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Online Genealogical Research Resources

Howard C. Bybee

More than three million Internet sites offer their services to genealogists and family historians for research. This truly exhausting array of Internet sites makes online genealogical research more convenient and more confusing for beginners and professionals. Keeping up with innovations can easily distract an Internet researcher. Individuals, family organizations, corporations, nonprofit organizations, libraries, and governments continually create more online content, much of it useful for family history and genealogical research. What we used to call genealogy has morphed into family history, and the web serves as both the scholarly publisher and the vanity press for primary and secondary sources used by genealogists and family historians of every degree. Researchers are spending more on subscriptions and document downloads and less on travel and copy orders, and governments have discovered a revenue source for supporting their archives and record repositories by charging for downloaded digital copies of vital records and by licensing companies to scan and publish documents on the Internet. Competition is keen for digital rights, creating a competitive atmosphere between Internet publishers, both fee and free. Keeping up with proliferating websites is a challenge to the professional and amateur researcher, who must discover, sift through, and subscribe to a growing array of resources in order to write family history.

Genealogists collaborate naturally because of the feeling that everyone belongs to “one great family,” which will be joined, eventually, into a single family tree. The newest sites have adopted wiki-like, user-contributed content operating models such as those found at Geni.com, Footnote.com, Ancestry.com’s World Tree, OneGreatFamily.com, and FamilySearch.org. These sites and others recruit volunteers to index, comment on, upload,

collaborate, and correct data. The policy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to digitize and index microfilmed records and offer them for free contrasts with commercial models, either pay-per-view or subscription. There are sites offering a blend of both models: limited free access, broader access by subscription, and digital document download for an additional fee. Some tension exists when the sites see one another as competitors, the fee sites looking askance at the free sites and vice versa. Each fears the other will corner exclusive digital publication rights to documents. The competitive business model often leads to dispute and contention, even in the benevolent pursuit of deceased ancestors.

This review describes a sample of commercial, free, governmental, societal, individual, and library sites—a microcosm of representative research sites for genealogy and family history. It is not by chance that these sites have proliferated. From the founding of the New England Historical and Genealogical Society in the fall of 1844 to the soon-to-be-released new Family Search, the work has grown steadily, because it must, under divine decree. The best is yet to come. There is no greater work. Family history *is* history.

Generations Network

The Generations Network, formerly MyFamily.com, Inc., best known for its flagship site Ancestry.com at <http://www.Ancestry.com>, offers a growing set of Internet sites focused on family history links. The company declares, “The Generations Network of products and services provides the tools that enable people to discover who they are and where they come from.”¹ The Generations Network currently offers twelve websites, each serving a segment of the genealogical research process. From its launch in 1997, Ancestry.com has grown in ten years from a modest Internet presence to its twenty-first-century stature as the most visited online genealogical site in the United States. The company claims to be the largest genealogical research site in the world. Ancestry.com provides over five billion names in approximately twenty-three-thousand-plus databases, serving mostly the U.S. genealogical community. Their international offerings have recently added sites for Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Italy, France, and Sweden, with more to follow. With these sites in foreign languages, the user base now extends around the globe. MyFamily/Generations Network bought <http://www.Genealogy.com>, a

1. The Generations Network “Corporate Overview” <http://www.tgn.com/default.aspx?html=overview>.

large competitor, in April 2003, and Genealogy.com remains an important paid subscription site for genealogical research. Both sites sell products popular with genealogists, mostly CD databases, software, books, and maps. The site <http://www.RootsWeb.com>, a free site in the Generations Network family, connects professionals and novices by offering instruction, message boards, web links, family trees, mailing lists, and a search engine for finding a name and related resources on the site. RootsWeb.com hosts numerous genealogical websites and projects. MyFamily.com, now a separate site among the rest and not the parent company, describes itself in this way: “By offering a variety of easy-to-maintain family websites, MyFamily.com gives families all over the world a unique venue for keeping in touch and strengthening relationships.”² MyFamily.com helps individuals to create private websites “in just 3 minutes” for communicating with family and friends by sharing photos, posting news, creating a family tree, sending email, or chatting.

