



## Begin Building Your Family Tree

### Learn the basics of how to search for your ancestors — without spending a dime

by: Judi Hasson | from: [AARP](#) | May 5, 2011

Knowing where to look is half the challenge of researching your ancestors and building your family tree.

**Also see:** [Ancestry search reunites long-lost cousins.](#)

But it's also important to be methodical in your search, says Constance Potter, reference archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Keep track of information you find and where you found it. (Use index cards or a file on your computer.)



The theatrical Barrymore family enjoys a family reunion in 1932. If you're looking for a connection, search for the original family surname, Blythe. — John Springer Collection/Corbis

These seven tips will help you get started.

1. The best clues may be found at your family home. Hunt for papers such as [military records](#), birth and death certificates, bibles or ledgers inscribed with information about family members, newspaper clippings and high school or college yearbooks. Make copies of everything electronically

or on paper, and file them in a systematic way.

2. Talk to older relatives about your [family history](#), record their answers and file them in your computer. Maintain a healthy skepticism about their stories but remember they may contain important clues that you can later verify with official documents.
3. A key starting point is U.S. Census records, which are available online for census reports from 1790 to 1930. (The 1940 census will be available in 2012.) These records will give you a wealth of information: Where your relatives were born, their first language, their occupation, who was living in the home when the census was taken. The 1900 and 1910 censuses go even further, asking women how many children they have given birth to and how many are living, good information to round out your family picture.

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4. The Internet can help you with your family search but you'll also need to do some old-fashioned sleuthing: Visit local courthouses, churches, parishes and public libraries to plow through paper records to locate property deeds, bankruptcies and other legal information. Ask a research librarian to help you. Some libraries have county historians on their staffs who are available to help.

5. It's easy to lose track of a married female who took her husband's last name. To find these relatives, search for their brothers and fathers in the Census and work backward to family addresses, which may contain information about female household members.

6. Closely examine family pictures. Figure out who's who and date the picture. Not sure if the little boy pictured is your grandfather or great-grandfather? Look for clues to help you identify the era, such as cars, appliances, clothing and hairstyles.

7. Become familiar with genealogical terms such as relic (a widow), testatrix (a woman's will) and dower (property rights of a woman in her husband's estate) to help you pinpoint your family history.

There is so much available for free online that searching for

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