



# Exploring Family History: In the Beginning

By Patricia Kruger

*Editor's note: This is the first installment in a multi-part series aimed at introducing Historical Society members with an interest in family history to genealogical research.*

My journey into the past started thirty years ago. It has been the journey of a lifetime—actually, many lifetimes—3,238 to be exact. The trail has had ups and downs, and along the way, I encountered patriots, traitors, farmers, doctors, colonists, and recent immigrants. There were dead ends and brick walls. A few lifetimes even had to be deleted, as I backtracked and took a different fork in the trail. It has been a journey of happy dances and humbling challenges. To date, the trail has covered seven countries and thirty-eight states. Much was found before the Internet improved access, provided background, and displayed data. And while technology has made the journey easier, it only provides some of the clues necessary to tell a family's history.

My journey is not uncommon. For me, like for many researchers, it started with family stories. Some of these stories turned out to be true, while others have been the family-history equivalent of the telephone game—evolving into barely recognizable truths as one generation passed them to the next. I daresay a few of the stories were purposefully altered. In any case, oral traditions such as these can be the foundation from which to build your own family history.

The study of genealogy, a branch of history, focuses on lineage and relationships. Often misunderstood by happy Internet clickers, its method is scientific: hypothesize, research, analyze, and conclude, looking for facts, weighing evidence, and drawing conclusions. In the words of Val

D. Greenwood in his classic text *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy* (1990), "This is not done by copying [and pasting] but rather by research." In lay terms, family history takes those past relationships and places them in context. Based on documented facts and supported with evidence, it is the flesh on the bones, the stories of lives.

So how do you transition your family stories to genealogy and family history? Start with yourself, what you know and who you know. Collect stories, names, dates, locations, and heirlooms from family members. Be forewarned, though, this is a never-ending process. Every experienced family researcher wishes they had asked their mother, father, aunt, or uncle some specific thing before he or she died. Now is the time to ask, not next Thanksgiving or when you finally get a family reunion scheduled. Write down or record the answers to your questions, identify the information, and date it. Make multiple copies and spread them around. Scour the attic, closets, old address books, and photo albums. Clues abound if you keep your eyes open. Investigating at home and interviewing living relatives will get you started.

Then begin your research. Learning to effectively research your family is another lifelong process, but some basic elements will put you on the right track:

(1) Start with yourself and work backwards. Don't skip generations or attempt to connect to some famous same-named individual without documented parent-child links. You can waste a lot of time trying to prove something that is not provable.

(2) Document everything you find—and everything you don't. When presented with conflicting "facts" by your

newly-found second cousin, you will want to know where you got your information. Plus, there is no point in redoing your work two years from now.

(3) Keep yourself organized. If you organize from the start, you will not be confronted with overwhelming piles of files or get mired in questions that you already answered (but don't know it).

(4) Maintain an open mind. Look in places you don't expect. Don't judge your ancestors. You can't know all of their life circumstances, and twenty-first-century values should not be applied to eighteenth-century behavior.

(5) Don't focus on correct spelling. Family names can be spelled many different ways, even in the same record. If an ancestor couldn't read and write, then he couldn't spell. Clerks and recorders wrote what they heard (or thought they heard). Accents altered spelling, and many letters sound alike. For instance, a *b* might be mistaken for a *v*. Handwriting styles changed over time. A written *a* might look like an *o*. Consider numerous possibilities as you look through records and documents.

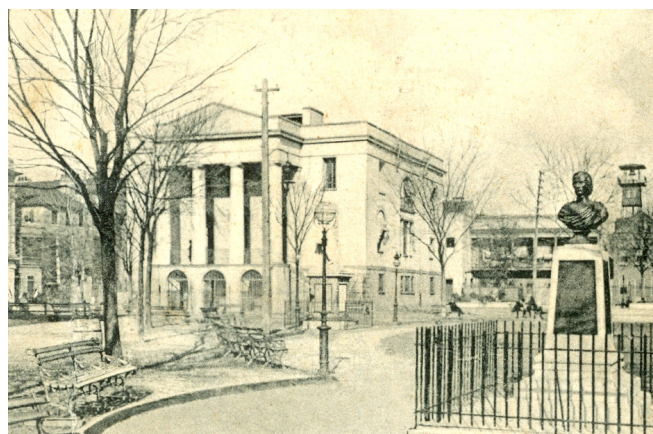
Now, go ahead. Start the documentation of your journey—and the journeys of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents, and great-great-great grandparents. It will be your journey of a lifetime. ♦

