



# Effective Use of Ancestry.com

by Scott E. Lee

Scott@ScottLee.com

GenealogyTechTalks.com



Ancestry.com is one of the largest online repositories of historical records with tools to search them. It also allows you to create and store your family tree, and it offers DNA tests with ThruLines<sup>®</sup> software to associate your DNA matches with your tree.

If you want a local copy of your tree, both RootsMagic and Family Tree Maker have software to sync your data with Ancestry.com.

Here are some tips on how to most effectively use Ancestry.com's website to build your family tree. They have software that uses other people's trees to suggest how to extend your own tree. Possible matches in census records, death certificates, military records, and many others are provided as "hints" based on those found in other people's trees.

This is a huge time saver because, in my experience, most of the hints are correct. However, you must keep in mind that a few of these hints will be wrong. Remember that these hints are based on examining other people's trees, and some people are more careful than others.

Many of the hints are questionable, such as user-created narratives, uploads without original citation, compiled genealogies, and other people's trees. The biggest mistake you can make is clicking on a hint labeled something like "John Smith, in Smith Family Tree" and saving any of that information into your tree. At least some of this is likely to be wrong. Instead, I recommend not even looking at that type of hint until the end of your search. The reason is that it may bias you with incorrect information, potentially clouding your judgment when reviewing quality source records.

*A note to those new to genealogy:* A **source record** is a document or artifact, such as a census record, death certificate, or tombstone, used as evidence for dates, places, and other conclusions about the people in your tree and how they relate to each other. A good genealogist will document the source of every piece of information in the tree by listing the source records from which it came. That is every date, place, relationship, and all other information in your tree. Without these documented sources in your tree, other genealogists may disregard your tree as the work of an inexperienced novice. A **primary source record** is a document or artifact created at or very near the time of an event by someone who had firsthand knowledge of it. Examples are birth certificates, marriage licenses, and death certificates. A **secondary source** is created after the fact or by

someone not directly involved, yet often still reasonably trustworthy. Examples include obituaries, census records, tombstones, indexes, and abstracts.

I recommend starting with all of the hints for primary source records. Second, look at the high-quality secondary record hints. Third, click the Search button in the upper-right corner to perform your own search across the many source records. Finally, after exhausting all other avenues, compare what you found with the less reliable sources and other people's trees.

Ancestry now owns **Find a Grave**<sup>®</sup>, and its records are provided as hints. This is a very useful resource and highly recommended, but it frequently contains more information than is engraved on the tombstone. This can be valuable, but it is hearsay with no reference to its source. For example, it may list the date of death when the stone only lists the year. It may list the place of death (something rarely on the stone). Or it may list a woman's maiden name that is not on the stone. I recommend only entering what is on the stone under this source. Use that other information to guide your search for additional sources. If there is no photo of the stone, be more skeptical because it is all hearsay. This same advice applies to any source where an image of the original is not provided.

When using the Search button for a manual search, it will automatically fill the search form with dates, places, and relations. Sometimes this yields a huge number of possible matching records, sometimes very few. Consider these strategies:

- Use the “Broad → Exact” sliders to increase or decrease the number of results.
- Narrow the search with filters like Census, Birth/Marriage/Death, or Military records.
- Click the pencil icon for more control by directly editing the search form.
- Broaden the date search by using  $\pm 2$  years or  $\pm 10$  years.
- Broaden the search for places by using “Adjacent counties” or “Adjacent states”.
- Try name variations (Bill vs. William).
- Change names to initials.
- Use wildcards “\*” and “?” for illegible letters in a name.
  - Use “\*” to match zero or more letters (“McA\*y”).
  - Use “?” to match one letter (“Wil?er”).
- Remove names, dates, and places you suspect may be incorrect.
- Add names, dates, and places you suspect, but haven't proven.

Why is it important to use the Search button to perform a manual search? The hints are a great first step because someone else in another tree thought the source record matched the person. However, there are billions of records available, and likely several matches that no one has found.

Source records exist on a **spectrum of reliability**, and the distinction between primary and secondary is fuzzy. Evaluate the reliability of a source based on these factors:

- **Is it Contemporaneous** – made close to the time of the event
- **Is the informant reliable** – who provided the data, and how likely are they to know the facts and be truthful
- **Is it a derivative** – copied or summarized from another record
- **Is there an image** – without an image of the original, it is a derivative
- **Is it legible** – poor photography or sloppy handwriting
- **Is there bias** – family histories may be flattering or simplified

When using a hint from another person's tree, if you see differences between your tree and theirs, never click the Save button. That will likely copy mistakes from their tree into your tree. Instead, look at the source records in the other tree. If you have done your job right, you will frequently have more source records than they do. Sometimes, the other tree may have few or no sources. That is a red flag that the other researcher is not an experienced genealogist, and you should have more faith in your own conclusions than theirs. If they do have sources in their tree, compare them with yours to determine which conclusion is correct. If they have a source not in your tree and you believe it matches, use the Search button to find it and add it to your tree.

