

# Three Easy Steps to Woodshedding the Family Tree

by Larry Pearce\*



For more than two decades I have been researching and writing about people and stories from nearly 200 families of my wife and my ancestral trees. As a frugal heir to my Scots-Irish ancestors, I have always been extremely interested in saving both time and money. If genealogy questions have been in the front of my mind, certainly questions of economy have been in the back; foremost has been, “How can I find and get others to provide me with the most information for the least amount of, as I said before, time and money?” This article, then, can be summarized in three parts as pertains to finding this information:

1) Exhausting the internet,  
2) Gleaning all nearby libraries, and 3) Using Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. None of these sources should be worked without extreme caution, and we will talk about that as we go along. First, I lay out the three areas listed above and then I will close with a final warning.

A basic assumption is that you have interviewed all living and available relatives, using an inexpensive cassette tape recorder from Walmart or your existing smartphone.

We call this “oral history” and it is the basis for everything that comes later. You never want to regret NOT having talked to Grandma about what it was like growing up or Uncle Bob about his war experiences.

After the in-person or telephone interview, transcribe that information on a tablet or computer as soon as possible. A folder labelled by family surname should contain these tablet pages or print-outs. Your job

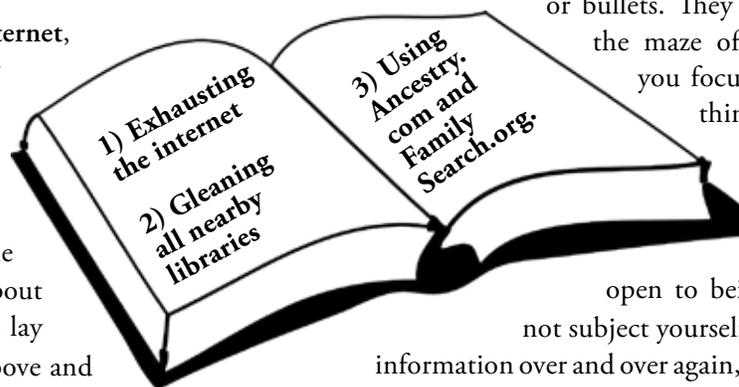
now is to formulate what scientists call “research questions,” i.e. “Why did this happen,” “How did these people get from point A to point B,” or “What other families were in the neighborhood at the time?”

As you proceed, these questions will be revised, amended, and expanded. Being without research questions is like being a police officer without a flashlight or bullets. They will guide you through the maze of information and keep you focused. Oh, and two more things: Don't re-invent the wheel or try to prove your wishes. What do I mean by all this? Well, while you are open to being corrected, you need not subject yourself to looking for the same information over and over again, such as names and dates. Feel free to go from there onto something else.

On the other hand, just because another researcher provides the answer to one of your questions, don't accept that as gospel. Unfortunately, in this business, amateur genealogists will take ALL the information on a family tree and build on that, sacrificing truth and accuracy for a quick solution.

This is where it is important to distinguish between “primary sources” and “secondary sources.” An example of primary support might be birth, baptism, confirmation, military or census records, or death certificates, all the closest thing to actually talking to your ancestors. Secondary support is important too, such as posted family trees and narratives, as long as they're based on primary sources and clearly identified or “qualified.”

Having someone's unsupported family tree prove your family tree would be like buying a used car on the



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word of the salesman. I am sure he is a nice man, just trying to make a living, but I want to see the service records and any list of factory recalls.

Now, let's look at the three original steps to "woodshedding," or honing basic genealogical research skills. These activities can and should all go on simultaneously.

**1. Exhausting the Internet.** Is this possible? I mean, the internet is so vast. Hardly, but it is the easiest and most inexpensive place to begin.

I am only suggesting that you start with a plan and methodology and revisit certain sites regularly. Here are a few strategies and sites that I started with years ago:

- *Meta-search (or aggregator) engines*—I say "meta" meaning "a higher view," because Google can be limited to whatever it is familiar with, whereas engines like Bing<sup>1</sup> and Dogpile<sup>2</sup> will search a multitude of Google-like sources in the same amount of time and provide a wider selection of links. I am always finding new information this way, but I have to avoid the temptation of just going to the top of the page and putting a search term in Google.

Bookmark these meta-search engine addresses so they are readily available. Also, try different terms. The same old names are not enough. I use variations of the three elements: name, date, and place.

In other words, along with "Richard Pearce," "1813," and "London," I will substitute "Pearce family," "1820," and "Pennsylvania." Carefully record what works best.

- *Message boards*<sup>3</sup>—This strategy can be time-consuming because you have to inquire about each family name and/or location separately, sometimes across several divisions. The giant Ancestry.com has gobbled up most of these inquiry sites, limiting the non-member researcher to read-only what's already been written. The landscape is constantly changing, to revisit them often.

