

Family History Project

Getting Started

The first thing you'll want to do is get organized and gather some general information.

- Get a folder or box so you can keep everything you collect in one place. You may want to include a spiral notebook in which to write your notes and thoughts.
- List as many members of your family as you can think of: immediate family members, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, more distant relatives.
- Write down anything you know (or think you know) about your family and family history.
- What interesting stories can you remember being told by parents or grandparents? List them briefly (example: the time Grandpa fell off the horse).
- Talk to your parents and add to your list of family members, facts and stories.

This will be a source of ideas for what you can later write in a family history notebook. Get a nice three-ring notebook and as you each story or activity is finished in final draft form, add it to the notebook. You can organize the notebook at the end of the unit.

Home Sources of Family Information

Look through whatever “archives” you can find in your home, then ask grandparents and other relatives if they can help. Take notes or, even better, make photocopies or scans of documents for your own collection.

- Birth certificates
- Baby books
- Christening records
- Church records
- Death certificates
- Deeds
- Diaries (with permission only)
- Diplomas
- Family Bibles (see if they contain a family tree?)
- Funeral notices
- Genealogies collected by others
- Heirlooms. What is their history?
- Immigration records.
- Journals (if not private)
- Keepsakes. What is their history?
- Letters (if not private)
- Maps of places associated with family members or history
- Marriage certificates
- Medical records
- Naturalization certificates
- Newspaper articles
- Obituaries
- Old photographs, slide shows, family videos or films
- Old recipe books
- Printed family histories
- School records (report cards, etc.)
- Scrap books
- Sunday School records
- Trunks and old boxes
- Vital records (passports, etc.)
- Written histories of places associated with your family
- Wills

Keep a list of what you find for your family history notebook. You may also want to include your copies of these things in the notebook.

What's in a Name?

This activity is based on the following questions, which were generated by a group of children.

1. What famous people, past or present, have the same first name I do?
2. Which names are most widely used? Take a survey.
3. Why did my parents give me my name?
4. What language or culture does my name come from?
5. What does my name mean?
6. Can my name tell me anything about my family history?
7. What traditional names are there in my family? Nicknames?
8. Are there any naming traditions in our family?

Get some books on names from the library. There are books on boy's names, girl's names, remarkable names, funny names, and so on. Make a list of names you really like for your family history book. Maybe someday you'll want to use this list when you name your own son or daughter.

Your Birthday in History

Look in the newspaper or library for a “Today in History” column on your birthday. Cut it out and tape it to a clean sheet of notebook paper. Then write about what you discovered, using the following questions as a guide and adding any other reactions you might have had. Use complete sentences.

1. Which event surprised you the most?
2. Which event are you most glad happened on your birthday?
3. Which event seems the saddest?
4. What event do you feel made the greatest change for good in the world?
5. Does a famous person share your birthday? Who?

Put this in your family history book.

Personal Time Line

List all the major events in your life you can remember, along with dates or ages if you know them. Talk to your mom or dad for help. Look at your baby book if you have one. Some suggestions of things to list are:

- Birthday and place born
- Learned to walk
- Changes of residence (moves from one house to another)
- Birth of siblings
- First thing you remember
- First toys you remember
- Learned to swim, etc.
- Major injuries, such as broken bones
- Diseases
- Memorable vacations
- New pets
- Accomplishments or awards

Look through an almanac for major news events that happened in your lifetime. Construct a time line by taping together several sheets of blank 8.5 x 11 paper so they fold out. Illustrate your time line or add photos. Put it in your family history notebook and add to it as you remember other things.

Birthday Time Capsule

On your birthday, make a secret time capsule for yourself, to be opened in five years. In an envelope or shoe box, collect things to record the event. Some possibilities are:

- Snapshots of friends, family members, pets, your birthday party, etc.
- Your school picture.
- A recording of you and your friends talking or of you practicing a musical instrument.
- All the stuff that's in your pocket.
- A TV guide.
- Letters or cards you received this year.
- Labels off boxes, bottles and cans of your favorite food.
- Ribbon from a gift.
- Name of a favorite book or song.
- A newspaper (or front page of a newspaper) for the day.
- A letter to yourself with messages for yourself five years from now.

Seal the outside of your time capsule well.

