



## Tracing Your Family History by Marie E. Daly, Waltham Historical Society

### 1. Getting started

Using a pedigree or ancestor chart, fill in the information, starting with yourself, your parents and your grandparents. Fill in the information as far back as you can. Interview your relatives and go through the family photographs and memorabilia to help jog memories.

### 2. Census records

Federal census records were gathered every ten years starting in 1790, and are available online up to 1940. Start your research with the 1940 census, which is available online at [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org). Look for your parents and grandparents (or even yourself). Work your way back in time in census records, making note of the approximate birthdates and places and marriage dates.

### 3. Vital records

Using the data you have gathered from the census records, look for vital records of birth, marriages and deaths. Marriage records can be very useful, since they often identify the names of the parents of the bride and groom. The information is coming from the horses' mouths, i.e., the bride and groom themselves. With death records, the person is not around the correct the possible misinformation of the deceased's relatives or friends. Do not bother the town or city clerk! Vital records are available on [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org) and [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com). For Massachusetts, the vital records are online from 1841 to 1920. Pre-1841 Massachusetts town records, which can begin in the 1600s, are published in book form, and are also online up to 1850 on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [americanancestors.org](http://americanancestors.org).

### 4. Church records

Church records of baptisms and marriages can compensate for lack of civil records. In addition, the names of godparents at baptisms and witnesses at marriages can add names to a network of friends and relatives. In many cases, there is significant under-registration of vital records, especially among immigrant populations. You can access the church records for the Boston Catholic Archdiocese, by appointment, at the Archdiocese Archives, 66 Brooks Drive, Braintree, MA, (617) 746-5795, or online at [americanancestors.org](http://americanancestors.org).

### 5. Identify the immigrant ancestor

Work your way back to the next generation, using the same types of records of census and vital records. Keep going back in time until you reach your immigrant ancestor.

### 6. Naturalization records

The next step is to determine where and when was the immigrant ancestor born in the Old Country. Naturalization records, especially for Massachusetts, are helpful in identifying the birthplace, birthdate, port of entry and date of entry. New England naturalization petitions from 1790 to 1906 are searchable & browsable on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org). Post 1906 naturalizations are on online on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), [fold3.com](http://fold3.com) and the New England original forms at the National Archives on Trapelo Road.

### 7. Identify the parents of the immigrant

Another important step is to identify the names of the immigrant ancestor's parents in the Old Country. This allows you to use online searches to locate your ancestor in Ireland, Italy, etc. The records that identify the names of the parents are American marriage and death records.

### 8. Newspapers

Newspaper records, especially obituaries, can be great sources of information about our ancestors. Many newspapers are searchable online on websites such as [genealogybank.com](http://genealogybank.com), [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com), [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), [findmypast.com](http://findmypast.com), [google.com/newspapers](http://google.com/newspapers), and the early American newspaper database. Some libraries have remote access, such as the Waltham Public Library (WPL cardholder only), the Boston Public Library (BPL



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cardholder only) and the Cambridge Public Library (no card needed). Some newspapers are not online, like the Waltham News Tribune, but are available on microfilm at local libraries, and the Boston Public Library.

### 9. Military records

Military records, such as the WWI and WWII draft registrations, Civil War and Revolutionary War pension applications, and military service records can be great sources of information about our ancestors. Males between the ages of 18 and 40 had to register for the draft, whether or not they actually fought in the war. These draft registrations can give detailed birthdates and birthplaces. Military records can be accessed online on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [fold3.com](http://fold3.com).

### 10. Passenger lists

Nineteenth century passenger lists can be a great disappointment, since we often cannot sort out which of the many individuals with the same names are our ancestors. But twentieth century passenger lists often list the names and addresses of the next-of-kin in the Old Country, as well as the names and address of the U.S. contacts. Passenger lists are available on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org).

### 11. City directories

City directories can be great sources of information, giving names, addresses, and occupations of all working adults in a household in any given year. They can be accessed in book form in public libraries, such as the Waltham Public Library, or online on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [fold3.com](http://fold3.com), or even [archive.org](http://archive.org).

### 12. Probate Records

Records of wills, administrations and guardianships can often show the relationship between generations, as a parent mentions children in the probate record. The inventories can detail personal household items and clothing, as well as detail real estate holdings. Many probates have been microfilmed & are available to borrow through [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org). Middlesex County probate records to 1871 are available online at [americanancestors.org](http://americanancestors.org). Later probate records are located either at the probate court or judicial archives.

