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Ancestry & Family History Online

FamilySearch, Ancestry, free records and DNA kits — explained in plain English, one step at a time

A plain-English guide to tracing your family online

Take your time — searching old records can't hurt a thing

Written for you by Bill — Bill's Home Tech

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

For FamilySearch, Ancestry & DNA sites on any computer or phone · facts current November 2026

What's Inside

This is your guide to finding your family's story online. Read it in any order and at your own pace; there's no test, and you can't fall behind. Every chapter explains what a website or tool does *for you*, with slow, step-by-step directions and honest advice about cost, privacy and DNA. Genealogy websites change their screens often, so if a button looks a little different on yours, the idea is still the same.

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PART 1

Getting Started with Family History

What online family history is, the handful of words you'll keep seeing, which websites are free and which cost money, and how to begin with what you already know.

CHAPTER 1

A Note from Bill

Hello, and welcome. Maybe you've always wondered where your grandparents came from. Maybe there's a shoebox of old letters and funeral cards in the closet, or a relative who's been asking you to "get the family tree down before it's lost." Whatever brought you here, you've picked a wonderful hobby. Family history connects you to people you never met, and it often brings living relatives closer too.

I'm Bill. For more than 30 years I've helped people feel at home with their technology. Genealogy websites are full of good things, but they can also be confusing, a little pushy about subscriptions, and surprisingly important to get right where privacy is concerned. So I wrote this book the way I'd explain it sitting beside you at the kitchen table: slowly, in plain English, one step at a time.

What this book covers

- **Getting started** with what you already know, and interviewing and recording your relatives.
- **FamilySearch**, the big free website, and the free FamilySearch centers.
- **Ancestry**: what it costs, the free trial and how to cancel it, building a tree, hints and privacy.
- **Other sites and free public records**: MyHeritage, the 1950 census, old newspapers, Find a Grave and Ohio's own death record index.
- **DNA kits**: what they can and can't tell you, the surprises they sometimes bring, privacy settings, what happened to 23andMe, and how to delete your DNA data.
- **Saving and sharing your research**, protecting living relatives, and the scams that target family historians.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this book does for you

By the end you'll know where to look for your ancestors without spending a cent, when a paid site is worth it, how to keep your tree and your DNA private, and how to save your work so it's never lost. Most of all, you'll be able to enjoy the search with confidence.

An honest promise about what can't go wrong

Searching records, reading old census pages, browsing a tree and looking at someone's grave photo can't hurt anything. Websites like FamilySearch and Ancestry are built for exploring. There are just a few moments that deserve a pause, and I'll flag each one: **starting a free trial** (it turns into a paid plan if you don't cancel), **sending off a DNA kit** (you can't un-know what it tells you), **deleting DNA results** (it's permanent), and **publishing details about living people**.

GOOD TO KNOW

Websites change their look

Genealogy websites update their screens often. If a button in this book has moved or been renamed on your screen, look for the closest match; the idea is almost always the same. Everything here was checked in November 2026.

And you're never stuck alone. If you'd like a hand, call me at **(330) 200-8042** and we'll sort it out together. There's no such thing as a silly question about your own family.

— Bill

CHAPTER 2

Family History Online, in Plain English

Family history (genealogy is the formal word) is simply the work of finding out who your ancestors were: their names, where and when they lived, who they married, and what their lives were like. Thirty years ago that meant writing letters to courthouses and squinting at microfilm. Today, millions of those old records have been photographed and put online, and many can be searched by name from your living room.

Words you'll keep seeing

Word	What it means
Family tree	Your chart of relatives: you, your parents, grandparents and so on, with their dates and places. Websites let you build it on screen.
Record	An original document about a person: a census page, birth or death certificate, marriage license, draft card, ship list, obituary.
Index	A typed list made from old handwritten records, so you can search them by name. Indexes can contain mistakes; the original image is the real evidence.
Census	The government's count of everyone in the country, taken every ten years. Old census pages list each household by name.
Hint	A website's suggestion that a record or another tree might be about someone in your tree. On Ancestry it shows as a little green leaf.
DNA match	Another person who took the same company's DNA test and shares enough DNA with you to be a relative.
Ethnicity estimate	A DNA company's best guess at where in the world your ancestors came from. It is an estimate, not a fact.
GEDCOM	A standard file type (it ends in .ged) for saving a family tree so it can be moved from one website or program to another.

Where the records come from

Most records online started life in a government office, a church, a cemetery or a newspaper. Websites either photograph and index those records themselves or license them from archives. That's why the same census page may appear on FamilySearch, on Ancestry and on the National Archives' own website. You don't always have to pay to see a record: it's often free somewhere.

TIP

Treat online trees as clues, not proof

Other people's family trees are wonderful for ideas, but they're only as good as the person who made them, and mistakes get copied from tree to tree. Before you accept a fact, look for the record behind it.

CHAPTER 3

Free Sites and Paid Sites: Which to Use

You can do a great deal of family history without paying anything. Here's how the main websites compare. Prices change often and sales are common, so always check the current price on the company's own website before you sign up.

Website	Cost	Best for
FamilySearch (familysearch.org)	Free. Run by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; you don't have to be a member.	Searching billions of records, one big shared tree, free guidance at FamilySearch centers.
Ancestry (ancestry.com)	Free guest account with limits; paid memberships for full records. Two-week free trial.	The largest paid collection, easy tree building, hints, AncestryDNA.
MyHeritage (myheritage.com)	Free Basic plan (tree up to 250 people); paid plans for more.	Trees and records with strong international collections; its own DNA kit.
National Archives (archives.gov)	Free.	The 1950 census and federal records.
Chronicling America (Library of Congress)	Free.	Old newspapers through 1963.
Find a Grave (findagrave.com)	Free.	Cemetery listings and gravestone photos.

My suggested order

1. Start with what you know, and talk to your relatives (Chapters 4 to 7).
2. Open a free **FamilySearch** account and build your tree there (Part 3).
3. Use the free public records: the 1950 census, old newspapers, Find a Grave and Ohio's death index (Part 5).
4. Only when you've hit a wall, consider a paid site such as **Ancestry**, ideally with a free trial and a reminder to cancel (Part 4). Or use Ancestry free at a FamilySearch center.
5. Think carefully before a DNA test, and read Part 6 first.