Write on the outside: "Time capsule from my ___th birthday. Do not open until _____."

Put it someplace where it will be safe for five years.

For your family history book, write something to remind yourself of where you hid your time capsule!

Your Own Scrap Book

Start a scrap book of your own. Take pictures of your house, school, friends, teachers and pets. Mount the pictures in the scrapbook with a caption describing each. Be sure to write the names of any people in the pictures.

Include other things, too, such as postcards, letters, invitations, travel brochures, ticket stubs, newspaper articles that interest you, and so on.

You might want part of the scrapbook to be an autograph book. Collect autographs from your friends or famous people.

Family Address File

Collect addresses and basic information about members of your family on 3x5 or 4x6 cards, or in a computerized address book. Your mom might have an address book that will help. Use a different card for each family group. For example:

Olson, Uncle John and Aunt Jane
2436 Foxfire Way
Portland, OR 97345
Phone: 503-657-2943
e-mail: jolson@aol.com
Kids: Mark (10), Mary (8) and Jimmy (5)

Some details you might choose to include:

- First names
- Middle names
- Surnames
- Suffixes (Jr., Sr., etc.)
- Nicknames
- Maiden names
- Cell phones
- Home phones
- Work phones
- e-mails
- Birthdays

When you have a card for each family you can track down, put the cards in alphabetical order and keep them together with a rubber band. Make an alphabetical list to include in your family history book.

Family Map

Find a large map of the United States or world. Start with your dad. Find the place he was born and record his moves and “big events” with an colored marker (or a piece of yarn if you don’t want to write on the map). Then record your mom’s moves and “big events” with another color.

Add information about your grandparents or others to the map if you wish.

Relatives Map

On a blank map of the United States, plot the places your relatives live. You might want to make a key. Include the names of the relatives and the city and state in which they live. If you have a large map and can find photos of the families, attach them.

Research Project

Do you know of an ancestor or someone in your family who:

- Came from another country?
- Was a native American?
- Participated in an historical event (war, gold rush, etc.)?
- Was famous or notorious?

If so, do some research and find out all you can about the person or related events. Use the internet, encyclopedias, books and/or periodicals.

Write a few paragraphs on what you learn for your family history notebook.

Music in Family History

What is your favorite popular song? Ask your mom what her favorite popular song was when she was young. Ask your dad, grandparents, sisters and brothers. Record your results.

What is the first song you remember hearing as a small child?

Do any members of your family play instruments? Why did they choose those instruments to learn to play?

Write a page or so on the part music has played in your family history for your family history notebook.

Old Family Recipes

Ask your mother or grandmothers for any old family recipes they might have. Find out who gave them each recipe and how old it is if you can.

Are there any special family dishes that your family always serves on special occasions? If you were going to add a recipe to the group of family recipes, what would it be?

Make a collection of family recipes on index cards or in a computer database. Are there any stories about these recipes?

Prepare one of your family's favorite dishes to share with friends.

Languages

What languages have been important in your family's past and present? Do you speak another language?

Make a list of some common words or phrases and their meanings for your family history notebook. Some possibilities:

- Yes
- No
- Thank you.
- Please.
- Hello.
- How are you?
- Excuse me.
- Sorry!
- Numbers 1-10
- Days of the week
- Months of the year

Hobbies and Skills

Talk to a relative about something he/she enjoys doing and does well, such as knitting, wood-carving, race car driving, gardening, etc.). When did he/she learn to do that? What does he/she like about it? How long did it take to learn? Can he/she teach you something about it?

Write a few paragraphs about what you discover for your family history book.

Interviewing

The best way to learn about your family is to interview your relatives, especially the older ones, about their memories. It's best if you can record the interviews. Most people feel uncomfortable being recorded at first but as soon as they begin to reminisce, they forget all about the recorder. Be sure to check your recording device to be sure it's picking up everyone's voice. Turn off the TV and radio, even unplug the telephone if possible so there will be no confusing background noise or unnecessary interruption. These recordings will be valuable source material in later years if someone decides to write a book or long family history.

Before the interview.

1. Find out all you can about the person you are going to interview.
2. Think of questions you would like to ask the person and write them down. A list of questions you might ask a grandparent or great-grandparent are listed below.
3. Call the person you want to interview in advance.
4. Set up a time and place for the interview.
5. Explain why you want to talk and tell the person how much you'll appreciate their help.
6. Ask if you may tape the interview.