*Patricia Kruger is currently president of the Charleston chapter of the South Carolina Genealogical Society and a former South Carolina Historical Society staff member. A retired business executive, she holds an MBA from the Wharton School and has been researching her family and lecturing on genealogy for more than thirty years.*



## Can't make it to the Fireproof Building to do your research?

The South Carolina Historical Society is now offering research services. For a pre-paid fee, a skilled staff researcher can investigate and respond to your research request utilizing sources available in our library and archival collections. The cost is \$50.00 per hour for non-members, \$35.00 per hour for members. This price includes a complete list of sources consulted as well as copies of any relevant material. The society receives several requests a day, so we ask that patrons submit an official request form—available online or mailed upon request—and allow six to eight weeks for processing. Before submitting your request, we recommend that you take a moment to explore our online catalog and gauge whether or not the society holds material relevant to your search.



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# Exploring Family History: Proceed with Caution on the Internet

By Patricia Kruger

*Editor's note: This is the second installment in a multi-part series aimed at introducing SCHS members with an interest in family history to genealogical research.*

Genealogy on the Internet: it's fun, it's easy. All you have to do is look. At least that is what the advertisements tell us. One-stop research shop is what they imply. Skilled genealogists know it isn't quite so, but it sure is tempting to believe. The Internet has brought a whole new dimension to family history. It is an incredible tool, and it has made family research easier. But is it all you need to uncover the journeys of your family?

What might your family look like if you put it all together from the Internet? First, start with (undocumented) information from an online family tree, add some (poorly) transcribed vital records, throw in a few people who (kind of) fit, combine some (conflicting) branches of information a supposed distant cousin posted (from a forgotten source), add the indexed information with the same name (because you assume it is yours), and overlay the family story passed down from your great-grandmother (that must be true because she said so). You've got a family tree that looks like a fascinating, but mutant, growth that may bear little resemblance to reality. Then, post it on the Internet just for good measure and continue the spiral of misinformation surrounding your family's journey like so many Internet posters have done before you.

If you want to write a fictional thriller, this might be useful. But if you want to tell your family's story, their personal trials, challenges, and accomplishments, treat the Internet as a tool in a disciplined process, not a one-stop research shop. It is a means to help identify clues, find source information, locate distant relatives, and save family research for future generations. In the pre-Internet world, it took weeks or months to find family information. Now it often takes only minutes or hours. Rapid feedback leads to more searches that lead to more data that leads to a greater need to sort fact from fiction. Knowing where to look will increase your family history success, and knowing what to believe will greatly increase your success.

Confronted with databases of records, references to iconic places like Ellis Island (and its passenger lists), and television commercials, all touting the fun of finding your family, how do you effectively use this fantastic tool?

**Just getting started?** Use the Internet to learn the techniques of sound genealogical research. Search the terms "genealogy beginner" or "genealogy classes" and find programs, blogs, e-zines, mailing lists, webinars, and guidance. Learn the processes, requirements, and basic skills to accurately find your family. Though it takes time and effort, it will help you distinguish the credible from

the myth. Hoping to find your family with a few clicks in a database may rapidly "build" a family tree, but you may well wind up with a hybrid of pine and maple on a prickly cactus stalk. Check sites like [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org), [rootsweb.ancestry.com](http://rootsweb.ancestry.com), [genealogy.com](http://genealogy.com), and [genealogy.about.com](http://genealogy.about.com) for research tips. Even YouTube has classes and training programs on methods and record groups. Furthermore, most of these online sources are free.

**Trying to expand your family tree?** The Internet can help. The tools to nurture and grow your tree are available, but watch for maladies, pests, and blight that weaken it or even take it down. Learn to distinguish the good from the bad, identify relationships, find resources, and get help. There are lots of sites with data, but what can you believe? Look at sites with databases, but also look at classes on methods and processes (these can be found at [ngsgenealogy.org](http://ngsgenealogy.org), [americanancestors.org](http://americanancestors.org), or [cyndislist.com/education](http://cyndislist.com/education)). Watch advanced webinars ([legacyfamilytree.com](http://legacyfamilytree.com), [familytreeuniversity.com](http://familytreeuniversity.com), and [blog.geneawebinars.com](http://blog.geneawebinars.com) are good sources) and read case studies. Be prepared to evaluate the onslaught of data available on the World Wide Web.