Because Ancestry.com has metastasized into country-specific fractions for the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Australia, France, Italy, and Sweden, with other country-specific sites under development, the company now offers a premium subscription covering all sites, and lower rates for subscriptions to its former, mostly U.S., resources. The subscriber base exceeds eight hundred thousand people, according to company press releases. Annual subscriptions are considered costly by some in comparison to other sites, but considering the ever-growing content, plus the savings in travel expense, not to mention reduced copy costs and ease of accessibility, subscriber numbers seem to say that the value in the subscription price is equal to the cost. While the company’s rush to post data sometimes results in errors, such as the spelling errors in the online census indexes, built-in customer feedback mechanisms correct the databases over time. For example, when my family name was misspelled “Byler” in the 1930 census, I had to use a first name search, limited by state and county, and then sift through the hits. I sent corrections through the Comments and Corrections link provided by Ancestry.com, which were added to the search index so that searchers can now find the record when searching with the correct spelling. The correction system is not perfect: the spelling in the index has not been corrected, but at least a note attached to the search result leads a searcher to the correct image.

As with all online research, searching Ancestry.com requires practice. A broad search of all resources launches from the initial page. By clicking on “All databases,” searchers can drill down to individual databases using

2. <http://www.tgn.com/default.aspx?html=overview>.

an alphabetical file structure, or browse databases grouped by record type. There is also a database keyword search engine for quick results in finding specific databases. Ancestry.com offers instruction, research guidance, printable forms, links to numerous other sites, and enough depth to occupy unending hours of genealogical research. It is safe to say that without the richness of Ancestry.com databases and its dedication to family history research, the genealogical universe would be impoverished.

Proquest—HeritageQuestOnline.com

The site <http://HeritageQuestOnline.com> is part of ProQuest Information and Learning, a company that provides “serious researchers with high quality information solutions, illuminated through authoritative discovery aids, and unlocked through powerful enabling technologies.”³ They have a varied name history, beginning as University Microfilms Inc. (UMI), acquired by Bell and Howell Information and Learning, then a name change to ProQuest Information and Learning, and now partnering with CSA (“a worldwide information company . . . headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland”⁴) to provide microform research collections and online databases to libraries. HeritageQuestOnline offers five main databases:

(1) U.S. federal census images from 1790 to 1930 are accessed through partial indexes. The bitmap census images are sometimes more readable than grayscale images found at Ancestry.com, and vice versa, so researchers often consult both for the best results when searching the census. Ancestry’s indexes are more complete, but spelling errors are common in those indexes, so searching HeritageQuestOnline may succeed where Ancestry produces no results. HeritageQuestOnline indexes are not complete for every year and list head of household, not every name.

(2) Twenty thousand digitized, full-text, searchable local and family history books, in three categories (people, places, and publications), comprise the second database at HeritageQuestOnline. Books may be downloaded in small portions. The books database draws from ProQuest’s genealogy and local history microfiche collection. This collection was originally on microfiche and is in the process of being transferred to the website. BYU has a copy of the microfiche and makes it available to the public.⁵

3. <http://www.proquest.co.uk/promos/product/proquestupdate.pdf>.

4. <http://www.csa.com/aboutcsa/company.php>.

5. The Lee Library copy is located in the HBLL Religion and Family History Department. Though not all the titles from the fiche collection are online,

(3) PERSI, Periodical Source Index, compiled by Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana, covers more than 1.9 million articles in four categories: people, places, how to's, and periodicals. PERSI cites articles from thousands of periodicals held at the Allen County Public Library, which claims to be the second largest genealogical library after the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Searches are performed using personal names, geographical terms, search terms, or periodical title. Search results provide an article title and where to find it, but not the actual article. Articles can be found in local libraries, via interlibrary loan, or directly from Allen County Public Library for a fee.

(4) The Revolutionary War database presents selected records from pension and bounty land warrant application files. This description is taken from their website:

On the rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced selected genealogical records from an estimated 80,000 pension and bounty-land-warrant application files based on the participation of American military, naval, and marine officers and enlisted men in the Revolutionary War. Most of the records are dated between 1800 and 1900. The files are part of Record Group 15, Records of the Veteran Administration.⁶

The Revolutionary War database consists of digital images of original documents proving marriage, financial condition, service in the military and many other important conditions and events in the person's life. They form a rich collection of historical documents for any family historian fortunate to find relatives in the database. Because they are partial files, it is advisable to request copies of the full files from the National Archives.

(5) Freedman's Bank database is a mainstay of African American genealogical research. Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-74, provided banking through twenty-nine branches for freed slaves following the Civil War. Depositors' personal information and signatures from fifty-five volumes are contained on twenty-seven microfilm rolls which have been digitized and made searchable on HeritageQuestOnline.