FROM BILL

You don't need every subscription

Many folks I talk with are paying for a genealogy site they rarely open. There's no shame in subscribing for a few months when you're busy researching, then canceling until next winter. Your tree stays put when you cancel (Chapter 13).

CHAPTER 4

Start with What You Know

Every family tree starts with **you** and works backward one generation at a time. Before you open any website, spend an afternoon writing down what you already know. You'll be surprised how much that is, and it makes every search afterward faster.

Write down three generations

1. Start with yourself: full name, date and place of birth, marriage.
2. Add your parents: full names (including your mother's maiden name), birth dates and places, marriage, and death dates and places if they've passed.
3. Add your four grandparents the same way. Leave blanks where you don't know; blanks are your to-do list.
4. If you can, add your great-grandparents. Even a first name or a town is a valuable clue.
5. Next to each fact, jot down how you know it: "Mom's Bible," "Dad's death certificate," "Aunt Ruth said."

Search the house

Homes are full of family records hiding in plain sight. Look for:

- Family Bibles (births, marriages and deaths were often written inside the front cover).
- Birth, marriage and death certificates; funeral cards and obituaries clipped from the paper.
- Military discharge papers, medals, old passports and naturalization papers.
- Letters, postcards, diaries, baby books, school yearbooks and wedding albums.
- Photographs, especially ones with names or dates written on the back.

> **TIP**
>
> **Write on the back of today's photos**
>
> Old pictures with no names are the most common heartbreak in family history. When a relative recognizes someone in an old photo, write the name lightly on the back in soft pencil, or note it with the scanned copy. My Digitizing Old Photos & Movies manual shows how to scan and label them.

Pick one question to start

Trying to research everyone at once is overwhelming. Choose a single, clear question, such as "Where was Grandpa Joe born?" or "When did Mom's family come to Ohio?" Answer it, celebrate, then pick the next one.

STAY SAFE

Be careful what you post about living people

Your full name, birth date, mother's maiden name and hometown are exactly the details banks use as security questions, and exactly what identity thieves look for. Keep living people private online. Chapter 26 explains how.

PART 2

Gathering Family Stories

The people who remember are your best source of all. How to organize what you find at home, interview relatives, and record their voices before the stories are lost.

CHAPTER 5

Organizing Papers and Photos You Already Have

Before you go hunting online, get a handle on what's already in the house. A little order now saves hours later, and it keeps fragile originals safe.

A simple system that works

1. Gather everything into one place: a table, a box or a plastic tub.
2. Sort by family line. One pile for your father's side, one for your mother's side, and the same for your spouse's family if you're researching them too.
3. Within each pile, sort by person or couple.
4. Put each person's papers in a folder labeled with their name and birth year, for example "Joseph Kowalski 1902."
5. Keep originals flat, out of sunlight and away from damp basements and hot attics.

Make digital copies

Once something is scanned, you can share it with relatives, attach it to your online tree, and stop handling the fragile original. A flatbed scanner gives the best results; a phone's camera in good daylight works fine for letters and certificates.

Tip	Why it helps
File names	Use the person's name, the document and the year: "Kowalski Joseph death certificate 1968." You'll find it again in seconds.
Folders	One folder per family line on your computer, matching your paper folders.
Resolution	For documents, a normal scan is fine. For photos you may want to enlarge, scan at a higher setting. My Digitizing Old Photos & Movies manual explains the settings.

HEADS UP

One copy is not a backup

If your scans live only on one computer, a single failure could lose them all. Keep a second copy on an external drive or in cloud storage. My Backing Up Everything manual walks through it step by step.

CHAPTER 6

Interviewing Your Relatives

No website holds what your oldest relatives carry in their memories: the nicknames, the family jokes, why great-grandpa left the old country, what Sunday dinner was like. Ask now. It's one of the most valuable things you can do, and most people are delighted to be asked.

Before the visit

- Tell them what you'd like to talk about, so they can think ahead and dig out photos.
- Bring a few old photos. Pictures unlock memories better than questions do.
- Plan for about an hour. Shorter, repeated visits are easier on everyone than one long one.
- Ask permission to record, and explain what you'll do with the recording.

Good questions to ask

Topic	Questions
Names and places	What were your parents' and grandparents' full names? Where were they born? Did anyone change their name?
Growing up	What was your house like? What did your parents do for work? What did you do for fun?
Big moments	How did you meet your husband or wife? Where did you get married? Where were you when you heard big news events?
Coming to America	Who in the family came from another country? When, and why? Where did they first settle?
Service	Did anyone serve in the military? Which branch, which war, where?
Stories	Is there a family story everyone tells? A family recipe? Something you wish you'd asked your own grandparents?

During the conversation

- Ask open questions ("Tell me about...") rather than yes-or-no ones.
- Let silences sit. People often add the best detail after a pause.
- Don't correct dates on the spot. Note the story; check the records later.
- Ask about the photos: "Who is this? Where was it taken?"

GOOD TO KNOW

Memories and records sometimes disagree

Family stories often carry a real grain of truth, but dates drift and details change as stories are retold. That's normal. Write down what you're told, and say so in your notes: "Uncle Pete remembered...". Records can confirm it later.

TIP

Go gently with painful memories

Some memories are hard: wartime, losses, family rifts. If a relative doesn't want to talk about something, let it go. You can always come back to it another day, or not at all.

CHAPTER 7

Recording Their Voices

A recording of Grandma telling a story, in her own voice, is a treasure no record can replace. You don't need special equipment: the smartphone in your pocket is a very good recorder.

Recording with a phone

1. Open the voice recording app that came with your phone. On an iPhone it's called **Voice Memos**. On Android phones it's usually called **Recorder** or **Voice Recorder**.
2. Put the phone on the table between you, about an arm's length from the person speaking, with the screen facing up.
3. Tap the red record button, and start by saying the date, who's speaking and where you are.
4. Tap stop when you're done, and give the recording a clear name, such as "Grandma Ruth interview 2026."