Only add a source to your tree when you are confident it matches the person. Just because the name matches doesn't mean it is the correct person. For example, if you are looking for the parents of Sam Jones and find a census record hint listing a child with the correct name and age, that is not enough. This may be presented as a hint because of a mistake made by someone else. You must find more convincing evidence. Try looking for additional records before adding that census record. You may find Sam's marriage record listing his parents' names, or an obituary may list his siblings' names. Sometimes it is helpful to print several sources on paper and spread them out on your desk to see the big picture. Highlight important parts with a highlighter. Ask yourself, what evidence do I have that these are the right parents? Remember that a hint is just a hint. Never trust it just because Ancestry presents it as a hint.

Look for contradictions. Do three different sources give three different birth dates? You will need to look for more sources and justify why you accept one over the others. It may be best to list just the year or approximate year (e.g., "Abt. 1886").

Build your tree up (toward ancestors), then build it down, adding your ancestors' descendants. By adding siblings of your ancestor, you will frequently find additional information about your ancestor. Great-uncle George's obituary may list your grandfather's other wife, you didn't know about.

When you add a source to your tree, Ancestry automatically fills in dates, places, and relatives, so you don't need to type that information manually. Most of the time, the transcription is correct and complete, but not always. Especially with blurry images and sloppy handwriting, errors may occur. Even with good handwriting and sharp images, there may be errors or omissions. **Always look at the document image** and verify that the transcription is correct and complete. I frequently find that information is missing. For example, a marriage license may list the parents of the bride and groom, but they may be missing in the transcription. A death certificate may list the birth date, but the transcription may not.

When you accept a hint by clicking the "Save" button, your tree is updated with the new information, and a source record is created listing the exact location of the source. A link is created between the fact and the source. If you manually add information not in the transcription, such as a birth date on a death certificate, that source will not be linked to the new information. You can see these links on the "Facts" tab by clicking a fact or a source. To manually link a fact to a source, either click "Edit" on the fact and go to the "Attach source" tab or click "View" on the source and go to the "Associated facts" tab.

**Standardize dates and places.** A date may be transcribed as "10/15/32", "Oct 15, 1932", or "15 October 1932". If you click the date field, Ancestry may offer the standardized date, "15 Oct 1932", which matches the standard format used by genealogists. Why is it important to standardize the date? Consider the date "5/3/34". In the US, this might mean 3 May 1934. In Europe, it might mean 5 March 1934. But is it 1934 or 1834?

Likewise, clicking the place field will offer a standardized version. If it lists only a state, "USA" might be added. It will also add the county if missing. Why is this important? Consider a place written as "Georgia". Is it Georgia, USA, or the country of Georgia? Why add the county? Consider "Salem, Arkansas". There are four places in Arkansas named Salem in four different counties. Consider "Richmond, Virginia". Is it the city of Richmond or the county of Richmond? (Richmond city is not in Richmond county.) Also, many records are kept at the county level, making this information useful. Keep in mind that county boundaries change, and counties are sometimes split to form new counties. Just because a city is in a county today doesn't mean it was always in that county. Check the county boundaries at the time of the event.

If your budget is tight, consider purchasing a one-month subscription to Ancestry. Collect a list of what needs research and batch all of that work in the purchased month. When the subscription expires, your tree and all its details are preserved and remain viewable. It just means you cannot use the search tools until you pay for another month. Also, many

libraries offer free access to the Ancestry search tools, but you will have to manually add what you find to your tree.

Finally, take the AncestryDNA<sup>®</sup> test. It will help verify that your research is correct. Your DNA results will allow Ancestry to construct a ThruLines<sup>®</sup> report showing how you relate to your DNA matches. To make this most effective, build your tree down from your ancestors, listing their descendants for as many generations as possible. This is because ThruLines only works if your tree and your DNA match's tree have people in common. Encourage your relatives (including immediate family and more distant cousins) to also test.

As I have said many times: *Without DNA evidence, the identity of the father is hearsay.*

*A summary of my recommendations:* Be skeptical of hints. Use the Search button and adjust search parameters as needed. Save less reliable hints for last. Only add sources when you are confident of a match. Verify transcriptions with the document image. Standardize dates and places. Take the DNA test and encourage family members to do the same. Add descendants of your ancestors to help ThruLines do its job.

Copyright © Scott E. Lee. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0).

The author's slides, handouts, and spoken content may be photographed, recorded, shared, and adapted for personal or educational use, provided they are not sold or used commercially and proper credit is given to the author.

For the full license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

My goal is to make genealogical knowledge freely available while ensuring information remains accurate and attributed.