**Be a healthy skeptic.** Combing through the wealth of information on the Internet is a joy and a curse. Some data is accurate; some is not. Some will lead you forward (or back, as the case may be), and some will lead you far afield. Ask yourself some key questions when confronted with any new piece of information. Is the data sourced? Is the source credible? Is it transcribed or indexed or is it the image of an original document? (Each of these carries different risks of error.) Who posted the information? Is the website up to date? Are the links still valid? Treat Internet data as clues until you can personally document the information, corroborate the facts, and build a solid case to prove your relationships. As many professionals say, "Genealogy without documentation is mythology." That holds for passed-down family stories and the World Wide Web. Take the time to analyze, verify, and resolve conflicts.

**Make the Internet your personal genealogical assistant.** The Internet's genealogical value is not just the database content that augments your personal history. You need contacts, repositories, and historical background. How else would you find your third cousin who owns the old family photos? How else can you efficiently learn that the courthouse you would travel five hundred miles to visit will be closed for the local Founders Day on the one day you have to scour their records? How would you sort through three similarly named people from the same town in Europe, born only months apart (without a trip abroad)? How can you find what your ancestor, the cordwainer, actually did for a living? How can you find the eighteenth-century diary written by your fourth great-grand-aunt? (Hint: Check online catalogs at

manuscript repositories like the South Carolina Historical Society.) You have to go beyond online databases, but the Internet can help you get there.

And as your solidly built foundation of genealogical research evolves, you can organize it, save it to the cloud, share it with the interested (even if unhelpful) relatives, and preserve it for the future ... just in case a natural disaster or other malady strikes. Yes, the Internet's benefits are vast.

Can you do family research without the Internet? Yes. People did it that way for centuries, and some of them may have been your ancestors. But, identifying your family's history and understand-

ing their personal journeys is hard work, so use all the tools at your disposal. It is the twenty-first century. Jump in, get educated, search the web, and expand the stories you already have. Just watch for tangles, traps, and erroneous conclusions. Explore, ask questions, join groups. The options are endless ... and you can do it all in your pajamas! ♦

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## Explore the World Wide Web

Several key websites are mentioned in the article, and here are some additional choices to get you started:

### Directories and Search Engines

- <http://www.mocavo.com> — Genealogy-specific search engine
- <http://www.searchforancestors.com> — Directory of genealogy search engines, databases, and guides
- <http://www.linkpendium.com> — Directory of genealogy links
- <https://familysearch.org> — Choose 'Search,' 'Search Historical Records,' WIKI for classes, resources, and help

### Databases

- <http://www.fold3.com> — Primarily military records, fee-based for full access (free at LDS Family History Centers)
- <http://www.findagrave.com> — Volunteer grave-marker information; not sourced, watch for errors
- <http://www.ellisland.org> — Arrival information for ships entering New York City
- <http://dar.org/library/> — Online databases at DAR Library
- <http://www.archives.gov> (National Archives) — Genealogy resources, military databases, and help
- <http://www.loc.gov> (Library of Congress) — Photos, historical newspapers, books, other materials
- *Always check libraries in your state/county/city of interest. Many have digital collections online.*

### Blank Forms and Charts

- [http://helpdesk.rootsweb.com/get\\_started/charts\\_forms.html](http://helpdesk.rootsweb.com/get_started/charts_forms.html) — Blank census forms, family group sheets, pedigree charts, and more
- <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/freeforms> — Research organizing tools, immigration forms, and more
- <http://www.ancestry.com/trees/charts/ancchart.aspx> — Blank ancestral charts

### Software Programs (Sample)

- <http://www.familytreemaker.com> — Home use, ancestry.com product
- <http://www.legacyfamilytree.com> — Free download starter version
- <http://www.whollygenes.com> — The Master Genealogist, steep learning curve, high functionality
- <http://leisterpro.com> — Reunion, Apple-based program
- <http://www.geni.com> — Collaborative online family tree, cloud-based
- <http://www.findmypast.com> — Cloud-based family tree program
- <http://www.ancestry.com> — Cloud-based family tree program





# Exploring Family History: Counting Heads

BY PATRICIA KRUGER

*Editor's note: This is the third installment in a multi-part series aimed at introducing SCHS members with an interest in family history to genealogical research.*

April 2, 2012. 8:59 a.m.