- *Family sites*—Most families have associations and/or webpages devoted to only their activities and information, such as reunions, newsletters, and trees. Although not all family sites with the same name or similar spelling will pertain to your family, you just may stumble upon a useful bit of information from way back when. Here



are examples of several sites with lots of interesting material: The Pearce Family Tree<sup>4</sup> and Rootie's Family History Site.<sup>5</sup>

- *Newer concepts*—One of the most helpful sites for me is called "Find-a-Grave."<sup>6</sup> It relies on everyday people to share their family history by going to the cemetery where each person is buried and posting a picture of the tombstone along with relevant information. Links are available to others in the family as well. This site is so relatively new that many ancestors

are not yet represented, which would be a good way for you to honor your forebears. While most counties have lists of persons in each cemetery therein, which you can search, "Find-a-Grave" goes much further faster.

One word of caution in using the internet: avoid the unorganized sites such as WikiTree<sup>7</sup> unless you want to take the time to click on and read all the folks with the same name. These are, however, good as a last resort, when you metaphorically "hit the brick wall" in family research.

**2. Gleaning Libraries.** The internet is always on at my house, but when I am away from home, I look ahead to see if I will be near a library or history center. What great places to spend a few hours when my wife is shopping or at the gym. Of course, I carry whatever family folder(s) I am working on at the time.

Genealogy resources are available almost everywhere today, sometimes with a free trial offer or sign-up required, but unless you are willing to fly to the Mormon collection<sup>8</sup> in Salt Lake City (actually, you can conveniently order free microfilm through your local LDS

<sup>1</sup> Bing.com. <https://www.bing.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Dogpile.com. <http://www.dogpile.com/>

<sup>3</sup> "Message Boards." Ancestry.com. <https://www.ancestry.com/boards/>

<sup>4</sup> "Pearce Family Tree." <https://www.pearcefamilytree.us/index.php?ctype=gedcom&ged=tree1>

<sup>5</sup> Rootie.org. <http://www.rootie.org/pierce.php>

<sup>6</sup> Findagrave.com. <https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi>

<sup>7</sup> WikiTree.com. <https://www.wikitree.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Mormon Genealogical Collection. [https://www.archives.com/search/ancestor?Location=US&kw2=Search%20for%20Genealogy%20Records%20Instantly!&utm\\_source=bing&utm\\_medium=cpc](https://www.archives.com/search/ancestor?Location=US&kw2=Search%20for%20Genealogy%20Records%20Instantly!&utm_source=bing&utm_medium=cpc)

church) or the Library of Congress<sup>9</sup> in Washington, D.C., or drive to your state capital,<sup>10</sup>—there is surely a regional history center nearby.

I am fortunate to have a Pennsylvania center<sup>11</sup> just up the road. There can be a charge for one-time research, but this is often waived with an inexpensive annual membership. The professional help, priceless materials, and organization's community events are worth the price.

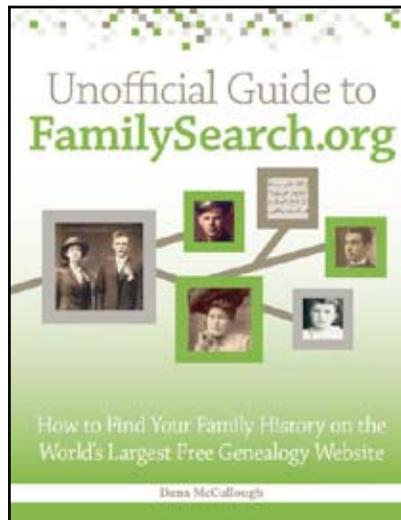
Many local colleges and state universities offer free access to historical records. The University of Pittsburgh<sup>13</sup> now has much of its collection online. A great deal of the Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society's<sup>14</sup> material is digitized and available at Pittsburgh's noble Carnegie Library.

But, probably every county in America has a public library. I am fortunate in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, to be 20 minutes away from both Somerset's two libraries and the Johnstown-Cambria County library. In Pennsylvania, a free library card through ones nearest center usually gives one borrowing privileges at any library in the state. Although rare historical documents do not circulate, they may be copied on site for pennies. Finally, many small towns proudly have historical and genealogical societies. Not only do they house family histories but also hold regular community fun activities.

In Pennsylvania, a free library card through ones nearest center usually gives you borrowing privileges at any library in the state, although most rare and primary historical documents do not circulate. Finally, many small towns proudly have historical and genealogical societies. Not only do they house family histories but also hold regular community fun activities.

We belong to the Casselman River Amish and Mennonite Historians<sup>12</sup> and attend the annual meeting about an hour away. My wife is always amazed to eat free with her Amish-Mennonite relatives after the public meetings and taste those fantastic, high calorie, raised donuts. I pay the reasonable annual dues, which allows me to access the archives and obtain expert advice with specific questions.

**3. Using Ancestry.com<sup>15</sup> and FamilySearch.org.<sup>16</sup>** I must confess that I am not now a regular paying member of the well-known international organization Ancestry.com. My



*\$25.99 plus \$4.00 shipping  
from Masthof Bookstore,  
219 Mill Road, Morgantown, PA 19543  
610-286-0258*

kids gave me a trial membership a few years ago for Christmas, and I worked it to death in six month's time. It was not that expensive, but two things influenced me not to immediately renew. One, membership allowed me to print, download, and/or save in a "shoebox" anything I found there. Two, it has taken me years to process the material I discovered there in that short amount of time. Much of it is duplicated at my libraries and history centers if I need further verification. I think that if/when I renew my public membership to Ancestry.com, I will do it on a free or low-cost "trial" basis using the same mind-set as before.