### 13. Land records and maps

Deeds and maps may show the location of our ancestor within a community, and identify friends and relatives in the surrounding neighborhood. Deeds can help date the construction of houses, identify the names of spouses, and suggest intergenerational relationships. Massachusetts deeds to 1900 are available on [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org). Post 1900 deeds are online on the Massachusetts county registry of deeds websites at [masslandrecords.com](http://masslandrecords.com). Historical maps of Waltham are available on the Waltham Historical Commission website at <https://www.city.waltham.ma.us/historical-commission/pages/historical-maps>. The 1854 Woodford map of Waltham is online at <https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:2979366> and Waltham village at <https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:2979368>.

### 14. Compiled genealogies

One of your first steps could be to see if someone has already written a book about your family. But even if this is the case, you should verify their assertions with your own research. Did authors cite their sources? Do the claims hold up to logical analysis? Many people post their family trees on social media sites on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org). Treat the information in these trees as clues, and not facts, since many genealogies were shoddily researched and copied from unverified family histories.

### 15. Write your own history!

The object of your family research is to compile your own history, write it down, and pass it on to future generations. There are many inexpensive genealogical computer programs that can help you keep track of facts and sources, and produce histories and charts that you can print and distribute to your family. Don't forget to give a copy to your local genealogical and historical societies, as well as your public library.



## Genealogical Websites

### **Ancestry.com**

Ancestry is a subscription website that has comprehensive sets of census, vital, passenger, military and city directory records, and much more. For those with French Canadian ancestry, it has the Drouin parish register collection for Quebec and New Brunswick, and some border communities in NY and Maine. Also, millions of subscribers have uploaded their family trees, making finding relatives easy. Many libraries have subscriptions to the library edition of ancestry.com. Ancestry also maintains your DNA results, and shows your matches.

### **Familysearch.org**

Due to religious beliefs, the Mormon church has been microfilming records all over the world. They have now digitized these records and making them available for free on their website. You can search for an ancestor on the main search page. But be sure to use the browse records feature, since the search will not include records that have been digitized but not indexed yet.

### **Americanancestors.org**

For anyone with early New England routes, this subscription website of the New England Historic Genealogical Society is a must. The site also has the Massachusetts Vital Records 1841-1915, as well as pre-1850 town records. Also, the Middlesex County probate papers to 1871, and many genealogical journals, are searchable on this website. For Irish research, the Missing Friends ads may help you identify place of origin in Ireland. Many features on the website are free to registered users. American Ancestors has also digitized many of the parish registers and cemetery records for the Archdiocese of Boston Archives. You don't need to have a subscription to browse the records.

### **Fold3.com**

This subscription website has a great collection of military records, especially for the Revolutionary War and WWII. In addition, the site has 20<sup>th</sup> century naturalizations, cities directories, the Chicago Tribune and the San Francisco Examiner. Many libraries have subscriptions to the website.

### **Findagrave.com**

This free website has billions of burial records, transcriptions and photographs of gravestones, and is searchable by name and cemetery.

### **Newspapers**

The Boston Globe 1872 to present is searchable by remote access for Waltham Public Library cardholders on the WPL website. This is a good reason to get a library card, if you don't have one already. The early American newspaper database is searchable by remote access for Boston Public Library cardholders, and the library has dozens of other databases available for remote access. Any Massachusetts resident can get a BPL card. The Cambridge Public Library and the Belmont Public Library have digitized Cambridge and Belmont newspapers up and is available by remote access. You do not have to have a card to use the sites.

## DNA

- 1) yDNA – information on paternal ancestry & can go back centuries. Link to a STR test comparison chart of companies & their tests: [https://isogg.org/wiki/Y-DNA\\_STR\\_testing\\_comparison\\_chart](https://isogg.org/wiki/Y-DNA_STR_testing_comparison_chart). Link to a SNP test comparison chart of companies & their tests: [https://isogg.org/wiki/Autosomal\\_DNA\\_testing\\_comparison\\_chart](https://isogg.org/wiki/Autosomal_DNA_testing_comparison_chart)
- 2) mtDNA – information on maternal ancestors & can go back centuries. Link to a comparison chart of companies & their tests: [https://isogg.org/wiki/MtDNA\\_testing\\_comparison\\_chart](https://isogg.org/wiki/MtDNA_testing_comparison_chart)
- 3) atDNA – information on all ancestors & can go back 400-500 years. Link to comparison chart of companies & their tests: [https://isogg.org/wiki/Autosomal\\_DNA\\_testing\\_comparison\\_chart](https://isogg.org/wiki/Autosomal_DNA_testing_comparison_chart)