



Start with What You Know

It probably sounds mind-blowingly obvious to suggest that you start with what you know, but you'd be surprised how many people don't. I think it's fair to say that we are a nation of impatient people. With so many opportunities for instant gratification, we've become accustomed to fast results and expect our roots served up the same way. So it's only natural that most of us embarking on a genealogical quest will pop online and do a vanity search. Type in your name and – poof! – instant roots, right? Another favorite point of entry is that famous ancestor you've heard mention of. Your name is Boone, so you must be related to Daniel Boone. Find his family tree online, and all you have to do is find yourself in one of the branches. Centuries of family history will unfold before you in minutes!

You might think I'm exaggerating, but any librarian can regale you with tales of patrons who wanted to pick up their family history at the reference desk or even the drive-thru (no kidding). If you're venturing into the world of genealogy now, you'll be pleased to hear that you were smart to wait. What used to take months might take you a couple of hours, but we're not quite at the just-add-water stage.

The danger of jumping in with no preparation is the risk of, well, barking up the wrong tree. It is astonishingly easy it is to assume your way into someone else's family tree (say, by confusing two people who happened to have the same name), only to discover some time later that you have no connection whatsoever to that family. Or perhaps you'll correctly latch yourself on to someone else's pedigree – after all, that was definitely your grandmother in there – only to learn later that the tree is riddled with errors elsewhere.

The tree you found online may be based on a century-old book found in the finest libraries, but these weighty tomes don't come with warning labels that many doing genealogy (or having it done for them) in the old days were doing so to prove illustrious roots, and there were Victorian rip-off artists only too happy to provide them. Over the years, I've even sporadically encountered folks who have assured me they don't need any help because they already have their roots traced back to Adam and Eve. I don't have the heart to burst their bubble, but I'll say this much. If you, as I have, find a tree online that starts with Adam and Eve and shows one of their children being born in British Columbia, Canada, a little skepticism wouldn't be out of order.

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](#)