HeritageQuestOnline keyword searches usually offer additional fields for focusing the search, and the user can browse periodical titles in PERSI, census images, book titles, and Freedman's Bank locations. The site is

researchers should check the HeritageQuestOnline website when a reference from the HBLL online catalog refers to a CS 43 call number, to see if HeritageQuestOnline has digitized the title.

6. "Read more about Rev War," at <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqweb/library/do/revwar>.

spare and well presented, making it easy on the eyes. It offers help screens, “about” links, and “What’s new” links for the user on some pages.

HeritageQuestOnline is available through libraries which usually offer access at home to patrons with a library card. In Utah everyone with the Internet can access it from home through Pioneer, Utah’s Online Library, using their local library card, via www.pioneer.utah.gov. BYU students, employees, and retirees have access at home using BYU identification codes. HeritageQuestOnline is an important, expanding, and widely available resource for local history and genealogical research.

USGenWeb and WorldGenWeb

The site <http://www.USGenWeb.com> links thousands of free county-level websites maintained by volunteers who create and maintain online genealogical research resources—query boards, lists of local record sources, state and county histories, digitized books, transcribed records, research tips, maps, and links to Internet resources. USGenWeb sponsors the nationally recognized Tombstone Project, where volunteers gather, preserve, and post tombstone transcriptions. From the home page www.usgenweb.org, researchers select a state, then a county link. Resources vary in scope and depth, but something useful usually appears. RootsWeb, part of The Generations Network, hosts USGenWeb and its derivative site, WorldGenWeb.

USGenWeb sites are particularly useful for historical geographical information when performing locality surveys for an ancestor. Knowing the geography helps locate vital records to document birth, marriage, and death, and for filling in historical background when writing family histories. In addition, local libraries and historical societies found on USGenWeb provide information often found nowhere else. On-site volunteers may research for free. Researchers cannot ignore the USGenWeb sites when beginning research and will return regularly to find additions to these growing databases. A query to a volunteer on USGenWeb brought me a digital photo of a relative’s tombstone via email, a real savings in gas and time.

FamilySearch.Org

Potentially the most powerful source on the Internet, FamilySearch.org at <http://www.familysearch.org>, operated by the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, currently offers online access to Ancestral File (AF), International Genealogical Index (IGI), Pedigree Resource File (PRF), and

several other proprietary databases. The Church promotes family history as a religious tenet, in order to provide temple ordinances to deceased relatives, and so the databases are offered free to all. Ancestral File was an early attempt to create a database of unique records for each person and family, but it was closed to further growth when electronic merging created errors in the database. Its successor, Pedigree Resource File, an ever-growing database of user submissions, accumulates numerous family trees submitted over time, without merging. The result is a collection of duplicate genealogies of great worth, but which are difficult to maneuver. The online version is open to anyone and is used by genealogists to collect and share useful data. Because these are user-submitted files, the information must be verified by anyone who collects it from PRF. The International Genealogical Index provides information about temple work to members who have registered with FamilySearch.org using their membership number and confirmation date. Others are allowed to see only the genealogical information. This database grows from Church temple records as the work is cleared and performed. The IGI has been populated with duplicate records of varying accuracy, resulting in wasted time and duplicated effort by thousands of researchers and temple workers, and the records must be verified to determine accuracy, but they provide a good beginning point, many clues, and collaborative contacts.

In order to eliminate duplication, facilitate research, and increase interest in family history, FamilySearch.org has begun releasing new online databases that utilize all the previous databases plus church membership records. The release has begun with small temple districts and will progress slowly until all districts are part of what has been termed “new” FamilySearch.org. This effort promises to deliver powerful online software for building family trees, creating family histories, increasing collaboration, streamlining temple work, eliminating duplication, and providing access to vast amounts of genealogical information for members and nonmembers alike. In concert with FamilySearch databases, microform collections are being digitized and indexed for quick delivery and retrieval via the Internet. Online instruction will accompany these offerings. The potential is almost overwhelming, providing free access to more than 2.5 million rolls of microfilm, hundreds of thousands of published family histories, and documents from the Church History Library. Collaboration with all Church institutions and Family History Centers worldwide will create a far-reaching network for genealogical research. We all look forward to the realization of this vision.