During the interview.

1. It may be hard for people to talk about the past because of sad memories or other concerns. Show respect and do not insist on answers. Change the subject or ask another question if the person you're interviewing seems uncomfortable.
2. Show interest. Be a good listener.
3. Do not interrupt. Let the person talk. Don't worry about getting all the questions answered. The purpose of questioning is to start the person talking. The best stories come from the free flow of memories.
4. End the interview if the person seems tired, especially if he/she is old. Continue it later.

After the interview.

1. Thank the person. Ask if the person wants to continue the interview later.
2. Write a thank you note within 10 days.

Possible questions to help a person get started talking:

1. What country did your family come from?
2. When did they arrive in this country?
3. Where did your ancestors first settle?
4. Do you know the names of any relatives still living in the “old country”?
5. What else do you know about your ancestors?
6. Where were you born?
7. Did you live in a big city, small town, or in the country?
8. What was life like for you when you were my age?
9. What did your house look like?
10. Did you live on a farm? Did you raise animals? Crops?
11. What kind of fuel did you use for heating and cooking?
12. How many hours did your parents usually work each day? each week?
13. How did you get to school?
14. What kind of car did your family have? How much did it cost?
15. What did you do for fun?
16. Did your family have a TV? What were your favorite TV shows? How was TV different then than it is now?
17. Did your family go on vacation? How did they travel?
18. What were the roads like?
19. What kind of job did you have and why did you do that kind of work?
20. Are there any things you used then that we don't use now?
21. What things do we have now that you didn't have then?
22. In what ways did you like the “good old days” better?
23. In what ways do you like these days better?
24. Do you have any old photographs or mementos?

Sample Family History Stories

George Washington's Bodyguard

James W. Engler, my grandfather four generations removed, was a Swiss soldier hired by the King of England from the Duke of Hess. Many young men were hired this way and were told that the Americans were barbarians and if they should fall into their hands they would be eaten by cannibals. This was to make the young men fight very hard for England and to stay with the English cause.

It was while my grandfather was fighting for England against the American colonists that he was taken prisoner by the colonists. Contrary to his expectations he was treated kindly and got word back to his comrades, causing almost all the Hessian troops to desert the British and join the Americans.

Because of this, James Engler was given a position in Washington's body guard. He always spoke of Washington as "My General."

James Engler was born on September 25, 1754 and died at the age of 79 years in 1833 on Christmas Eve.

During the years following the war he married Martha Stone and lived on a farm in Burk County, Pennsylvania. They later moved to Summit Township, Pennsylvania. They belonged to the Lutheran church and raised seven children, six daughters and a son named Solomon.

Solomon Engler married Mary Brown and they reared thirteen children, one of whom was William Engler, my great grandfather.

Sample Family History Stories

Great-Grandpa Wilson Lived in the Gay Nineties

My great-grandfather, Willard Vincent Olson, was born May 27, 1889 in a small town in northwest Pennsylvania. He was the seventh child in a family of nine children.

In those days bathrooms were outside and running water was unheard of. Water was lugged in from outside wells, heated on a coal stove, and baths were taken in the wash tub. Ladies' hoop skirts had gone, but the wire frames were a common sight in vacant lots. However, bustles were in use. Merry widow hats half the size of an umbrella were the rage.

Grandpa told me at the age of five he roamed the country at will because there were no automobiles and it was safe. Kids could always mooch a handout from farmer's orchards. It was about this time that the first talking machine was made, soon to be known as the phonograph.

Grandpa said he was never bored. If they weren't pitching hay, milking cows, repairing fences, they were running errands for their parents, sometimes walking several miles.

For fun they swam in the rivers for hours at a time and ice skated on the same rivers in the winter.

My grandpa loved animals. He always had a dog, but his favorite pet was a banty rooster.

When grandpa grew up he went to work for Mountain Bell and was sent west as an auditor for them. He worked for the telephone company for 42 years.

He met my grandma in Montana where she was chief operator for Mountain Bell. They married in Anaconda, Montana on June 12, 1923 and had eight children-- seven girls and a boy, who died at age five.

My mother, Mary, was their third child.