Beginning Your Family History Research

Virginia Beach Genealogical Society · Oct 10, 2026 · Diana Bryan Quinn

Start carefully, work backward, and build a tree you can trust.

Five steps to get started

1. **Start with yourself.** Record your own names, dates and places first.
    - Names: full name, maiden name, nicknames, name changes, spelling variations.
    - Dates: birth, baptism, marriage, divorce, death, burial.
    - Places: town or city, county, state and country, not just "Virginia."
2. **Work backward, one generation at a time.** Parents, then grandparents, then great-grandparents. Use a pedigree chart, family group sheets, or software such as Family Tree Maker, RootsMagic or Legacy.
3. **Talk to family.** Record or take notes. Ask who has photos, a family Bible, a tree or family papers.
4. **Search the house before searching online.** Look for certificates, naturalization and military papers, Bibles, letters, funeral cards, yearbooks, and the backs of photos. Photograph or scan items and note who owned them.
5. **Keep learning.** Read collection descriptions, learn what records exist for each place, and learn from podcasts, webinars and society meetings.

Cite as you go. Enter a source every time you enter a fact: who, what, when, where, and the URL if it was online. You won't remember later.

Verify before you add. Hints, other people's trees and AI-generated summaries are clues, not proof. Check the original record first.

Searching online

- Search broadly first, then narrow with dates and places. Common names need more limits than rare ones.
- Try spelling variations, nicknames and initials.
- Look at the record image, not just the index or transcription. Images hold extra clues, and indexes have errors.
- Read the collection description. It tells you what the records cover and what is missing (for example, in which states WWII draft cards were destroyed).

Websites mentioned today

Site	What it's good for
FamilySearch	Free records, full-text search, and a shared tree
FamilySearch Research Wiki	What records exist for each place, and where to find them
Ancestry	Records, hints and online trees (subscription - often free at libraries)
WikiTree	Free collaborative tree
GenForum archive at Genealogy.com	Old surname message boards, still searchable
Library of Virginia	Virginia records and finding aids
Portal to Texas History	Texas newspapers, photos and documents

Site	What it's good for
State Archives of North Carolina	North Carolina records
National Library of Ireland	Irish Catholic parish registers and more
USGenWeb Project	Volunteer county pages and transcriptions
Find a Grave	Cemetery and burial information
Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation	Passenger lists for immigrant arrivals
Internet Archive	Local histories, published genealogies, city directories
Google Books	Searchable out-of-print books
Freedmen's Bureau records (NMAAHC)	Essential post-Civil War records for African American research
Family History for Beginners (FamilySearch Wiki)	Step-by-step guide to starting your family history
New to Genealogy: Beginner's First Steps (FamilySearch Wiki)	Simple first steps and free lessons for new researchers
Getting Started (National Genealogical Society)	Beginner guidance and resources from the NGS

Family tree software: Family Tree Maker · RootsMagic · Legacy Family Tree

More tips for beginners

- **Pick one question at a time.** "Who were Grandma's parents?" is easier to answer than "everything about the Smiths."
- **Keep a research log.** Note what you searched, where, and what you found, including searches that found nothing.
- **Record women by their maiden names** so each person is easy to find in your tree.
- **Write dates as 7 Oct 1898.** It avoids confusion between month and day.
- **Look at the whole household and neighbors in census records.** Relatives often lived nearby.
- **Interview older relatives soon.** Their memories are sources too.
- **Back up your work** in more than one place: software, an online tree and an external drive or cloud folder.
- **Consider DNA testing** later to confirm or extend what the paper trail shows.

Learn with the Virginia Beach Genealogical Society

- **Monthly meetings:** hybrid and free to all, on Zoom or in person at the library, with speakers on genealogy topics
- **Special interest groups (members only):** How-to, DNA, Writers, and Lunch and Learn. **Coming up:** How-to group, Oct 13, 7:00 PM on Zoom: "Getting Started with Family Tree Maker: Don't Be Afraid to Click!" with Mark Olsen.
- **Book club** four times a year
- **Recordings of past meetings** are available to members
- **Local history outings**

Website: www.vbgsva.net

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