Getting good sound

- Turn off the TV, radio and any noisy fans. Kitchen clocks and dishwashers are louder than you think.
- Sit somewhere soft. Rooms with carpet and curtains sound better than bare kitchens.
- Put the phone on airplane mode or silence it, so calls don't interrupt.
- Make a short test recording and play it back before you begin.

Video, too

If your relative is comfortable on camera, a video lets future generations see their face and gestures. Prop the phone sideways on a stand or a stack of books, at eye level, with a window or lamp lighting their face rather than behind them.

HEADS UP

Save it in two places the same day

Recordings are easy to lose when a phone is replaced or broken. As soon as you get home, copy the file to your computer or cloud storage, and share a copy with another family member. My Backing Up Everything manual shows how.

TIP

Add it to your tree

FamilySearch and Ancestry both let you attach photos, documents and stories to a person in your tree, so relatives who view the tree can enjoy them too. Just keep recordings of *living* people private (Chapter 26).

PART 3

FamilySearch: The Big Free Website

A free account, one shared world tree, billions of searchable records, and free in-person guidance at FamilySearch centers, including near you.

CHAPTER 8

Setting Up a Free FamilySearch Account

FamilySearch is the largest free family history website. It's provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and FamilySearch says it's free of charge to everyone. You don't need to be a member of the Church to use it. There's no free trial to remember and nothing to cancel.

Create your account

1. On a computer or tablet, go to **familysearch.org**. (There's also a free FamilySearch app for phones.)
2. Click **Sign Up**.
3. Choose how to sign up. You can use an existing **Google**, **Facebook** or **Apple** account, or create a FamilySearch username and password with your name, birth date and email address.
4. Read and accept the terms.
5. Activate the account using the message FamilySearch sends you by email or text.

GOOD TO KNOW

Church members already have an account

If you're a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you can sign in with your Church account; you don't need a separate FamilySearch one.

TIP

Write down your sign-in

Note your username or the account you signed up with (for example, "signed in with Google") and keep it with your other passwords. My Passwords & Password Managers manual explains a safe way to keep track of them.

Is my information safe on FamilySearch?

FamilySearch keeps information about **living** people in a private space that only you (and anyone you choose to share with) can see. Information about people who have **died** is public, so other relatives can see it and add to it. Chapter 9 explains why.

CHAPTER 9

Building Your Tree on FamilySearch

FamilySearch's Family Tree works differently from most. Instead of everyone building their own separate tree, FamilySearch aims for **one shared tree for the whole world**, with just one public profile for each person who has died. When you add your great-grandfather, a distant cousin in another state may already have added his parents. That's the magic of it.

Start with the Guided Tree

1. Sign in at **familysearch.org**.
2. Click **Build Your Tree** at the top of the home page.
3. The Guided Tree asks a few questions about you, such as your sex and your birth information.
4. It then prompts you to add your parents, then their parents, one person at a time. Use what you wrote down in Chapter 4.
5. When you add someone who has died, FamilySearch may show you possible matches already in the shared tree. Look carefully at the dates and places before you connect to one.

Living people stay private

Anyone you mark as **living** is kept in your private space, visible only to people with access to it. A person's profile becomes part of the public shared tree only after they're marked as deceased. If you want to share living family with relatives, FamilySearch has **Family Group Trees**, a private shared space for a family to add and edit information about living members together.

HEADS UP

Shared means others can edit

Because the tree for people who've died is shared, another researcher can change a date or add a parent you don't agree with. Attach records and sources to your ancestors so others can see your evidence. If someone makes a change you think is wrong, contact them politely through FamilySearch before changing it back.

TIP

Take your time connecting

It's tempting to accept every match to the shared tree and watch your tree fill up. Slow down. Connecting the wrong John Smith can send you down someone else's family for generations.

CHAPTER 10

Searching Records on FamilySearch

FamilySearch has billions of names from census pages, birth, marriage and death records, church registers, military records and much more, and searching them is free once you're signed in.

Do a simple name search

1. Sign in at **familysearch.org**.
2. Click **Search**, then **Records**.
3. Type a first name and last name. Add a place and an approximate birth year if you know them.
4. Click **More Options** to add a spouse, father or mother, which can narrow things down a lot.
5. Click **Search**. Use the filters on the results page to narrow by place, date or type of record.
6. Click a result to see the details, and look for a camera icon or image to see the original document.

Tricks for hard-to-find names

Tip	How it helps
Start broad	Begin with just a name and a state, then add details. Too many details at first can hide the right record.
Wildcards	An asterisk (*) stands for one or more letters, and a question mark (?) for exactly one. "Kowal*" finds Kowal, Kowalski and Kowalczyk. Wildcards don't work in the Ellis Island collections.
Spellings	Clerks wrote what they heard. Try Schmidt and Smith, Catherine and Katherine.
Check the image	Index mistakes are common. When an original image is available, read it yourself.

Records that aren't indexed yet

Many records are online as pictures but haven't been typed into a searchable index. Two tools help:

- **The Catalog** (under **Search**) lets you look up a place, such as your county, and see which records exist for it. A camera icon means the images are online to browse.

- **Full-Text Search** uses computer reading to search the words inside many un-indexed documents, such as old deeds and wills.

GOOD TO KNOW

Why records stop around 1950

FamilySearch notes that records for people alive in 1950 or earlier are the ones typically available. More recent records are usually kept private to protect living people.

CHAPTER 11

The FamilySearch Library and FamilySearch Centers

FamilySearch isn't only a website. In Salt Lake City, Utah, there's the famous **FamilySearch Library**, and around the world there are more than 5,000 local **FamilySearch centers**, often in Church meetinghouses, staffed by volunteers who offer free, in-person guidance.

GOOD TO KNOW

They used to be called Family History Centers

In 2023 the Family History Library was renamed the FamilySearch Library, and local Family History Centers became FamilySearch centers. The free services stayed the same. Public libraries and museums that are FamilySearch affiliates kept their own names.

Why a visit is worth it

- **Free guidance** from experienced volunteers, which is wonderful when you're stuck.
- **Free use of paid websites.** FamilySearch says you can use Ancestry free at FamilySearch centers (a library version called Ancestry Institution is offered at larger centers), and Findmypast at any center. Some centers also offer MyHeritage.

