



Chart Your Way

Before long, you'll find yourself looking for a way to organize all the information you're gathering. The easiest way to do this is to create a chart that's often referred to as a family tree. Fortunately, you have plenty of options for doing this, including software or online tree services like the one available at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org). They make it easy to modify your entries over time, print out useful reports, and keep track of all the relationships (trust me, you don't want to try to keep 3rd cousins twice removed straight in your head).

A family tree, also referred to as a pedigree, is a handy way for organizing the most basic of genealogical information – names, dates and places. Standard practice is to start with yourself and march back one generation at a time to your parents, grandparents and so on. It's also a good idea to add as many siblings as you can to get a more complete picture. Down the road, this will help your research considerably and make it easier to fit in the assorted cousins you'll find along the way. If you do this, you'll be able to make use of family group sheets, another convenient way of summarizing what you've discovered. These list a husband, wife and children, along with their dates and places of birth, marriage and death, spouses, and sources for this information.

While you can download family tree and family group sheet forms, all genealogy software and most online tree services will automatically generate them for you. Both will help you spot the gaps – missing ancestors or events – and give you a roadmap for your beyond-the-family research.

One issue worth pondering is whether to start (or later upload) your family tree online. There's privacy to be considered, but online environments usually offer a menu of privacy settings, including one that makes your tree available only to you and those you invite. Of course, one of the main reasons for putting your tree online is the opportunity to collaborate with others. Maybe your aunt will dig out some photos, scan them and attach them to your shared tree. It's funny how snippets of a family's history drift down different branches, and having a centralized tree can be an efficient way of reassembling the photos that went to your cousin Kathy and the military discharge papers that went to your cousin David. It's also likely that placing your tree online will eventually attract some distant cousins you've never heard of (even those overseas), and you never know which pieces of your shared puzzle they might have.

The above is excerpted and adapted from [Who Do You Think You Are](#), companion book to the television series of the same name, by [Megan Smolenyak](#).