Millions of people were online, waiting for the release of the 1940 U.S. Census. Curious and hoping to find themselves, their parents, or their grandparents in a glimpse of the past, they were poised to check the database as the clock reached the designated time.

Alas, 9:00 a.m. came, and nothing happened. Overwhelmed by more than twenty-two million hits during the first three hours, the 1940 census database on the National Archives website was frozen, locked up, and inaccessible. Now, more than a year later, that event is history, and the census data is readily available and indexed.

Why all the curiosity? Article One, Section Two, of the Constitution states that "the actual Enumeration [of the population] shall be made ... within every subsequent Term of ten Years." And since the first enumeration in 1790, this population count has occurred every decade. Although the government uses this data to reapportion legislative districts, influence policy, and affect social reforms, family searchers know that census records provide some of the best clues for exploration of family history. Release of new census data is a historic event!

Today, most researchers access census records through an online database. Accessible for free in many public libraries, through online subscriptions, and also in print or microfilm in various places, the census provides a key look at household and family structure through the centuries. Starting with yourself and working backwards, it is often possible to trace an ancestral line to the immigrant (whether from the eighteenth century or the twentieth).

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The earliest censuses were simple schedules of population tallies, but with the 1850 enumeration, individual names and ages were incorporated. Over time, birthplace, birthdate, marital status, citizenship, occupation, parents' birthplaces, and household relationships were also included. These population schedules were frequently supplemented by other schedules designed to address particular elements of interest for economic or social policy. For instance, mortality, agricultural, manufacturing, and slave schedules were completed in various years.

Both population and special schedules provide fantastic clues about ancestral origins, economic status, and family dynamics. *Clues.* Yes, the information from a census schedule should be considered a clue for your family history journey. If you've looked at more than one census for the same members of your family, you've no doubt found conflicting information: women get younger, recollection of the immigration year



This intrepid census taker stops at nothing to interview a South Dakota farmer for the 1940 census. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

becomes a little fuzzy, children's names change, parental birthplaces move, and dates of key personal events fade. So, consider these descriptive elements to be clues as you put your ancestral family in a time and place with surrounding people and activities.

Why is there conflicting information? Consider the census process. The census wasn't completed for genealogical purposes. The training and background of census takers (enumerators) has changed, the census purpose has evolved, and population growth and location have dictated alternate formats and procedures. A review of enumerator instructions is most enlightening and explains many of the conflicts that are found (see *History and Growth of the United States Census* or *Measuring America*, detailed in the information box after the article). But there can be other pitfalls, too.

**Enumerator Issues:** How did census takers get their jobs?

(Applications weren't required until 1880, and screening exams only began in 1900.) How were they trained? Did they clarify information or write what was heard? Did they really go to every house, or did they stay in town and wait for people to come to them? Did they get paid by the household or by the number of individuals counted? How many schedule copies were made and by whom? Are you looking at an original form? Is the handwriting legible? Do the responses reflect the census date? Is the geographic area one of known census fraud? The 1857 Minnesota Territorial Census, for instance, is known to include fictitious individuals and localities.

**Informant Issues:** Who actually supplied the information? (The 1940 census was the first to identify the informant, or the person who provides the enumerator with household information.) Was the informant someone in the household or the neighbor down the street? Did they really know the answers, or were they just the person who opened the door? What was the informant doing while the enumerator asked questions? Did they have another agenda for their age, citizenship, occupation, or birthplace answers? Did they mistrust the government? Were they moving? (Each census was to be recorded as of a particular date, but enumerators had much longer time periods to actually complete collection of the data.) Did the informant speak with a strong accent? Did they understand the questions?

**Indexing Issues:** Online databases have introduced another potential source of confusion. Understand who actually did the indexing. Were they familiar with the geographic surnames? Were they proficient in English? (Some companies use non-native English-speaking indexers who are based offshore.) Was the handwriting difficult to read? (Why else would your ancestor with the surname Smalls be indexed under Ginalls?) Was information mistyped or were characters transposed? A typing or transcription error could send your indexed ancestral family to the netherworld!