Find a center near you

1. Go to **familysearch.org** and look for the **FamilySearch Library** or **Locations** link (FamilySearch's locations directory is at locations.familysearch.org).
2. Search by your town or ZIP code.
3. Check the center's hours and phone number before you go. Many small centers are open only a few days a week, and what each one offers varies.
4. Call ahead to ask which partner websites they offer, and bring your notes and a USB flash drive to save what you find.

TIP

Your public library may help too

Many public libraries offer free genealogy databases on their own computers, and some have local history rooms with old newspapers, directories and obituaries. Ask at the reference desk.

PART 4

Ancestry

The best-known paid family history website: what you get for free, what the memberships cost, the free trial and how to cancel it, building a tree, hints, and keeping your tree private.

CHAPTER 12

Ancestry Plans, Prices and the Free Trial

Ancestry (ancestry.com) has the largest collection of paid family history records, and it's the site many people hear about first. You can create a **free guest account** and build a tree without paying. A paid **membership** unlocks the full record collections.

The three membership levels

Membership	What it adds
U.S. Discovery	U.S. records: census pages, vital records, military records and more.
World Explorer	Everything in U.S. Discovery, plus records from other countries. Useful when you've traced a family back to Ireland, Germany, Italy or elsewhere.
All Access	Ancestry's most complete level, which adds extra partner collections on top of World Explorer. Check Ancestry's site for exactly what's included today.

Ancestry sells these by the month or for six months at a time, and the prices change with frequent sales. In November 2026 Ancestry's own U.S. Discovery page showed World Explorer "starting at $39.99," and independent reviews list monthly prices from about $25 a month for U.S. Discovery to about $50 to $60 a month for All Access. Check the current price on ancestry.com before you buy.

The free trial

Ancestry often offers a **two-week free trial**. You give a card number, and if you don't cancel within two weeks of the day the trial began, the card is charged for the membership you picked.

HEADS UP

Set a reminder the day you start

The moment you start a free trial, put a reminder on your calendar or phone for **two days before** it ends. That gives you time to decide calmly, instead of discovering a charge on your statement.

If you sign up in the Ancestry app

If you start a membership in the Ancestry app on an iPhone, iPad or Android phone, you're billed by Apple, Google Play or Amazon, not Ancestry, and you must cancel through them. Uninstalling the app does **not** cancel the membership.

TIP

Try it free at a FamilySearch center first

Not sure Ancestry is worth it? Many FamilySearch centers offer free use of Ancestry on their computers (Chapter 11). An afternoon there can tell you whether Ancestry has records for your family.

CHAPTER 13

Canceling an Ancestry Trial or Membership

Canceling is straightforward when you know where to look. And here's the reassuring part: **canceling doesn't delete anything**. Your family trees, your DNA results and your account all stay. Your account simply goes back to a free registered guest account.

Cancel on the Ancestry website

1. Sign in at **ancestry.com**.
2. Click your name in the top-right corner, then **Account Settings**.
3. Find the **Membership** section.
4. Click **Cancel free trial** (or **Cancel membership** if you're already paying), and follow the directions.
5. You're done when you see a **cancellation confirmation number**. Ancestry also sends a confirmation email. Keep it.

Cancel a membership bought in the app

If you subscribed on...	Cancel here
iPhone or iPad	Cancel through Apple. My iPhone manual shows where subscriptions live in Settings.
Android phone	Cancel through Google Play, in the Play Store's subscriptions list.
Amazon device	Cancel through your Amazon account.

Don't see a Cancel button?

Ancestry lists a few reasons:

- You have a free guest account, so there's nothing to cancel.
- You have a **gift** membership, which simply ends on its own.
- You're part of a **family plan** someone else bought; only the person who bought it can cancel.
- You have **more than one Ancestry account** (often under a different email address) and the membership is on the other one.

GOOD TO KNOW

Taking a break instead

Ancestry also offers a way to **pause** some memberships rather than cancel. Look for it in the same Membership section of Account Settings.

CHAPTER 14

Building a Tree on Ancestry, and Using Hints

Building a tree on Ancestry is free, even without a membership. Each tree is **yours alone**, unlike FamilySearch's shared tree: nobody else can change it unless you invite them to.

Start your tree

1. Sign in at **ancestry.com** and click **Trees**, then **Create a new tree**.
2. Add yourself first, then your parents and grandparents, using your notes from Chapter 4.
3. Click a person's box to add more facts: dates, places, a spouse, children.
4. Give your tree a name you'll recognize, such as "Kowalski-Murphy Family."

Hints: the little green leaves

Soon after you add people, small **green leaves** start appearing on their boxes. Each leaf is a **hint**: Ancestry's suggestion that a record, a photo or another member's tree may be about that person. Hints are ranked by how closely the record matches what's in your tree.

1. Click a person, then choose **Hints**. Or click the leaf icon at the top right of the tree to see hints for everyone. A red dot means there are new ones.
2. Open a hint and compare its details carefully with what you know: names, dates, places, family members.
3. Choose **Yes** to accept it and add it to the person, **No** to reject it, or **Maybe** to save it for later.

HEADS UP

Hints are suggestions, not facts

A hint for "Mary Murphy, born about 1880, Ohio" may be a different Mary Murphy. Accepting a wrong hint can pull in the wrong parents, and more wrong hints follow. When in doubt, choose **Maybe**.

If you have...	You see
Free guest account	Hints from Ancestry's free collections only.
Paid membership	Hints from the record collections in your membership.
Ancestry app	Some hints, such as those from other members' public trees, appear only on the website.

GOOD TO KNOW

A green leaf in DNA results means something else

In the AncestryDNA match list, a green leaf means Ancestry found a common ancestor in your trees, not a record hint.

CHAPTER 15

Keeping Your Ancestry Tree Private

When you build a tree on Ancestry, you choose who can see it. There are three settings, and it's worth choosing on purpose.

Setting	Who can see what
Public	Anyone with an Ancestry account can find and view the people who have died, and your tree can show up as hints for others. Living people show only as "Private" or "Living."
Private, searchable	Others can see that your tree exists in search results and hints, with basic details such as the number of people and names of those who have died, and can message you to ask for access.
Private, unsearchable	Hidden from searches and hints. No one sees it unless you invite them.

