


# Ancestry.com: Finding the Treasures While Avoiding the Minefields

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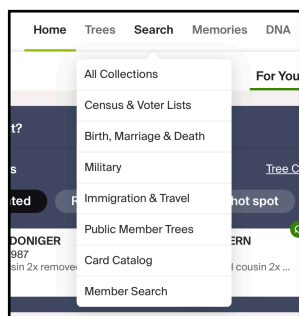
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 **ancestry.com**—both a treasure trove and a quagmire for genealogists

Filled with digital images of actual records from every state and the federal government, yet rife with misleading trees and “suggestions” that often lead to the wrong people, Ancestry.com is a challenge even for the most experienced user. Here are some ideas of how to get the most from this challenging website.



The starting point of your journey through the site is the menu bar found at the top of the home page and subsequent search pages. If you click on *Search* and then “All Collections,” you will get to the actual record sets. (Or, you can narrow down your search by choosing a particular category.)

Each live link on the page will take you to “real” records. Where to start? The U.S. census is always a good place to begin searching. Ancestry has every census year plus the special schedules. There are also numerous help tips scattered throughout its pages to explain what you are looking at and to guide you.

Searching the census is always a multi-step process:

1. Do the initial search.
2. Look at the results list.
3. Look at the summary page.
4. Look at the actual census page.
5. Write down your source citation.

## Sources and Citations

In your excitement at finding your family, do not forget to cite the sources of whatever you find. Ancestry’s built-in citations are not usually adequate. You can use the St. Louis Genealogical Society’s website to find templates for common sources. Just copy them and fill in your own information.

Go to <https://stlgs.org/>.



Click on the *Resources* tab, then “On This Site” and “Citations: A Guide.”

A complete census citation should look like this:

Year U.S. census, Name of County, State, population [or whatever] schedule, Town, [township no., range no., if given; ward no. if given], enumeration district (ED) no., sheet no., dwelling no., family no., Name of Person; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed day month year); citing NARA microfilm publication ???, roll ???.

# Navigating Ancestry.com Over the Minefields to the Treasures

## Other Records on Ancestry

In addition to the U.S. census, some other federal records on Ancestry include:

- Passenger ship manifests
- Passport applications
- World War I and II draft registration cards
- U.S. General Land Office records and Bounty Land Warrants

Some of the state records include:

- Births, deaths, and marriages
- State censuses
- Military records
- Wills, probates, tax, and criminal records
- Maps, atlases, books, newspapers

## Accessing State Records

Use the map on the Search page to access records for a particular state by clicking on it OR by clicking in any of the state names below the map.

You'll find a list of general information as well as individual county collections. Numbers will indicate how many unique collections are available for each county.

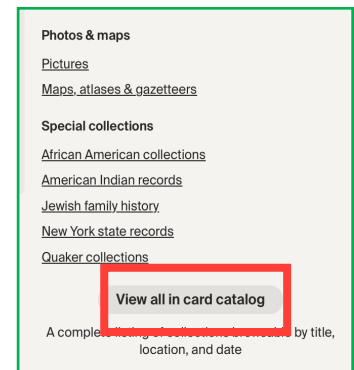
Check out the digitized family histories, which may yield biographical information on your ancestors.



## Reference Materials

Ancestry.com includes reference materials that can help you become a better genealogist. Links are scattered around the website.

On the Search page, you will find links to the Card Catalog as well as a section on references, such as dictionaries, research guides, encyclopedias, etc. Once you click on a link, you will be able to narrow your categories and selections. For specific information, search the Card Catalog, which is searchable by title or keyword, and there are a series of filters available on the left side of the page.



## Searching the Site Effectively

Knowing how to search will make your life a lot easier as you work through Ancestry's millions of records. In general, using the overall search is less helpful than working with individual databases. If you do choose to search this way:

1. Use the "Show More Options" choice to give you a wider selection.
2. Experiment with "Sounds like," "Similar," and "Soundex" in your names.
3. Experiment with locations and dates.

