

Finding Information About Individuals Online

My goal this issue is not to present ways of finding out your neighbors' credit score; I want to describe ways of locating information about historical individuals. Depending on the importance of the individual being researched, there are lots of paths to take. If your subjects are not well-known, then the best way to go is probably to pretend that you're related to them (which might be the case!) and approach it as a piece of genealogy. Genealogy must be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the internet: it has become so easy to find and share obscure information that is relevant to just a few people around the world. There are many different genealogy web sites that can help you find information about ancestors, whether they are related to you or not. Examples include: www.genealogy.com, www.familysearch.org, www.ancestry.com, and www.worldvitalrecords.com.

Several sites post immigrant passenger lists, though it's hard to identify which have the most complete data and which duplicate others. The Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild (www.immigrant-ships.net) has many ship lists available online; their databases are also available through www.worldvitalrecords.com. The Ships List (<http://www.theshipslist.com>) also offers free passenger lists.

Most of the major genealogy sites are subscription-based, though fees are very reasonable. Every day, more and more data is added to these sites. It's a fantastic way of making otherwise-inaccessible information, such as census data, widely available. Free sites of note include the Mormon Church's www.familysearch.org, plus the Social Security Death Index, which is available at multiple locations, including <http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>. This index provides useful information about Americans who have passed away since the creation of the Social Security system.

Several of the paid services are also available through public libraries. The most notable are **HeritageQuest Online** and **Ancestry Library Edition**. (Disclaimer—both are sold to libraries by my employer, ProQuest.) These databases are sometimes accessible to library card holders from home or may only be accessible inside the

library. Either way, they're excellent places to start a search and may preclude the need to open individual subscriptions to the other sites mentioned above.

For people who might be somewhat better known—say, might have appeared in a *Who's Who*-type publication (and there are volumes for dozens of subjects and regions; not just *Who's Who in America*)—a resource called **Biography Master Index**, available at many libraries, tells you who is listed in over 4,500 biographical dictionaries. It includes about 4 million people. Research libraries may have **K. G. Saur's World Biographical Index Online**, which is similar to, but about twice the size of, **Biography Master Index** and has a broader geographical focus.

Finally, for individuals who may have had their papers collected and stored in a library or museum, the **National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections** (also called "NUCMC," pronounced "nuk-muk") at <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc> provides limited access to information about these collections. It can be difficult to search and even more difficult to determine where a given set of papers is actually located, but if you're looking for primary documents surrounding a specific individual or family, it's a useful place to look. Once you find an interesting collection, try using **WorldCat** (<http://www.worldcat.org>) to learn more: search in WorldCat for the NUCMC "control number" at the bottom of the NUCMC record (but ignore the "ocm" before the number).


The impact of the internet on genealogical research cannot be underestimated and it will continue to expand. Using genealogical research tools can be a great way for finding information about specific individuals in American history, whether they are related to you or not.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at shipindex@yahoo.com. See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓

—Peter McCracken



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