Change your tree's privacy

1. On the Ancestry website, open your tree.
2. Open **Tree Settings** (from the tree name menu), then the **Privacy Settings** tab.
3. Choose **Public** or **Private**.
4. For the most privacy, choose Private and also check **Also prevent your tree from being found in searches**.
5. Save. In the Ancestry app, the same choice is a **Show in Search** switch; turn it off to hide your tree from searches.

GOOD TO KNOW

Changes take effect right away, mostly

Ancestry says privacy changes take effect immediately, but it can take about a month for the change to show up everywhere in its search index.

STAY SAFE

Mark living people as living

Ancestry hides living people in public trees, but it decides who is living from the information you enter. If you mark a living person as deceased, or enter a death date by mistake, their details can become visible. If there's no status or death date, Ancestry looks at the birth date, and if it can't tell, it treats the person as living.

TIP

Public trees help cousins find you

There's a good side to a public tree: distant cousins researching the same ancestors can find you, and they may have photos and letters you've never seen. Many people keep their tree public with living people protected. It's your choice.

PART 5

Other Sites and Free Public Records

MyHeritage and friends, then the free treasures: the 1950 census, a century and more of old newspapers, cemetery records, and Ohio's own death record index.

CHAPTER 16

MyHeritage and Other Family History Sites

FamilySearch and Ancestry are the two big names in the United States, but they're not the only ones. Here's a short, honest look at the others you'll hear about.

MyHeritage

MyHeritage (myheritage.com) is a family history website with trees, records and its own DNA test. It's especially popular with families whose roots are in Europe.

Plan	What you get
Basic (free)	A family tree of up to 250 people and 500 MB of space for photos and documents. If you go over 250 people, you can still view the tree but can't add more without upgrading.
Premium (paid)	A tree of up to 2,500 people.
Complete (paid)	Unlimited tree size and photo storage, plus records and extra DNA features.

HEADS UP

Watch the bundled trial

MyHeritage's DNA kit has been sold bundled with a trial of its Complete plan that turns into a paid yearly subscription if you don't cancel. Read the fine print at checkout and set a reminder, just as with Ancestry's trial. If a paid subscription ends, your site goes back to the free Basic plan.

A few others

Site	What it's known for
Findmypast	Strong for British and Irish records. Free to use at FamilySearch centers.
Find a Grave	Free cemetery listings (Chapter 19).
FamilyTreeDNA and GEDmatch	DNA-focused sites. They have their own law-enforcement matching settings (Chapter 23).

FROM BILL

One or two sites is plenty

You don't need accounts everywhere. FamilySearch plus the free records in this part will take most families a very long way. Add one paid site only when you know what you're looking for.

CHAPTER 17

The National Archives and the 1950 Census

Every ten years the government counts everyone in the country. The individual census pages are kept private for about seven decades, then released to the public. The **1950 census** was released by the National Archives on **April 1, 2022**, and it's free to search online. If you were born before 1950, you may be able to find yourself, as a baby or child, in your parents' household.

Search the 1950 census

1. Go to **1950census.archives.gov**, the National Archives' official 1950 census website.
2. Type a name and choose a state. Adding a county or town helps with common names.
3. Look through the results and open the page image to see the full household.
4. If the name search doesn't find someone, search by place instead: the site lets you browse the "enumeration district," the small area one census taker covered, where the family lived.

GOOD TO KNOW

Why names come up misspelled

The National Archives built the 1950 name index using computer reading of the handwriting, so it contains mistakes. You can help: the site has a tool for correcting and adding names, and your fix helps the next searcher.

Older censuses

Earlier census years are public too, and you'll find them in the record searches on FamilySearch (Chapter 10) and on Ancestry. Older censuses list less detail, but they let you follow a family back ten years at a time.

TIP

Read the whole page

Census pages list the neighbors too. Relatives often lived on the same street, and a grandmother or uncle may be living just a few lines away.

CHAPTER 18

Old Newspapers: Chronicling America

Old newspapers are full of family history: obituaries, wedding announcements, birth notices, local "personals" columns about who visited whom, and stories about accidents and anniversaries. The Library of Congress runs a free website of digitized historic newspapers called **Chronicling America**, with millions of pages reaching back to the 1700s and running through 1963.

Search it

1. Search for **Chronicling America Library of Congress**, or go to the Library of Congress website at **loc.gov** and look for Chronicling America.
2. Type a name or phrase. Put a full name in quotation marks to find the words together.
3. Narrow the search by **state** (choose Ohio), by a particular **newspaper**, and by **years** or even months.
4. Open a page and zoom in. The highlighted words show where your search term appears.

TIP

Try every spelling, and initials

Old papers often called a married woman by her husband's name ("Mrs. John Kowalski") and used initials ("J. A. Kowalski"). The computer reading of old print also makes mistakes. Try several versions.

When the paper you need isn't there

Chronicling America has many, but not all, newspapers. Paid sites such as Newspapers.com and GenealogyBank cover more. Before you subscribe, ask your public library: many offer newspaper databases free with a library card, and local libraries often keep microfilm of the hometown paper.

GOOD TO KNOW

Obituaries are gold

A single obituary can name a person's parents, spouse, children (with married names), siblings, church and cemetery. It's often the best record you'll find for anyone who died in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 19

Find a Grave and Cemetery Records

Find a Grave (findagrave.com) is a free website where volunteers have listed millions of graves, often with a photo of the headstone, dates, a short biography and links to family members buried elsewhere. It's been owned by Ancestry since 2013, but it's free to search and you don't need an account to look.

Search for a grave

1. Go to **findagrave.com**.
2. Use the **Memorial Search** on the home page: type a first and last name.
3. Add a birth or death year and a location if you know them, then search.
4. Open a memorial to see the headstone photo, dates, cemetery and any linked family members.

HEADS UP

Volunteer-made, so double-check

Find a Grave memorials are created by volunteers. The headstone photo is good evidence; typed biographies and family links can contain mistakes. Compare with other records.

