Ancestry.com is the world’s largest and most popular genealogical website, with access to thousands of databases containing more than 15 billion historical records and more than 3 million paying subscribers. In addition, Ancestry provides DNA testing (with over 15 million people in their database) that allows customers to discover their genetic ethnicity and find relatives with a common ancestral match. Ancestrty.com is available in over thirty international markets and offers localized websites in nine countries.

How to access Ancestry.com

The library edition of Ancestry.com can only be used while in the library. When using one of the library computers, the Eisenhower Library webpage will automatically be the first page that opens when you click on the Chrome, Firefox or Edge browser icons. If you bring in your laptop, you will need to type www.eisenhowerlibrary.org in the address bar.

Once on the library’s website, click on the Research tab, located at the top middle part of your screen.

Next, click on the box to the left of Genealogy.

Resources

Filter by Category
- Biography
- Books & Literature
- Genealogy
- General Reference
- Homework Resources
- Language Resources

then click the green link for Ancestry Library Edition.

Ancestry Library Edition

For in-library use only. Search United States census records, military records, directories, passenger lists and more with the library edition of the popular genealogy resource.
What is a Database?

Ancestry.com is an online genealogical research website that consists of thousands of smaller databases of genealogical records, including census and voter records, birth, marriage and death certificates, immigration and emigration records, military and court records, and more! However, before we dive in, we need to understand what a “database” actually is and how it works.

Data are specific entities or pieces of raw information with common attributes that are connected by defined relationships. It is the plural form of datum.

A database is an organized collection of data that allows for search and retrieval, which also provides structure for information systems. A record is the basic component of a database.

Databases are necessary when there is too much information for humans to process and recall by themselves. Today, while the term “database” is generally used in reference to an electronic database, which is accessed via computers and the internet, there are also print or hard copy databases that you have all used repeatedly throughout your lives. These include phonebooks, library card catalogs, checkbooks, etc. Let’s look at the example of a checkbook:

The highlighted row represents a transaction record. In this instance, this record is an entity in a database. And in the context of databases, every entity has a number of attributes, which, in our example above are date, check number, transaction description and cost.

By themselves, these attributes are meaningless. However, when they are organized and given structure, we see that the attributes now provide additional information about the entity (transaction record) and serve a purpose. Essentially, this is how databases work. With electronic databases, computers do most of the heavy lifting when there is too much information for humans to quickly sort through.
What can I find on Ancestry.com?

As of 2019, and with *varying degrees of coverage*, Ancestry.com includes records from the following regions:

- **Africa** (Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Mauritius, South Africa)
- **Asia** (Afghanistan, China, India, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Oman, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan)
- **Central America** (Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, St Kitts and Nevis)
- **Europe** (Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Channel Islands, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Isle of Man, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Wales, Yugoslavia)
- **North America** (Canada, Mexico, and the United States [all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands])
- **Oceania** (Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga)
- **South America** (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, Venezuela)

Ancestry.com: Personal Subscription vs. Library Edition

It is important to note that Ancestry.com is, by and large, designed for individual, private subscribers. As such, there are features and record collections which are not accessible via Ancestry Library Edition. Some of the key differences between the two versions are:

- **No remote access** – the website is only available from inside the library *
- **No online Family Trees** – perhaps the most popular feature offered by Ancestry.com, this option allows you to connect with family members, as well as grow and share your family trees online
- **AncestryDNA** – DNA testing must be purchased separately ($99)
- **Hire an Expert** – while estimates are free, a standard research project starts at $2,500, which secures 20 hours of professional time with a genealogist from their research firm, ProGenealogists.
- **Obituaries & Historical Newspaper Collections** – specifically recent obituaries from hundreds of newspapers, as well as mostly small town newspapers. *

*Good news! The library does have a subscription to HeritageQuest Online (another genealogical website), which does allow remote access for patrons. In addition, the library subscribes to several other databases that provide coverage for researching both obituaries as well as newspapers.
You can access these other resources by navigating to the Research page of our website...

...and then clicking on Genealogy and/or Newspapers to filter your results.