United Kingdom Sites: Genuki and ORIGINSNetwork

For a full description of Genuki (<http://www.genuki.org.uk/big>), read the ten-year anniversary article by one of the founders.⁷ The following description is extracted and paraphrased from this article: Offering fifty-five thousand pages in 2005, Genuki is the oldest and largest site devoted to British Isles genealogy. It aims to be a virtual reference library—both a genealogical handbook and directory—of other sites about British Isles genealogy. The searcher will find links to local societies, record repositories, maps, gazetteers, libraries, and more, all listed by individual countries in the British Isles—England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Channel Islands, and Isle of Man. Users are guided through the tree by subject lists, leading to link after link. Because it is staffed by volunteers, information is free. It is an important noncommercial site for British Isles research. Genuki provides information relating to primary sources, not compiled genealogies or family histories. The content is distributed to many different servers, maintained by many volunteers who make up Genuki, and provides links to thousands of sites about British or Irish ancestry.

The Origins Network at <http://originsnetwork.com> (formerly Origins.net), founded in 1997, pioneered the provision of genealogical database services on the web and offers access to ancestral information via British Origins, Irish Origins, and Scots Origins, each being a separate site where the researcher can select from a list of record types to focus a search. The key to successful commercial sites such as Origins Network is exclusive digital rights negotiated with data owners, libraries, archives, churches, and any organization that has a large quantity of historical documents. Researchers will find digitized books, census and vital records for birth, marriage, death, wills, probate, maps, and reference works.

Norway Archives

The Digital Archives at <http://www.digitalarkivet.no> is a free public service from the National Archives of Norway consisting of transcribed source material. The site is in both Norwegian and English, and reading the “About the Digital Archives” link from the home page is helpful.⁸ Norway feels that the national archives should be widely available and has been online since 1998. The site invites other institutions, organizations,

7. <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/genuki/org/ancestors31.pdf>.

8. <http://digitalarkivet.uib.no/cgi-win/WebFront.exe?slag=vis&tekst=introduk-eng.htm&spraak=e>.

and private persons to contribute digitized material on a site called “The Digital Inn.”

As noted earlier in this review, online collaboration has become a strong force for building site content, commercial or nonprofit. Searching country sites requires basic language skills for the target area. The interface may be in English, but the records, transcribed or imaged, most likely will contain non-English terms. Searching can be challenging as is the case with the Norway Archives. Begin a search in a census using first names, then narrow the search by using the family name, the date of birth, or place; each subsequent search progressively narrows the results. It is an interesting approach and takes practice. This site is unadorned and well organized, partly because it is free and annoying advertising is absent. No distractions accompany the search result or navigation within the site.

France Genealogy

The portal at <http://www.france-genealogie.fr>, launched in May 2003, is a collaboration directed by the French Archives (*Archives de France*) and the French Genealogical Federation (*Fédération Française de Généalogie*), and there is no English version. The *Guide des ressources* links to ten categories: federated associations, nonfederated associations, publishers/vendors, libraries, archives services, bookstores, maps, notices and guides, individual sites, and online archives. Through the links under these headings, genealogists are pointed to various French genealogical resources. It is a useful site if you know French, especially for locating contact information for archives if planning a research trip to France. Be aware before planning a trip to France that about 80 percent of the French archival records have been filmed by the Family History Library and many French professional genealogists spend several weeks a year researching in Salt Lake City. The site links to NOMINA, a federated search site that searches four nongovernmental archives and institutions covering over thirteen million individuals. Another search tab links to national, regional and local databases. There are tabs for a “tool box” and for news releases. Here researchers may link to all the French archives and to the *Fédération Française de Généalogie* and other important French research sites.

The Encyclopedia of Genealogy

The Encyclopedia of Genealogy at <http://EoGen.com>, a wiki that explains genealogical tools and techniques, is not a source for ancestral research. It defines terms, methods, record types, and research methods for all countries and is becoming a comprehensive reference work

for genealogists at all levels. Look to the Encyclopedia of Genealogy to provide explanations about how to look up your family tree and explanations of terms found in genealogy research, including obsolete medical and legal terms. It describes locations where records may be found, and how to research Italian, German, Polish, French-Canadian, Jewish, Black, Indian, and other ancestors. The Encyclopedia of Genealogy is a reliable, free, expanding, genealogy reference manual, and it provides many links to relevant Internet research sites.

Stevemorse.org

One example of a popular and useful site created by an individual is <http://stevemorse.org>. Stephen P. Morse, PhD, a computer professional and amateur genealogist, researched his own Russian Jewish origins and found that many Internet sites contained useful data but were difficult to use. His website “started out as an aid for finding passengers in the Ellis Island database. Shortly afterwards it was expanded to help with searching in the 1930 census. Over the years it has continued to evolve and today includes over 100 web-based tools divided into twelve separate categories ranging from genealogical searches to astronomical calculations to last-minute bidding on e-bay.”⁹ The search forms are named by the database searched and are listed and linked on the website home page, followed by a variety of tools and instruction useful to genealogical researchers. Stevemorse.org provides powerful search forms, databases, and instruction that facilitate online genealogy research, and it has become a standard in the online community.