Adding your own family

You need a free account only to add photos or information. If you visit a family cemetery, photographing the stones and adding them helps other researchers, and it's a lovely way to honor your people. Find a Grave notes that if you create your account through Ancestry, your name and email are shared with Find a Grave.

TIP

Call the cemetery office

Many cemeteries keep burial records with details that never made it onto a stone, such as who bought the plot and who else is buried there. A polite phone call often gets results.

CHAPTER 20

Ohio Records: Ohio History Connection

If your family has Ohio roots, the **Ohio History Connection** (the state's history organization in Columbus, which runs the State Archives) is a wonderful resource, and its online **Ohio Death Records Index** is free.

What the death index covers

Records	Years
Ohio Department of Health death certificates	1913 to 1944, and 1954 to 1970
Stillborn death certificates	1913 to 1935, and 1942 to 1953
Columbus Board of Health death certificates	1904 to 1908

Use it

1. Search for **Ohio History Connection death index**, or go to **ohiohistory.org** and choose **Research**.
2. Open the death records index and type a last name (and first name, if you know it).
3. Note the details in the index entry, such as the date, county and certificate number.
4. To get a copy of the certificate, use the Ohio History Connection's online order request. Its staff fill death certificate orders received online. Check their site for the current fee.

GOOD TO KNOW

The index has gaps

The years 1945 to 1953 aren't in this index, and it stops at 1970. For those years, and for births and marriages, try FamilySearch, the probate court of the county where the event happened, or the county's local library and historical society.

TIP

Close to home

For Portage County families, ask at your public library about local history and obituary resources, and look for a county historical or genealogical society. Local volunteers know which records survive and where.

PART 6

DNA Kits: Answers, Surprises and Privacy

What a spit-in-a-tube test can and can't tell you, how to handle unexpected results with care, the privacy settings that matter, what happened to 23andMe, and how to delete your DNA data.

CHAPTER 21

What a DNA Test Can and Can't Tell You

A consumer DNA test for family history is simple: you order a kit, spit into a tube (or swab your cheek), mail it back, and a few weeks later your results appear online. The best-known kits in the U.S. are **AncestryDNA**, **23andMe** and **MyHeritage DNA**. Each company only compares you with people who tested with that same company.

The two kinds of results

Result	What it is
Ethnicity estimate	Percentages showing which parts of the world your DNA most resembles, such as "Ireland 42%." It's made by comparing your DNA to reference groups of people with long roots in each region. AncestryDNA divides the world into hundreds of overlapping regions.
DNA matches	A list of other customers who share DNA with you, with a predicted relationship such as "1st cousin" or "3rd to 4th cousin." For family history, this is the truly useful part.

What it can't tell you

- **Ethnicity percentages are estimates.** Ancestry shows a likely range for each region, and the numbers can change when the company updates its reference groups.
- **Brothers and sisters get different results.** Each child inherits a random half of each parent's DNA, so siblings' percentages won't match exactly.
- **Neighboring countries look alike.** People with long roots in England, for example, may see some Scandinavia, reflecting settlement centuries ago rather than a recent relative.
- **Names, dates and stories.** DNA can show that you're related to someone, but records are needed to work out exactly how.

GOOD TO KNOW

How reliable are the relationship guesses?

Ancestry says its relationship predictions are almost always accurate for second cousins or closer. Further out, the same amount of shared DNA can fit several relationships: someone in the "first cousin" group could also be a half aunt or uncle, or a great-grandparent.

Before you buy a kit

The Federal Trade Commission suggests comparing companies on privacy, not just price. Before you buy:

- Read the company's privacy policy and terms. Does it share data with other companies? Can you delete your data and have your sample destroyed?
- Look for privacy settings, and start with the most private ones rather than the defaults.
- Use a unique password and turn on two-step sign-in (multifactor authentication) if it's offered.
- Remember that your DNA also says something about your relatives, and a company can be hacked even if it promises not to share.

Kit	Cost in November 2026
AncestryDNA kit	List price $99.00 plus shipping; frequently on sale (it was offered for $34.00 in a mid-November 2026 sale).
MyHeritage DNA kit	Often sold on sale and bundled with a trial of a paid plan. Check the checkout page for what renews.

CHAPTER 22

When DNA Results Bring a Surprise

Most DNA results bring pleasant discoveries: a cousin in another state, confirmation of a family story. But DNA is honest in a way family stories aren't, and sometimes it reveals something nobody expected. It's worth thinking about this **before** you test, and being gentle with yourself and others if it happens.

Surprises people sometimes find

- A half-brother or half-sister nobody knew about.
- A parent, grandparent or great-grandparent who wasn't the person the family believed. Ancestry itself notes that a person you thought was a close relative may not be biologically related to you.
- An adoption that was never talked about, or a child given up for adoption long ago reaching out.
- Ethnicity that doesn't match the family's story of where "we" came from.

If something unexpected appears

1. **Pause.** You don't have to do anything right away. A match will still be there next week.
2. **Check the simple explanations first.** Relationship predictions overlap, and a "close family" match may be a different relationship than it first seems (Chapter 21).
3. **Talk it over** with someone you trust before contacting anyone.
4. **Think about the other people involved.** A discovery about your family is also a discovery about someone else's, and they may know nothing about it.
5. **If you reach out,** keep the first message short, kind and low-pressure, and let them answer in their own time, or not at all.

TIP

Talk before anyone tests

If you're giving DNA kits as gifts, or asking an older relative to test, mention gently that results can sometimes surprise people. Everyone should choose for themselves whether to test and what to share.

GOOD TO KNOW

You can step back

If you'd rather not see matches for a while, you can turn matching off and keep your ethnicity results (Chapter 23). It's your DNA and your choice.

FROM BILL

Be kind to yourself

A surprise in your DNA doesn't change who raised you, who loved you, or who you are. Take your time. If it's weighing on you, a counselor, a pastor or a trusted friend can help, and support groups exist for people in just this situation.

CHAPTER 23

DNA Privacy Settings, and Police Matching

Your DNA is the most personal information you have, and it can't be changed like a password. It also carries information about your children, siblings and cousins. Here are the settings worth checking.

AncestryDNA settings

1. Sign in at **ancestry.com**. Click your name at the top right, then **Account Settings**.
2. Click **DNA** in the menu, and choose your test.
3. Review the choices there: whether you appear in **DNA matches**, whether you've given **research consent**, and other sharing options.

