

Bring Your Ancestors to Life – A Dozen Tips for Expanding Upon the Family Story

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It is the stories that make the family history come alive. Whether you are recording information in the individual notes section of a genealogy software program, writing a blog for the internet, an article for a genealogy magazine, or hope to publish a family history book, these tips will help you to bring your ancestors to life. Generally, but not always, the further back you go in history, the fewer documents you will find on your forebear. Don't despair. You can still write a good story on someone who lived hundreds of years ago.

Make a reasonably thorough search for records on this individual. Have you looked for birth, marriage and death records, immigration records, census records, land records, tax lists, cemetery records, obituaries, newspaper articles, wills, and probate records? These are the most common records of genealogical merit. Are there pertinent family letters, photographs, a diary, or a bible stashed among family papers and memorabilia? Could your ancestor be listed in a city directory or a county history? Sometimes a search for the records of siblings can yield important information on our direct ancestor. It also pays to have a second look at documents. Sometimes new records shed more light on records looked at previously.

Now look beyond the main facts on each document for other information that might shed light on this person's life.

1. Review birth, marriage, and death data. Was this person the oldest, the youngest, an only child, or one of a large family? How old was this person when he/she married? Do you have a cause of death, in addition to the date of death? Are there other details to be extracted from the birth, marriage, and death records?
2. Pay attention to migration. Was this an immigrant ancestor? What influence did the country of origin have on this person's life? Were traditions continued? Did this family move a lot or settle in one area to remain for generations? Did parents, siblings, and other relatives live nearby?
3. Consider the possibility of military service. Was your male ancestor a young adult at the time of a military conflict that affected his country or locale? Search for military records.
4. Look for the occupation of your ancestor. Was it an unusual occupation? Was it a trade passed down from father to son? Did siblings and cousins follow the same occupation? Were they in business together? If your ancestor was a widow for a lengthy period, how did she support herself?
5. Evaluate property ownership as an indication of economic status. Was your ancestor a land owner? Did he or she own or rent a home? Were there other assets of value?

6. Consider whether religion was an important influence in your ancestor's life. Did this person belong to a particular religious faith? How did religion impact other aspects of his or her life?
7. Look at the extended family and neighbors. In the past, many people lived in multi-generation households. They were often linked to their neighbors through marriage, legal ties (guardianships, witnesses to wills), and cultural traditions. Were there relatives, neighbors, or friends who were particularly important in this person's life?
8. Think about the level of education your ancestor attained. Could this person read and write? Were there reasons why he or she might not have been literate? Might you be able to find his/her signature on a document?
9. Investigate family illnesses. Were there family members who died in childhood or as young adults? Were they victims of childhood diseases? Did your ancestor die during an epidemic, such as smallpox or the Spanish flu? Did he or she die from a disease that in the past was endemic and often fatal, such as tuberculosis or malaria?
10. Look for involvement in civic or political activities. Was he or she a leader in the community?
11. Think about family traditions. Has a recipe, a handmade quilt, a treasured heirloom, or a favorite story about this ancestor been handed down through the generations? Do photographs tell a story?
12. Flesh out your family story with relevant local, regional and national history. What was happening at the time that your ancestor lived? Could it have had an impact on his or her life?

We will never know the whole story about another individual. You may want to focus on a single incident, one theme, or a particular period in that person's life. Or you may want to compile a biographical sketch that spans a lifetime. Whatever you choose, a few family documents, along with a bit of historical context, can tell a fascinating family story or at least an illuminating one. These stories add flesh to the bones of those long gone. We carry our forebear's DNA within us. Maybe we can see something of ourselves in the narrative of one or another of these ancestors. Or maybe their stories reveal common threads that pass from one generation to the next.