Resources

Filter by Category

- Biography
- Books & Literature
- Business
- Genealogy
- General Reference
- Geography & Social Studies
- Homework Resources
- Language Resources
- Newspapers

Here is an up-to-date current list of the newspaper databases currently available to you:

- America’s Obituaries: 1860-present (available remotely)
- Chicago Sun Times: 1986-present
- Chicago Tribune & Historical Chicago Tribune: 1849-1993
- Norridge News: 2002-present
General Tips for Searching Ancestry.com

Before we begin, here are some general tips and search strategies you should be aware of:

- It’s always easier to start when you’ve documented the information you already have. So the first thing you should do is list what you already know.
- Just as importantly, list what information you are trying to find. Identify gaps in your family trees and histories. Avoid random browsing and search with a purpose to maximize your time on Ancestry.com.
- Start small then go big (aka “Pearl Growing”)! Begin your initial searches with as much detail and specific information as you can. If that proves ineffective, branch out with other information or focus on another family member.
- Don’t be afraid to start over! If you keep running into a wall, take a moment and rethink your search strategy and how best to achieve your desired results.
- Speak with relatives and close family friends, as they are unique resources only available to you, whose knowledge may not be easily found elsewhere.
- Exhaust any vital records (birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, etc.) you may have access to, as these may lead to other records about that person.
- Search local sources, such as local newspapers, court and church records, wills, etc.

Visiting Ancestry.com for the first time

From inside the library, the first page of Ancestry.com will look like this:

When you first arrive on the Ancestry.com home page, you will see the Home, Search, Message Boards, Learning Center, Charts and Forms and New Collections tabs across the top of your screen. These tabs will be on every page (in the same order) within the Ancestry.com site.
• **Home** will always take you back to this first page.
• **Search** has a drop down menu when you mouse over it that gives you more focused options, but you can also just click on "Search" to get a page similar to the home page, with extra stuff - you can search for databases and records by location (below the basic search box) or narrow your search by category of record/database (right sidebar). We’ll come back to the Search page in just a moment.
• **Message Boards** will allow you to search topics other users are discussing online. These can be narrowed down geographically by country and region/province/state, etc. Unfortunately you cannot post to or create a new discussion topic via the Library Edition.
• **Learning Center** has information that can help you manage your genealogical research more effectively, such as genealogical research and translation guides, as well as intermediate and collection-specific searching tips.
• **Charts and Forms** takes you to a number of documents you can download, including blank family trees, forms to use to request census information, and tables to keep track of your own research and progress.
• **New Collections** will take you to the “Card Catalog” page, which enables you to examine both newly added record collections as well as those that have recently been updated.

**Beginning your Search**

From Ancestry’s homepage, click on the **Search** tab. This will lead you to the following page. NOTE: the **Search** tab is underlined in green. This is a visual aid to remind you where you currently are on the website.
Familiarizing yourself with the layout of this screen is crucial, as it will allow you to begin and more importantly, continue your search from a number of different access points, such as names, date of birth/death, etc., locations/places lived in, life events, and specific record collections.

You should also be aware of the **Show More Options** feature. This will display additional fields that you can use to search more specifically through the various collections and databases.

A link that enables this option can be found on the **Home** and **Search** page of the website. In terms of on-screen placement, it will be located to the right of the orange “search” button. You will see two different versions of this exact screen:

1) **Before clicking**, with the additional options hidden

2) **After clicking**, with the additional options displayed. You’ll notice the text has now changed to “Show fewer options”
Clicking on the **Match all terms exactly** box will narrow your search and make Ancestry look for results that match exactly those search terms. On the surface, this seems quite appealing. However, if you have any doubts about the validity of your information, avoid this option.

Alright, let’s get started! For our first search, let’s see what information we can find for **Dwight D. Eisenhower**.

Due to the fact that Eisenhower was a prominent person, you shouldn’t have too much difficulty in retrieving quality results from your initial search. If that person had a fairly common name, be sure to confirm the birth and death dates (he was born in 1890 in Texas and died in 1969 in Washington, D.C.), as that will help you sift out any unrelated search results.
Let’s try another one. Try to see what records we can find for John F. Kennedy.

![All results for John F Kennedy](image)

As you can see, despite having been a very prominent figure, these initial results are not the John F. Kennedy we are looking for. President Kennedy was born in 1917 in Massachusetts and died in 1963 in Texas. This illustrates the need for specificity when researching family members with common names. This is where additional information, such as the names of spouses, cities, etc., become incredibly important.