Search

[Switch to Smart Search](#)

First & Middle Name(s) Last Name

Place your ancestor might have lived Birth Year

City, County, State, Country

Search Show more options

## Navigating Ancestry.com Over the Minefields to the Treasures

4. Try your search with and without “Match all terms exactly.”
5. Be careful of getting too specific.
6. Work with the search filter sliders. They will let you expand and narrow your search without going back and forth between screens. Use the edit pencil to make changes.
7. If you wind up with too many hits, use what you know to help narrow your choices. Also use the various categories of links to concentrate on what might be useful and discard choices that are likely irrelevant.

It’s always preferable to search one database at a time. Then, when you find your person, pay attention to the “Suggested Records” that turn up on the right side of the screen. Don’t use them as absolutes, though, as sometimes they may lead you astray.



Additional hints to finding people in the census:

1. Search for a wife or child, especially one with an unusual name.
2. Search for a neighbor.
3. Search on just a birthdate or place.

Always think about searching on alternatives to someone’s name. Use your imagination to think of combinations that may yield results. Be as flexible as you can.

More things to keep in mind:

1. Start with the general and work to the specific instead of the other way around.
2. Be as creative with spelling as you can. Think phonetically to find misspellings.
3. Remember that some people used nicknames, initials, or middle names.
4. Immigrants may have Anglicized their names or not.
5. Say names aloud to discover more ways to spell them.
6. Our ancestors were mobile. Don’t discount them in unexpected locations.
7. Be open for new names for women as they married and remarried.

## Wildcard Searching

Use an asterisk \* to search for missing letters. You need at least three characters before the asterisk and then the asterisk is good for up to six characters. For instance,

Joh\*on = Johnson, Johanson, Johnston

Use a question mark to search for a single character. For instance,

Kath?rine = Katharine, Katherine

## Beware of the Pitfalls!

As good a resource as Ancestry is, you need to travel with care down its pathways so you don’t wind up connected to the wrong family.

## Making the Most of the Site

- Find vital records, census images, military records, digitized books, and immigration records.
- Look at individual states and counties for unique collections.

## Navigating Ancestry.com Over the Minefields to the Treasures

- Check back often, as new things are always being added.
- Look carefully at each record for clues that will move your research forward:
  - Who were the neighbors?
  - What occupations did people have?
  - What military service did they engage in?
  - What other families with familiar names are before and after on the page or adjacent pages?
  - What migration path(s) did they follow?
  - Are married children back home? Why?
  - Are grandchildren, cousins, nieces, or nephews living with the family? Why?

Be especially careful of the “helpful” suggestions that pop up all over the place. Often, they are truly helpful but sometimes they are misleading and will lead you astray.

- Use those hints as just hints. Don’t just take them at face value.
- By all means follow leads, but work critically to eliminate false returns.

## The Member-Submitted Trees on Ancestry

Again, these are potentially very useful, but many are poorly done and unsourced.

- The good news is that you can find much-needed information on some of the trees. Look for documents, photos, stories, Bible pages, and other unique items.
- Gather possible married names for women, migration information, names of children, etc., and then research them on your own.
- Some people just use Ancestry for their research and never go beyond the site. That means that some trees are sketchy and incomplete.
- Often, there are blanks that could easily be filled in just by studying the records that are posted on the tree.
- Far too often, one person copies a tree, and then it is recopied and recopied, perpetuating the same errors over and over.
- Once a tree is posted, theoretically it can be changed and enhanced. In reality, many are never updated nor are errors fixed in a timely manner.
- Use the trees critically and never copy anything into your own work without verifying it.
- Be sure to cite your sources. **An unsourced Ancestry tree is NOT a source.**

## Remember Some Basic Rules for Good Research

- Look for multiple sources for proof.
- Look for and analyze original documents, whenever possible.
- Look for friends, associates, and neighbors.
- Look for all variations of spelling.

Everything is NOT online. As good as Ancestry is, it can only provide you with some of what you need in order to do good genealogy. Be prepared to hit the road: to libraries, archives, courthouses, cemeteries, historical societies, etc., and to keep learning about what possibilities exist for your research.