**Environmental Issues:** Is the microfilm or digital image legible? Is the page too dark (or too light) to read? Even more critically, does the record of interest even still exist? Was it burned? Lost? Mishandled? There are reports that members of Congress liked to borrow census schedules on occasion, and some were never returned. Nearly the entire 1890 census was destroyed, and only a few thousand entries remain. Census records dating prior to 1820 are missing for the state of Georgia. Sparsely settled areas of some counties were never enumerated in the first place. Check to be sure your census records of interest are extant before you spend lots of time searching.

**Analysis Issues:** Understand the constraints and requirements for each census year. Know who was included or excluded. Early census years can be confusing since there was no preprinted form in use, and column headings are generally missing in the original records. The column titles changed from one year to the next, potentially leading to erroneous household totals (or conclusions). Know which census years asked county and state of birth, and know when the marriage column lists number of years married or age at first marriage. And don't make assumptions about household relationships. After all, the census did not ask for the relationship to head of household until 1880. Don't assume the older man and older woman with two younger boys in an 1850 household was a biological family. And even after 1880, unless the adult female was the head of household, don't assume she was the mother of the listed children!

With all these pitfalls, how can you effectively use these government records?

## Census Strategies

- Identify your ancestor in every census of his or her life. Remember that census records are private for seventy-two years. The 1950 census will not be released until 2022.
- Check the pages before and after your ancestor's entry. You may find other family members nearby.
- Study the enumerator's handwriting for identifying script. You can often discern stylistic quirks by looking at other names on the page.
- Analyze and summarize the census findings before moving on. Identify statements that confirm your prior knowledge, and identify information that needs further exploration.
- Use online search tricks. Try an unusual given name (rather than your ancestor named John) or a specific geographic area (rather than the whole state of California). Use wildcards (symbols like \* and ? that substitute for letters in a name). For example, Brown or Braun could be searched with Br\*n, where an asterisk replaces one or more letters in the search.
- If you can't find your family in one index, try another online census provider. They don't all index the same way. Nor do their programs search the database the same way once you query a name. And if the indexing doesn't work, go through the census line by line for the geographic area of interest. It's tedious, but you may well find your household of interest (albeit with a mangled name).

Holtrup, Anna	W. F. 21	Boarder	1	
Haller, William	W. M. 61	Boarder	1	Peddler & Philosopher
Bremminger, Louis	W. M. 42		1	Saloon keeper

A few of the more unusual occupations discovered in 1880 census records: above, William Haller of Cincinnati, Ohio, is noted as a "Peddler & Philosopher;" below, Oliver Ewing of Fort Scott, Kansas, "steals for a living." Images courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

Ewing, Sarah	W. F. 40		1	Laundress
Ewing, Oliver	W. M. 20	Son	1	Steals for a living. 1/2
Ewing, Swift	W. M. 15	Son	1	



In spite of these challenges, census records provide one of the best sources of information about your ancestral family. They are easily accessible in the twenty-first century, relatively complete, and provide an abundance of leads for further research. As always, start with yourself (or your parents) and work backwards. Look for ancestors as children in their family household. A story will emerge. You'll get a window to the past, and you may just get a good, solid chuckle as well. ♦

*Patricia Kruger is currently president of the Charleston chapter of the South Carolina Genealogical Society and a former South Carolina Historical Society staff member. A retired business executive, she holds an MBA from the Wharton School and has been researching her family and lecturing on genealogy for more than thirty years.*

## For More Information

### Census Records

- Digitized census records with index: Ancestry.com (available through home subscription and through many local library systems), FamilySearch.org (free), HeritageQuest (available through many local library systems)
- Digitized census records without index: Archive.org (free; to search, select Texts and plug '[state] [year] census' into search box)

### Publications

- *Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790–2000* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Includes details about each census, including instructions for enumerators. Great information about the meaning of different columns, options for answer choices, how enumerators clarified responses, and the details of data collection. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/pol02marv.pdf>.
- *200 Years of U.S. Census Taking: Population and Housing Questions, 1790–1990* (U.S. Census Bureau, 1989). Available at <http://www.census.gov/history/pdf/200years.pdf>.
- *The History and Growth of the United States Census*, by Carroll D. Wright and William C. Hunt (Government Printing Office, 1900). Information on schedules, including all instructions. Available at <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/wright-hunt.pdf>.

