

Tell Your Ancestor's Story by Writing, Documenting, and Sharing

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Many genealogists find that family members are most interested in the stories of their ancestors. They want to go beyond basic genealogical facts and learn the details of their lives. Whether documenting family stories that have been passed down, or working to draw stories out of genealogy documents, we can each work to accurately preserve the details of our ancestor's lives.

One way to preserve your research and your family heritage is by writing biographical sketches of your ancestors. This can be done by verifying details of family stories, or recreating lives from details found in records. This session will highlight several examples of creating documented biographical sketches from family stories and genealogical records.

Steps to creating written stories of ancestors

Choose the steps that are relevant to the ancestor of interest. There may or may not be living relatives that knew the ancestor, and the number of genealogical records available will depend on the time period in which the ancestor lived.

1. Get stories collected and recorded

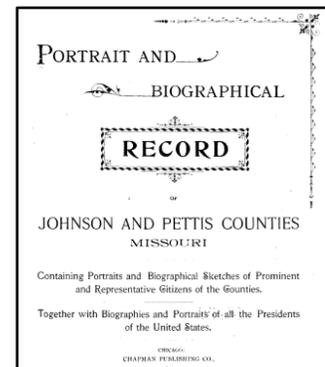
- Ask relatives what they know about the selected ancestor. Talk to a member of the oldest living generation and anyone who may know information about the ancestor.
- Create a list of specific questions to ask relatives.
- If the relative is agreeable, audio or video record them telling stories about the ancestor.
- Record any family legends or stories passed down to you by others.
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2. Locate written histories and stories

- Search for biographical sketches published in county histories.
- Ask relatives if they have any written histories of relatives.
- Seek information in library or historical society surname files.
- Search online for blog posts or family histories.
- Check online family trees for attached family stories.

3. Verifying the details

- Search for original records to prove (or disprove) the information included in the family histories. The goal is to



document each fact with genealogical records. This takes diligent effort, but will make the history more accurate.

- Search for manuscripts, such as letters or diaries of people who traveled with your ancestors, served in the same military company, or lived in the same time and location.

4. Fill in details from records when there are few family stories

If your family did not pass down many stories of your ancestors, you can still write a biographical sketch from information you locate in genealogical records. There are some records that provide more details on individuals than other records. You may seek out the following records:

- **Homestead applications** include details on the home and improvements to the land.
- **Agricultural census schedules** provided details on crops and livestock on each farm.
- **Manufacturing census schedules** provide details on family businesses.
- **Compiled military service records** may include a physical description of the soldier.
- **Passport applications** provide a photo or physical description of a person as well as birthplace, details on immigration and naturalization, residence, and occupation.
- **Probate records** may list heirs, bequeaths, household inventories, and credits/debts.
- **Census records** provide different information depending on the census year, but may include occupation, value of real estate, year of immigration, number of children living, ability to read or write, birthplace, birthplace of parents, whether naturalized, and more.

What type of record would provide that information?

Birth	Birth record, death record, church record, Bible record, obituary
Immigration	Passenger list, passport application, naturalization, census (year)
Occupation	Census, city directory, immigration record, newspaper, court record
Marriage	Marriage record, church record, newspaper, Bible record, census
Physical Description	Military service record, draft card, passport application
Farming Details	Agricultural census (1850-1880), Homestead application
Signature	Passport application, land record
Death	Death record, obituary, cemetery record, probate, church record

Case Study Examples

Much of this session will focus on two families, one which lived in Missouri and the other which immigrated from England. These case studies will demonstrate the process of verifying information from an undocumented history of an individual, and the process of writing the story of an ancestor based on details located in genealogical records.

“Our challenge is to write each person’s story so well that the world is tempted to read it—and so faithfully that ancestors could actually recognize themselves.”

Elizabeth Shown Mills
NGS Quarterly (December 2000), page 243.

References for Further Study

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