Cyndislist.com

The best-known genealogy portal on the web, <http://cyndislist.com>, offers more than 264,800 links to family history. The site describes itself as

- A categorized & cross-referenced index to genealogical resources on the Internet.
- A list of links that point you to genealogical research sites online.
- A free jumping-off point for you to use in your online research.

9. <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nvcnngs/springseminar.html>. See also <http://stevemorse.org/onestep/onestep.htm>. For a full article about Steve Morse and his genealogical search forms, connect to <http://www.stevemorse.org/mensch.html>. More information is on the website under Miscellaneous at the bottom of the main page. I thank Stephen Morse for his email correspondence with me.

- A “card catalog” to the genealogical collection in the immense library that is the Internet.
- Your genealogical research portal onto the Internet.¹⁰

Cyndislist.com offers a main index, topical index, alphabetical index, and a “no frills index.” The home displays the main index, searchable with Google. The index appears as an alphabetical list of main categories, accessed by clicking an alphabetical list. This site leads to virtually all the important genealogical sites on the Internet, about 10 percent of all relevant sites, if we believe the statistics. Patience is required at the outset, and it is easy to become distracted by the richness of the information. Search it methodically whenever in need of guidance.

Up and Coming on the Internet

WorldVitalRecords.com. This site was founded in 2006 by Paul Allen and “several key members of the original Ancestry.com team.” Allen’s goal in founding WorldVitalRecords was to make family history research more affordable. WorldVitalRecords has partnered with Everton Publishers (which includes the Genealogical Helper and Everton’s Pedigree Files and Family Group Sheets), FamilySearch, Quintin Publications, and the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation, among others, in order “to make wonderful genealogical content available at an affordable price.”¹¹

WorldVitalRecords offers three reasonably priced memberships, new databases daily, collaborative research, and more. They offer newspapers, vital records, court records, land records, probate records, Idaho 1880 state census, LDS records, and immigration records. The search engine is adequate and fast, and images are good quality. Certainly ambitious and not without promise, WorldVitalRecords is quickly meeting its goals.

Geni.com. The site <http://www.Geni.com> was “founded by former executives and early employees of PayPal, Yahoo! Groups, Ebay, and Tribe.” In Geni, you create a family tree and invite all your relatives to join you. “Your tree will continue to grow as relatives invite other relatives. . . . Each family member has a profile which can be viewed by clicking their name in the tree. This helps family members learn more about each other and stay in touch. Family members can also share photos and work together to build profiles for common ancestors.”¹² While I have no extensive experience with the site, I am intrigued by the concept, which, my

10. <http://www.cyndislist.com/faq/whatis.htm>.

11. <http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/about.aspx>.

12. http://www.geni.com/company/about_us.

young acquaintances have informed me, resembles facebook.com. Perhaps such ventures will take hold and lead to useful genealogical connections.

Footnote.com. Footnote.com launched in early 2007. It was formerly iArchives, which specialized in document digitizing. It negotiated a contract with NARA, U.S. National Archives, for digitizing historical documents of interest to many researchers. Under the new name Footnote, the company offers collaborative services, document images, a powerful search engine, and the ability to annotate their records and upload personal records. This site offers small town newspapers, numerous historical documents, rare photos, UFO investigations, and native American documents, all from the National Archives. In addition, users can upload images of their own original sources and share them publicly. Users can also create a “story page” using their original sources. Footnote is growing rapidly through paid subscriptions and free collaboration services. It is a very interesting site to navigate and worth revisiting often.

Summary

This review looks at a few of the thousands of genealogical sites on the Internet. Using the major search engines to find your family name, locate research tools, or find advice about writing a family history or just about anything genealogical is very useful and should not be ignored. Many search results lead to sites discussed in this article, such as Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org, but small personal or association sites and useful tools also show up in search engine results lists. While it may be impossible to keep up with proliferating websites, it is an exhilarating challenge to have so many resources at our fingertips.

Howard C. Bybee (howard_bybee@byu.edu) is Family History Librarian, Religion and Family History Department, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. He earned a Master of Library and Information Science from BYU, a Master of Arts in French literature from Duke University, and a Master of Arts in anthropology from BYU.