

Get Your Sherlock On - Online!

It's truly astonishing how much of our collective past has been uploaded in recent years, even if it represents only a tiny fraction of what might eventually be in store for us. Chances are that you'll be stunned as you start wading through the billions of records that may hold pieces of your puzzle. So once you've scoured your home and pestered your relatives for clues, here are some of the best free websites for finding and discovering more about your ancestors.

LibertyEllisFoundation.org

Did you know that roughly 40% of Americans have at least one ancestor who took their first steps in the United States at Ellis Island, and many of us have several, so the fact that the records for this port are digitized and available online free is great news. This database has millions of arrivals for the period 1892 (when Ellis Island opened) through 1924 (when immigration was on the wane, partly as a result of legislation that tightened restrictions) with an expansion up to 1957 currently underway, so there's a good chance you'll be able to spot a relative or two.

Ellis Island records, especially those after 1906, can be very helpful in identifying a place of origin in the old country. In addition, these manifests usually provide details such as age, occupation, birth place, last residence overseas, the name and address of a relative in the old country, the name and address of another relative (or sometimes friend) in the U.S., and the final destination of the traveler. It can also be an eye-opener to learn how little money your ancestor arrived with.

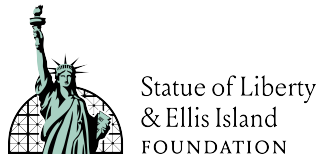
FamilySearch.org

FamilySearch is the online door to a cornucopia of free, family history records that grows by millions every week. Some are browsable (meaning you can click through and look around page by page), while others are completely searchable (meaning you can go directly to the entry for a person of interest). A massive volunteer transcription effort is gradually converting browsable records into searchable ones, and a large portion of the collection is digitized. In many cases, you'll be able to print out, save or download a record you seek on the spot, and thanks to a friendly user interface, you'll find it easy to do so. For genealogists, this is a candy store!

You'll find death certificates, probate files, state census records, and funeral home registers – just about anything you might think of. And depending on your heritage, you may well benefit from the international nature of the site. Looking for marriages from the Philippines, burials in Norway, the 1895 Argentina census, or Civil Registration indexes for Ireland? You've come to the right place!

[Cyndi's List](#)

Cyndi Ingle is a rock star in the genealogical world. The reason for this is Cyndi's List, a collection of well over 300,000 links to online genealogical resources organized into more than 200 categories. What started as a personal set of bookmarks has evolved into a remarkable card catalog of everything genealogical you could possibly think of. Whether your ancestors were Loyalists,



Lutheran or from Luxembourg, Cyndi has a category of links that will steer you exactly where you need to go to learn more.

It's fun to browse the topics from Clothing & Costumes to Serendipity, but the true strength of Cyndi's List is revealed when you find yourself asking, "Now where would I find out about ...?" Discovering an ancestor who came from Barbados, for instance, you'll be delighted to find her Caribbean/West Indies section. This is a site you'll never outgrow, so you'll want to bookmark it. Even the most seasoned professionals find themselves consulting it on a frequent basis.

[Chronicling America](#)

While there are a growing number of online newspaper resources, most of them involve a subscription fee. Chronicling America, an initiative centered on historic American newspapers, is a happy exception. Currently, it contains millions of free, digitized images for a selection of newspapers from 38 states for 1836-1922. But beyond that, it also helps you track down just about every newspaper in America dating back to 1690. Looking for 19th century newspapers from Jersey City, New Jersey? This site can tell you exactly which seven repositories contain part or all of the *Jersey City Daily Times* from 1864 to 1868.

[FindAGrave.com](#)

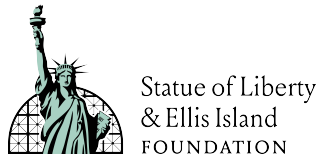
As the name suggests, this is a massive database of graves – mostly transcriptions, but many with photos of actual tombstones – intended to help you find the graves of your ancestors. All told, FindAGrave contains well over 100 million entries, content that comes entirely from volunteers. They may add their own family members, those buried in the cemetery near their home, military vets from across the country, or only the notable and notorious. Everyone has their own preference, but collectively, it adds up to one very useful site.

[DeathIndexes.com](#)

Genealogists are often accused of being more interested in the dearly departed than the living, and I have to admit that there's an element of truth to this assertion. But the reality is not as morbid as it – or this website – might sound. It just happens that those who came before us can be fascinating, and uncovering their death dates can often be the key to opening up the rest of their lives. The death date and location might lead you to a tombstone that gives your 3rd great-grandmother's maiden name or an obituary that reveals that the fellow you were named after served in the War of 1812. Now you can pick up her trail as a child and his in military records.

When you'll visit, you'll see that it's a clean, no-nonsense site. As Joe Beine, the site's sole administrator, explains, it's "a directory of links to websites with online death indexes, listed by state and county. Included are death records, death certificate indexes, death notices & registers, obituaries, probate indexes, and cemetery & burial records." It's so simple that you may be deceived, but start clicking around and you'll soon begin to understand the website's popularity.

[ISOGG.org](#)



One of the most exciting developments in family history since 2000 has been the addition of DNA to our research tool box, so you might want to consider joining the International Society of Genetic Genealogy (ISOGG). Founded in 2005, it has over 8,000 members from roughly 60 countries – and it's free! ISOGG is a terrific resource for those getting their feet wet in the world of genetic genealogy (check out the site's "Newbies" section), as well as a playground for those who find themselves addicted.

The group is spearheaded by the tireless Katherine Hope Borges, and offers mailing lists, speakers, success stories, videos, and even a page dedicated to famous DNA (in case you're curious whether you might be related to Jesse James or the Romanovs!). Want to learn more about specific testing companies such as Family Tree DNA or 23andMe.com? Post a query and you'll get an earful! A smart way to familiarize yourself with genetic genealogy is to subscribe to ISOGG's newsletter and browse past issues. You'll find that they're written in plain English and make for enjoyable reading.

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.