**Wildcards**

*Wildcards* are unique keyboard characters that function as advanced search operators for search engines and databases, which are used in place of missing letters or numbers. Within Ancestry.com, they can assist you in finding relatives and recalling records despite being unsure as to the exact spelling of an individual’s name. As such, they will only work in the name fields of the website.
There are two wildcards available to us for searching Ancestry.com, the question mark and asterisk. However, they each have different purposes and will produce different results. Specifically:

- **Question mark (?)** - is used in place of a single letter
  - Example: searching for “Sm?th” will return both “Smith” as well as “Smyth”

- **Asterisk (*)** - is used to replace zero or more letters
  - Example: searching for “Fred*” will return “Fredrick”, “Freddie” and “Freddy”

However, there are a couple of things to be aware of when utilizing wildcards, such as:

1. You must have at least three consecutive letters somewhere in the name
   a. Example: “Sm?” or “Sm*” will not work
2. A wildcard can be used at either the beginning or end of a name, but **NOT** both.
3. Wildcards now work in both exact AND keyword searches in the name fields (we will discuss filters in the Advanced class next week)

Obviously, it is preferable to use single character wildcard (the question mark) since that would indicate that you are more certain of the overall spelling and length of an individual’s name. This, however, can vary due to personal circumstances and should not dissuade you from utilizing the multiple character wildcard (the asterisk).

**Searching Census Records**

The Census Bureau’s National Processing Center (NPC) in Jeffersonville, IN, maintains copies of the 1910 to 2010 census records. After the 72 years have passed, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is responsible for making the records publicly available for viewing or purchase. The **most recent** publicly available census records are from the 1940 census, which were released April 2, 2012. Records from the 1950 census are the next to be released. This is scheduled to occur on **April 1, 2022**.

Federal Census records are a great source of information. However, the amount of information that is immediately available to you may depend on your own personal circumstances and family history (remember Elias’ example of his family).

You may access Census records on Ancestry.com by hovering over the “Search” tab and then clicking on “Census & Voter Lists”.
You will then be directed to this page:

On the right, you may click on the link for “U.S. Federal Census Collection” to be taken to that page, which, as the title suggests, focuses exclusively on census records from the United States. Here you will have access to all publicly available census records.

Once inside a particular census record, you will see the entire page of which contains that specific person’s entry. You can zoom in (as I have done below for President Eisenhower’s 1940 Census entry), or out to make the page easier to read.

If you find that you are still having difficulty reading the written entries on the page, try hovering over the Navigation Bar, located at the center of the bottom of the page.

When here, you can click on the double silhouette icon (see arrow in above image) to bring up an index. This is a typed list of the same information you see recorded by hand on the page. Furthermore, this feature still displays the printed page, making comparison quick and easy.
As you continue researching, you may come across pages that you wish to save, print or download for future reference. To save a census page, simply move your mouse’s cursor to the top right corner of the screen and click on the green “Save” button.

To print or download a particular page, simply click on the hammer and wrench icon on the right side of the page (below the “save” button). This will bring up a menu, from which you may select from a variety of options.
Avoiding Easy Mistakes

Genealogical research is often a process of “trial and error”. So don’t get down on yourself for making a mistake or not realizing something right away. However, there are easy to make mistakes that you should be aware of and try to avoid:

- Assuming your family name has always been spelled one way. Errors in spelling or transcription can occasionally block your search results. Make a list of different possibilities.
- Don’t dismiss results based on assumptions or family stories.
- Researching the wrong family. Often this would be a result of continuing where someone else left off.
- Failing to document sources. Records are not from Ancestry.com; they are being accessed via Ancestry.com. Otherwise, you run the risk of repeatedly looking up the same record.
- Ignoring siblings and distant relations. We have a tendency to focus on our direct lineage, which can limit the true scope of your family. This can also help avoid “dead ends”.
- Overlooking maiden names of female ancestors.
- Overlooking the “black sheeps” of the family. Court and Prison records are highly reliable.
- Neglecting to document and search for known neighbors, particularly if you are having difficulty in tracking down your ancestors.
- Assuming you are related to a famous person.

Additional Resources: The Learning Center

A great source of additional information and help is Ancestry.com’s Learning Center, which can always be found at the center of the menu bar at the top of your screen.

Here you will be able to find genealogical research and translation guides that can assist you when dealing with records that were originally published in a foreign language, blank charts and forms for almost every record type found within Ancestry, and much more. In addition, please take advantage of Ancestry.com’s YouTube Channel, which are regularly updated and full helpful, informative videos that cover a range of topics, search strategies and collection details.