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# Exploring Family History: Matters of Life and Death

By PATRICIA KRUGER

*Editor's note: This is the fourth installment in a multi-part series aimed at introducing SCHS members with an interest in family history to genealogical research.*

**Three immigrant brothers.** It seems that nearly every family has a legend about three immigrant brothers. And usually, it is just that—a legend. But there really were three immigrant brothers in my family. They were named William, Paul, and George, and they came into South Carolina in the 1700s. Unfortunately for descendant family researchers, they named their sons William, Paul, and George. As a result, they left a host of same-named cousins, juniors, and seniors, all to be sorted out by later generations. It's a complex task, and one conducting family research just has to start at the beginning.

The beginning. That's how we often start work on any ancestral life—chronologically, a timeline, a lifespan. Track the ancestor from birth to death, cradle to grave. That first key event, birth, is the great identifier. With that one piece of verified information, a world of research possibilities (and conclusions) opens up. You can tell sibling birth order, identify previously unknown children, separate juniors from seniors, clarify parent and child relationships, distinguish cousins and other individuals, and identify more potential record sources. So for the three immigrant brothers (and their same-named children), those identifying birth dates are pretty important.

How do you find that birth date? For those born after the early 1900s, when most states began enacting and enforcing birth registration requirements, it is usually fairly straightforward. Although there are access restrictions that vary by state, these birth registrations provide certificates or birth registers that identify birthplace, birth date, maiden name, father's name, birth order, residence, and other elements vital to your family story. For twentieth-century births, you may not need to go in search of the third cousin who *might* have a family Bible that *might* mention the birth date you seek.

And if your ancestor was foreign-born, many countries had systems of civil registration that started even earlier. Depending on the location, areas within the former German Empire, for instance, had civil registration records starting between 1792 and 1876.

But what about births that occurred before that vital registration? There are many places to look. Start by thinking about any record in which an age might have been recorded: death certificate, marriage license, military registration, military service or pension, census, and baptism are some that immediately come to mind. And don't forget the grave marker—some even give age at death in years, months, and days.

Are these reported birth dates accurate? Maybe. Always look for more than one independent source and consider the knowledge of the informant. Be alert for fudged dates. Was there a reason they may have given an erroneous age? Were they trying to get into the military (or out of conscription)? Were they underage but wanting to get married? If you have conflicting information, consider the possible reasons ... all of them.

Check the census. Each census from 1850 to 1940 asked for age, and in 1900, month and year of birth were added. Before 1850, age was indicated by a tally mark under an age bracket. Analyze *all* of the census dates of your ancestor's life and narrow the time period for year of birth.

Know the laws of the time. Local or state tax laws may help you identify the age of individuals based on their first appearance on tax rolls. Guardian choices could vary depending on the age of a child, so this might well be mentioned in court papers. At what age could an individual marry without needing parental consent? Was an individual old enough to take possession of an inheritance? Awareness of the law in time and place may help you estimate birth information.

Look for family documents that might provide clues. A family Bible is an obvious choice, but may be hard to track down. Family letters could hold the key. Don't just look at those from your direct line mentioning the birth of a child or the celebration of great-uncle Harold's ninetieth birthday, but also look at those from cousins, aunts, uncles, or neighbors who were writing to inform family and friends of significant events. Who says those annual holiday letters won't come in handy?

Scour documents that relate to your ancestors. A short reference ("I am] near 70 years of age") in a 1788 Loyalist claim helped narrow the birth year for an immigrant ancestor. It helped distinguish him from other same-named individuals. Be alert for clues, perhaps in unusual places.

Identify any religious affiliation. Find the church records and look for baptismal or christening documentation, confirmation certificates, or entries in a marriage register. Some churches, depending on denomination and nationality, have fantastic records for reconstructing family groups. Quakers and German Lutherans stand out from personal experience. Other group records, however, are not as detailed. But it never hurts to look and discover every clue you can.

Work on the beginning of your ancestor's life timeline and remember to analyze the details you compile. People were born before their mother's death and before their own marriage. If the dates don't fit, keep searching.