Now, another confession/suggestion: I use the institutional

Ancestry.com free through our community college library. I belong to the Johnstown Area Genealogical and Historical Society<sup>17</sup> which encourages its members to research there and in turn share their findings with others. This is a wonderful exchange, and I recommend that you investigate a similar arrangement in your town.

FamilySearch.org<sup>18</sup> is a newer and free online genealogy tool box that provides access to some 4,500 family history sites in 70 countries. It is sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. While it has some features yet to be found at Ancestry.com, such as customizing your family tree, the primary materials can be repetitive and the family names confusing. But being free is enough for me to begin there every time.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/>

<sup>10</sup> Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission. <http://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Somerset Historical Center. <http://www.somersethistoricalcenter.org/>

<sup>12</sup> Casselman Valley Historians. <http://www.amishmennonitehistorians.com/>

<sup>13</sup> University of Pittsburgh Library. <http://pitt.libguides.com/Genealogy>

<sup>14</sup> Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society. <https://www.carnegielibrary.org/research-overview/genealogy/>

<sup>15</sup> Ancestry.com. <https://www.ancestry.com/>

<sup>16</sup> FamilySearch.com. <https://www.familysearch.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Johnstown Area Genealogical & Historical Society. <http://www.johnstownroots.org/>

<sup>18</sup> "FamilySearch.com." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FamilySearch>

Now, several tips for efficiently using Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. First, take those research questions we talked about earlier and start with specific names. If various spellings are possible, use the feature that allows “sounds like,” etc. Next, use the “exact +/-” or “range” feature to expand the search possibilities with your dates. I generally use the maximum “+/- 10 years.” Add as much information as you have: parents, spouse, children, geographic, etc. Then hit the “search” button. When the various sources come up in Ancestry.com, go to the bottom and hit “Public Member Family Trees.”

I have discovered that, while not all valid, the ones near the top have the largest number of bone fide possible matches. At this point, you may wish to go back and edit your search parameters, either limiting or expanding them, for even more matches.

This is where the firmest word of caution comes in: Public Member Family Trees are not always reliable, and certainly not as primary sources, as I said earlier. With careful investigation, you may find grossly incorrect and even laughable names, dates, and places. Eliminate those and stick with the ones containing the most primary sources.

FamilySearch.org offers a “Source box” to collect your best finds. Soon you’ll have an entire collection of historical documents, photographs, and maybe early newspaper accounts. I like to print or save these to my computer, and use the “Gallery” format rather than the “Life story” one. The information can be more easily displayed on my family webpage and count as those valuable primary sources.

Finally, may I suggest several novel, helpful, and even entertaining written and/or televised collections of advice for newcomers to the genealogy game?

**First**, acquire Powell’s *The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy*<sup>19</sup> and/or Fitzpatrick and Yesien’s *Forensic Genealogy*.<sup>20</sup> Search Amazon.com for other timely and inexpensive collections and texts.

**Second**, tune in to one or all of the PBS family history series: The Genealogy Roadshow or Finding Your Roots. Or try one of BYU-TV’s many genealogy-oriented series, such as Ancestors or Relative Race. All of these can be viewed for free with an inexpensive TV streaming device.

I hope you have found at least some portion of this article helpful. Every “young” genealogist and family historian has to start somewhere, and these have been some of the things that I have found to work for me over the years.

After you get started, you will have the opportunity to decide how to best present your information to benefit yourself, your families, and your descendants. I have chosen to post regularly to a personal webpage, E-Gen.info. Divided into the categories of my wife and my four grandparents, the material is much less expensive to circulate and easier to amend than using printed media. Plus, I am always thrilled to receive timely comments and inquiries via e-mail from around the world. This is why I have coined the phrase, “E-genealogy.”

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<sup>19</sup> Kimberly Powell. *The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Colleen Fitzpatrick and Andrew Yesien. *Forensic Genealogy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Fountain Valley, CA: Rice Book Press, 2013.

### Query . . .

I am researching the early Lehman families who lived in Somerset Co., Pa., specifically Benedict Lehman (1729-1787), John Lehman (1749-1842), and Christian Lehman (1774-1840—all who lived in Somerset Co. I would be interested in corresponding to anyone else researching these families. ~ *Scott Lehman, 2410 W. Teton, Green River, WY 82935*

### Book Wanted . . .

*Hertzler-Hartzler Family History* wanted by John Zook, 1825 Paradise Road, Apt. 601, Orrville, OH 44667; 330-930-0399.

### Book For Sale . . .

*Annals of the Conestoga Valley* by Simpson and Mast for sale by Mim Stoltzfus, 10 Whitehall St., Belleville, PA 17004; 717-483-6213.