfilm index to *War of 1812 Pension Application* and *Bounty Land Warrant files*, which are available through the National Archives. The library also has the *Adjutant General of New York* reports on state Civil War units, and a digital index of *Civil War soldiers and sailors from Onondaga County*.

**NEWSPAPERS:** Check local newspapers for articles mentioning your ancestors. You may find birth, marriage, and death announcements, obituaries, mentions of moves, home/farm/business

**Cyndi's List**—Links to just about every genealogical site to be found!  
[www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com)

**Ellis Island Family History Center**—Between 1892 and 1924, more than 22 million passengers and members of ships' crews came through Ellis Island and the Port of New York. You can research passenger records from ships and see the original manifests with passengers' names.  
[www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)

**Onondaga County Genealogical Site**—Table of Contents - Of most importance to those researching their Onondaga County ancestors, this site provides access to Onondaga County cemetery inscriptions (not all inclusive), town and village histories, surname indexes, and links to other counties and states.  
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyononda>

**United States GenWeb Project**  
This site includes searchable links to all states; It leads to Internet addresses that may include cemetery inscriptions, military and vital records, important addresses and contacts, pioneer indexes, obituaries, online maps, and much more—one of the most important web sites available.  
<http://www.usgenweb.org>

## OTHER ONLINE NEWSPAPER ARCHIVE DATABASES

**FultonHistory.com**—Searchable database of over 12,000,000 historic New York State newspapers, including weeklies; This is a good place to search for articles published in smaller community newspapers. [www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com)

**Northern New York Historical Newspapers**—Searchable database of historic newspapers from Oswego, Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton, and Essex Counties  
<http://news.nnyln.net>

## STEP 6 VITAL RECORDS

While OCPL does not have official vital records, it does have a microfiche copy of the **New York Vital Records Index** created by the New York State Health Department. The Vital Records Index provides information to help locate birth, death, and marriage certificates filed since the 1880's in New York State (excluding New York City). OCPL also has a collection of church records, many of which are indexed, that cover the early years prior to the start of official records in 1873.

## STEP 7 MISCELLANEOUS SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Do not overlook any source of relevant information—local newspapers, county and town historians, undertakers, clubs

and associations, historical and genealogical societies.

### **STEP 8 OTHER LIBRARY AND ARCHIVAL MATERIALS**

Visit other libraries with genealogical collections, historical societies, and archival agencies. Generally, libraries have published materials, while archives have original, one-of-a-kind records. Consider visiting the *National Archives in Washington, D.C.*, the *Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* in Salt Lake City, or one of its branches, or *Boston's New England Historic Genealogical Society*.

**Interlibrary Loan** – This service allows OCPL patrons to borrow materials from other libraries and archives around the country. Of particular significance is the *New York State Newspaper Project* which makes available to New York State libraries hundreds of local newspapers from across the state.

### **STEP 9 REFERENCE RECORDS**

Always write down the source of your information. Identify it as accurately and clearly as possible. If your source is a book, copy the exact title, author's name, and publication date from the title

page. Note the page or pages where the information appears. When photocopying is possible, copy the title page as well as the information you need.

### **HOW-TO BOOKS FOR GENEALOGISTS**

There are many books available on researching your genealogy, including how to research specific immigrant and ethnic groups. Please ask a librarian to assist you in locating these titles.

**Enjoy your journey!**