Setting	What it does
DNA matches	Turn matching off to hide from other customers' match lists. Your ethnicity results stay. Your own match list disappears until you turn matching back on.
Research consent	Separate from matching. Says whether your data may be used in Ancestry's research project. Voluntary; you can withdraw at any time, but data already used in research isn't taken back out.

Can the police search my DNA?

Police sometimes use genealogy DNA databases to identify suspects and unidentified remains, a practice called investigative or forensic genetic genealogy. The rules differ by company:

Company	Policy, as reported
Ancestry	Reported to release DNA data to law enforcement only when compelled by valid legal process, such as a search warrant. It has no opt-in program for police searches.
GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA	These sites have settings that let you opt in to or out of law-enforcement matching. Which is the default has changed over the years, so check your setting yourself.

HEADS UP

Uploading your raw data elsewhere

Many people download their DNA file from one company and upload it to another site for more matches. Every upload is one more company holding your DNA, with its own rules. Read each site's privacy and law-enforcement settings before you upload.

SCAM ALERT

"Free DNA kit from Medicare"

The FTC warns about callers offering free genetic tests "covered by Medicare" in exchange for your Medicare number. Medicare doesn't market DNA kits to the public. Say no and hang up.

CHAPTER 24

23andMe Since Its Bankruptcy, and Deleting Your DNA Data

In March 2025, the DNA company **23andMe** filed for bankruptcy, and many customers worried about what would happen to their genetic data. Here's what happened, and what you can do now.

Who owns 23andMe now

- A bankruptcy court approved the sale of 23andMe in June 2025 to **TTAM Research Institute**, a nonprofit led by 23andMe's co-founder Anne Wojcicki. The purchase, for about $305 million, closed on **July 14, 2025**.
- TTAM then renamed itself the **23andMe Research Institute**.
- TTAM said it would honor 23andMe's existing policies letting customers **delete their account and genetic data** and opt out of research. State attorneys general reported added protections, including independent annual audits.

GOOD TO KNOW

Check for later changes

Ownership and policies can change again. Before you rely on any of this, look at 23andMe's own privacy page for the current details.

Delete your 23andMe data

1. Sign in at **23andme.com**.
2. Optional but wise: download any reports or raw data you want to keep, from your Account Settings. You can't get them after deletion.
3. Go to **Account Settings** and find the **23andMe Data** section.
4. Click **Permanently Delete Data**.
5. 23andMe emails you to confirm. Click to confirm. Deletion then begins and you lose access to the account.

HEADS UP

What deletion does

Once confirmed, it can't be undone. It deletes the data for **every profile** in the account, so if you manage a spouse's profile in the same account, move it first. If you joined research, your data won't be used in future projects and a stored saliva sample is discarded. 23andMe keeps a limited record of the request and anything the law requires.

Delete your AncestryDNA results

1. Sign in at **ancestry.com**. Click your name at the top right, then **Account Settings**.
2. Click **DNA** in the menu, and choose the test you want to delete.
3. At the bottom of the page, choose the option to delete your test results.
4. Enter your password to confirm.

HEADS UP

Permanent, so consider the alternatives

Deleted AncestryDNA results can't be brought back; you'd have to buy and send in a new test. If you just want privacy, turning off matching may be enough (Chapter 23). Canceling an Ancestry membership does **not** delete your DNA results.

TIP

The FTC's advice on deleting

DNA companies often hold two things: your physical sample and the DNA data made from it. When you ask for deletion, check that the company's process covers both.

PART 7

Saving, Sharing and Staying Safe

Keep a copy of your hard work that no website can take away, protect the living people in your tree, and spot the scams aimed at family historians.

CHAPTER 25

Saving Your Research: GEDCOM Files and Backups

You may spend years building your tree. Websites change owners, raise prices and close accounts, so keep your own copy. The standard way to do that is a **GEDCOM** file, a text file (ending in .ged) that almost every family tree website and program can open.

Download your Ancestry tree

1. Sign in at **ancestry.com** and open your tree from the **Trees** menu.
2. Open **Tree Settings** (from the tree name menu).
3. Under **Manage your tree**, choose **Export tree**.
4. Wait while Ancestry builds the file, then click to download it. It may arrive inside a zip file; double-click the zip file to open it.

Good to know	
Who can export	Only the tree's owner. You don't need a paid membership.
What's included	Names, dates, places, relationships and notes. Photos and documents are **not** inside the file, so save those separately.
If it seems stuck	If it still says it's generating the file after ten minutes, refresh the page and try again.

GOOD TO KNOW

Everything else in your account

Ancestry also lets you request a download of all your account data, including your trees and DNA information. Look for **Requesting a Download of Your Account Data** in Ancestry's help center.

A simple backup routine

1. Every few months, or after a big research session, export a fresh GEDCOM file.
2. Name it with the date, such as "Family tree 2026-11.ged."
3. Save it in your family history folder along with your scanned documents, photos and recordings.
4. Make sure that folder is backed up to an external drive or cloud storage. My Backing Up Everything manual shows how.

TIP

Share a copy with family

Give a copy of your GEDCOM file and scans to a child, grandchild or cousin, on a flash drive or through shared cloud storage. That way your work survives no matter what. My Digital Legacy manual explains how to make sure family can reach your accounts and files later.

CHAPTER 26

Protecting Living Relatives' Privacy

Family history is about the people who came before us, but every tree also includes living people: you, your children, grandchildren, cousins. Their details deserve protection, both for their privacy and because names, birth dates and mothers' maiden names are exactly what identity thieves want.

How the big sites protect the living

Site	What it does
FamilySearch	Living people are kept in your private space, visible only to people with access. Use Family Group Trees to share living family privately.
Ancestry	In public trees, living people show only as "Private" or "Living." Ancestry decides who is living from the status and dates you enter, so enter them carefully.