At the other end of the timeline journey is death. Cradle to grave. Death dates and places bring a sense of closure to an ancestor's journey, but they often elude research efforts. Unlike birth



records, it can be much harder to estimate death dates. Did the person survive infancy? Did they “Go West” as a young adult but not survive the journey? Did a parent move in with an adult child and die far from their lifelong home? Or did they just get missed by the census taker? Did a widowed woman remarry?

As with birth registration, the development of death certificates or locale-specific death registers makes the search easier. The time periods for death registers vary significantly by location. The city of Charleston, for example, has death registers starting in 1821. Official South Carolina death registration didn’t take effect until 1915, however. Again, state and local governments have various restrictions on the availability of death information in terms of timing and family connection. This restriction is often based on misinformation or political agenda, so be alert for pending restriction efforts underway in your geographic area of interest. You may not want to wait until you “get around to it.” If what you need is accessible now, get it. The Social Security Death Index, or SSDI, falls into this category as well. Efforts are underway to restrict public access. If you need a late twentieth-century date or information from a Social Security application, this is a good time to get it.

There are other sources of death information. The Internet has been a big asset in this arena. Sites like findagrave.com and billiongraves.com allow name searches to identify grave marker images and information worldwide. Online newspapers can reveal obituaries providing a wealth of family clues. A reprinted letter, for instance, gave poignant details of an ancestor’s death at the First Battle of Manassas. It was published several months after the battle in the *Macon Telegraph*, over 150 miles from the ancestor’s hometown. Name and keyword searches in online databases may provide unexpected results. Expand your geographic search.

Content in obituaries changed over the decades. Obituary or death mentions in the 1700s or early 1800s may provide a glorious picture of your ancestor’s virtues, but they are unlikely to mention surviving parents, a spouse, or child.

Check for church death or burial registers. Archives for specific religious denominations or local historical societies may have the registers. The SCHS has many records for denominations and churches throughout the state. Some start in the early 1700s. Check SCHS holdings and look in online catalogs like NUCMC, WorldCat, and Internet Archive to locate other church register collections.

Look for a range of legal records. A probate court (this name can vary by geographic area) will have records of wills, estate inventories, guardianships, and letters of administration. Probate record availability will predate death registration requirements. Many wills and inventories are included in colonial-era records.

Other courts may have records of litigation. Recorded transfer of land may give a date of death for an owner or reference an individual’s estate, executor, or administrator as the seller or grantor. Tax records may show a widow as the newly responsible party. You may find early newspaper ads for estate settlement or creditors. Consider the possibilities.

Review relevant military records. Service member or widow’s pensions may lead to death information. Proof of death might have been required. Abstracted or indexed pension records are unlikely to provide the detail you want, so track original documents through the duration of the pension. Look for notations or

stamps on final vouchers indicating the recipient’s death. A final widow’s pension warrant dated January 23, 1905, led to the March 1905 death certificate for the widow of the Manassas soldier mentioned above.

Don’t discount the value of pensions that were authorized *after* your ancestor’s death or disappearance. A War of 1812 pension, authorized by Congress in 1878 and granted to a previously unknown second wife, gave the soldier’s death date as December 1870. It contained a wealth of personal and family information.

And finally, in the immortal and often misquoted words of Mark Twain, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” Just like birth years altered to more favorably accommodate other life events, death dates may also be incorrect. There is a recently surveyed grave marker in the Lewis Christian Union Cemetery in Charleston that identifies a death date of 1891, ten years before the 1901 newspaper account says it happened. Probate and the death register

agree with the 1901 newspaper. The stone carver did not. As with other genealogical evidence, don’t rely on only one source. The stone carver might have misunderstood, the informant may have provided incorrect information, or the marker might have been placed many years after the fact. There are a host of reasons why the marker may be incorrect. Always look for other evidence to support your conclusions. Premature death dates, or even obituaries, are not common, but they do happen.

Birth and death: two critical pieces of evidence that help expand your family story. They bracket the events of your ancestor’s life. You may have to hunt and search and get creative to identify them, but the circumstances and details broaden your ancestor’s story and help you understand the journey of your life. ♦

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**Some grave markers, like this one documented near the Old Congaree Road in Berkeley County, provide age at death in years, months, and days. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**