Your own good habits

- Ask before you add a living relative's photos, stories or recordings to an online tree.
- Don't post a living person's full birth date or mother's maiden name on social media or public family pages.
- When you share a GEDCOM file, remember it includes living people. Share it with family you trust, not on public websites.
- Be thoughtful with sensitive history: adoptions, illnesses, crimes and family rifts may still affect living people.
- Keep your genealogy accounts safe with strong, unique passwords and two-step sign-in where offered. My Passwords & Password Managers manual explains how.

STAY SAFE

Security questions and your tree

Many banks still ask "What is your mother's maiden name?" or "What city were you born in?" If those answers are on a public tree, they're no longer secret. Where you can, choose different security questions, or give answers only you would know.

TIP

Turn off a public tree for a while

If you're unsure, set your Ancestry tree to Private while you tidy it up (Chapter 15). You can always make it public later.

CHAPTER 27

Scams that Target Family Historians

People researching their family are curious, trusting and often have their family details online, and scammers know it. These are the tricks to watch for.

SCAM ALERT

The long-lost relative's inheritance letter

The FTC warns about letters, often from a "lawyer" or "law firm," saying a distant relative or a client who shares your last name has died and left millions, and offering to split it with you. The FTC is blunt: the inheritance or life insurance policy doesn't exist. Replying leads to requests for your Social Security or bank account number, or for money for "fees." Don't respond. Report it at **ReportFraud.ftc.gov**.

SCAM ALERT

"You're owed unclaimed money" calls and texts

The FTC also warns that unexpected calls or texts saying you're owed unclaimed property are often scams. If you want to check whether any money is being held for you or a late relative, go to your state's official unclaimed funds office yourself, never through a link or number in the message.

SCAM ALERT

Fake Ancestry emails and texts

Ancestry says it will never ask for personal information by email or text. Be wary of messages pushing you to click a link, open an attachment, call a number or "verify your account," and of Ancestry messages sent from ordinary Gmail, Outlook or iCloud addresses. Instead of clicking, type ancestry.com yourself and sign in.

SCAM ALERT

Free DNA tests "paid for by Medicare"

Medicare doesn't market DNA testing kits to the public. Anyone offering one in exchange for your Medicare number is after your information. Hang up.

Other warning signs

- A "cousin" you met through a DNA match or family tree site who soon has an emergency and needs money. Real relatives can wait while you check.
- Websites selling a "family crest" or "official family history" for your surname. A surname doesn't come with one coat of arms for everyone.
- Paid "heir finder" or record-retrieval services that ask for big fees up front. Many records are free; ask a FamilySearch center or library first.
- Messages inside a genealogy site that ask you to move the conversation to another app or email.

If you already clicked or replied

1. Stop replying. Don't send money or any more information.
2. If you typed a password into a suspicious page, change it on the real site right away, and anywhere else you use it.
3. If you shared a card or bank number, call your bank using the number on your card.
4. Report suspicious Ancestry emails to Ancestry through its help center, and messages within the site with the report option on the message.
5. Report scams to the FTC at **ReportFraud.ftc.gov**.

PART 8

Help and Your Cheat-Sheet

An honest word about when a hand is worth it, and the whole book on one page.

CHAPTER 28

When to Call Bill

I've written this book so you can do your family history on your own. But part of being helpful is being honest about when a hand saves you time, worry or money, so here's my straight advice, with no pressure. I'm a technology helper, not a professional genealogist: I can't trace your family for you, but I can make the tools work for you.

Times it's well worth a call

- **Getting set up**: a FamilySearch account, an Ancestry account, and your first few generations entered, with passwords safely recorded.
- **A charge you didn't expect** from a free trial, and canceling it in the right place (website, iPhone or Android).
- **Privacy check-up**: tree privacy, DNA matching and research settings, and deleting DNA data if that's your choice.
- **Saving your work**: exporting your tree, organizing scans and recordings, and setting up a backup.
- **Scanning old photos and documents**, or getting a recording off a phone and onto a computer.
- **A letter, email or message you're not sure about.** Ask before you answer.

What working with me is like

I work at your pace: no rushing, no talking down, and no jargon. I explain what I'm doing in plain words, and I'll tell you honestly when a subscription or a gadget isn't worth your money. I serve Portage County, Ohio, and I bring more than 30 years of professional experience to every visit.

FROM BILL

How to reach me

Call or text **(330) 200-8042**, or book a time at **billshometech.com/book**. Help is **$49 remote · $99 in your home**. If I'm with another customer, my AI receptionist, Sophie, will answer and make sure I get back to you. No question is too small.

Thank you for letting me help with your family's story. The people in your tree are waiting to be found, and now you know how to find them and keep what you learn safe.

— Bill

CHAPTER 29

Your Family History Cheat-Sheet

Print just this page and keep it by your favorite chair. The whole book, boiled down.

Where to look

I want	Go here
Free tree and records	**familysearch.org** (free account).
Free in-person guidance	A **FamilySearch center**; Ancestry is free on their computers.
The 1950 census	**1950census.archives.gov**.
Old newspapers	**Chronicling America** at loc.gov, through 1963.
Graves	**findagrave.com** Memorial Search.
Ohio deaths	Ohio History Connection death index (1913 to 1944, 1954 to 1970).

Everyday moves

To do this	Do this
Cancel an Ancestry trial	Your name > **Account Settings** > Membership > **Cancel free trial**. App sign-ups: cancel with Apple or Google.
Make a tree private	Ancestry: **Tree Settings** > **Privacy Settings**.
Review a hint	Click the green leaf; choose Yes, No or Maybe.
DNA settings	Ancestry: your name > **Account Settings** > **DNA**.
Save my tree	Ancestry: **Tree Settings** > **Export tree** (GEDCOM).
Delete 23andMe data	**Account Settings** > 23andMe Data > Permanently Delete Data.

Keep handy

Item	
FamilySearch sign-in	_____
Ancestry sign-in	_____
Free trial ends on	_____
Where my tree backup is kept	_____
Nearest FamilySearch center	_____

Safety, in three lines

- A letter about a long-lost relative's fortune is a scam. Don't reply.
- Keep living people private, and never give personal details to an email or text.
- Think before a DNA test, and know you can turn off matching or delete your data.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

You've got this

You can now search for your ancestors for free, use the paid sites wisely, protect your family's privacy and keep your work safe for the next generation. When you'd like a hand, call (330) 200-8042.