

Spring 2019

Turning a Hobby into a Life-Long Career: Making Genealogy My Profession

Grace Ligon
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Ligon, Grace (2019) "Turning a Hobby into a Life-Long Career: Making Genealogy My Profession," *ESSAI*: Vol. 17 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol17/iss1/30>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact orenick@cod.edu.

Turning a Hobby into a Life-Long Career: Making Genealogy My Profession

by Grace Ligon

(English 1102)

I debated between two careers: a community support manager in disability advocacy or a genealogist. I found genealogy interesting because my grandma, who passed away in 2014, used to do genealogy as a hobby and I recently picked up where she left off. My grandma spent hours upon hours on the phone contacting cemeteries looking for more information about our relatives. Instead of spending hours on the phone trying to find information, now it takes spending hours looking through an endless number of different websites. This project inspired me to help others with their family research, as a career. For me it's been meaningful to search for my relatives, including many that I've never met before. To look back into history for the details of my family and how we got to the United States is like reading a history book about myself. It's possible for people to find historical connections. For example, I'm related to many people who served or were drafted in the Revolutionary and both World Wars. I'm doing my own family research and I found how rewarding it's to find historical documents about my family. How awesome would it be to learn that you're related to someone famous, like the King of Norway? Genealogy is a difficult career that entails a lot of research and work, but then end result is incredible: help people determine who they are and where they come from, things they might've not been able to answer on their own.

BEHIND THE SCENES RESEARCH

Some people that don't have the time to devote to genealogy, will find a professional helpful. Someone that can get them started, do some or all of the research for them, or help finish a project. According to the article "Hiring a Professional for Genealogy Research" written by a man who goes by the name Gord R, an author for the website My Family History, wrote "Many people hire a professional genealogist to dive deeper into their family history. In recent years, people found interest in researching their family genealogy to find out where they're from." If one chooses not to hire a professional genealogist, there are other ways they can find answers to their questions.

An article published in *The New York Times*, "Why You Should Dig Up Your Family's History – and How to Do It," written by Jaya Saxena, states that "In America, the question of 'Where am I from?' usually means, 'Where did my family live before they arrived/were forcibly shipped to America?'" This article takes you through some steps and different ways to start research on your family tree. Talking to your family is the best way to gather information when you're starting your research. Double check documents to make sure the information is correct. Saxena describes this process as "solving a puzzle at the highest level, and the benefit is that you get to find out about your family." As she says, genealogy takes time and patience. Genealogists have to make sure the information they provide to their clients is accurate and by doing so, the process isn't a short one.

According to the AncestralFindings.com the website article, "5 Ways to Tell if Your Genealogy Research is Accurate," there's many errors that you'll encounter or make when creating a family tree. As the article tells, "Even the best genealogists will once in a while discover they got an entire line [lineage] wrong based on one incorrect assumption, misinterpretation of a record, or obtaining a faulty record." Genealogy isn't always 100 percent accurate. For example, there could've been a secret adoption that was never discovered or documented. This website itself can help both professionals or hobbyists with ways to help with research. First of all, you'll find more accurate information if it repeats in different records. Records that occur on an event day such as a

birth, wedding, death, or even military records, are more accurate. One way you can tell if the records are accurate is they'll appear more than once. Using a website like Ancestry.com makes it easier to match your information to other people's research. This website is free to use if you buy a DNA kit. However if you want to dig deeper into your family tree, you have to purchase a membership. For example, I have the world membership in which I have access to everything discovered about my family tree in the US, can trace my family internationally, and obtain records. If it's possible to use someone else's research, then you can investigate their footnotes for accuracy. The article continues on to make the point that, "sometimes, in genealogy research, we have to take a leap of faith in our conclusions due to a lack of solid evidence." Even a professional will use assumptions in their conclusion of their research. The professionals will use "evidence where the record doesn't outright state a family relationship or date, but one can be inferred from the information that is there," or simply put, secondary evidence to back up their claims. The use of DNA testing can help prove or disprove a family's connection. DNA may not be able to connect one person directly to another but it can narrow it down to a family. If there's 2 or more people that have their DNA tested, there's ways to figure out the number of generations since your common ancestor. Although DNA testing is the most common, there's many other ways people can research their family history.

A genealogist researches a family's history by using different resources including birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death records. According to Will Moneymaker, an author on the website *ancestryfindings.com*, in his article "The Different Types of Libraries Used in Genealogical Research, and Their Unique Values," libraries have a lot of information on genealogical research that hasn't been digitalized yet. Public and university libraries have a special room within their departments of genealogy that people can use to explore their lineages. Historical societies specialize in different time periods such as wars and other historical events. Information related to historical events can connect to lineages. There are genealogical and lineage research libraries all over the nation that can help someone research their genealogy. Some historical museums have libraries that people can belong to with a membership to dive deeper into their lineage research. Using libraries to research family history seems a little outdated, so luckily there is a modern day approach to finding out information: the internet.

According to Pamela Porter and Amy Johnson Crow in the book, *Online Roots: How to Discover Your Family's History and Heritage with the Power of the Internet*, Ellis Island was a point of entry that millions of people immigrated through to enter the United States. With the help of the passenger search on The Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. website (libertyellisfoundation.org), it's possible to find people that entered the US through Ellis Island. Genealogists can search by name, date of arrival, ethnicity, and age among other criteria. The website allows anyone to search by specific information like the ship they arrived on or their last place of residence. The database allows information to be more specific with a last name's spelling or pronunciation under options such as "contains," "starts with," or "sounds like." This website also gives the genealogist more general historical information. While finding out information about oneself seems exciting, there are several steps that are recommended to do the research easily.

According to Porter and Crow, there are six steps to get started on a genealogy research project for a client. The first step is to set goals in what the client wants to learn about. It helps to be specific and start with one side of the family. Genealogists start with what they already know about the client and about their family. Then they use that information to help guide their research. The researcher starts with the basic information (birth, death, and marriage dates). Then they find other family relatives like mom (maternal), dad (paternal), siblings, spouses, and children that match those records. The researcher critically thinks about the information that they're reviewing. A list of resources is necessary in order to determine which one you'll need to start with to accomplish the goal. For example, having a date of death of a relative but you don't have the birth date. It's also

necessary to understand how to search on different resources. Some websites will ask for a last name first and then the first name while others are case sensitive. For each website that's used, you need to understand how to search on that resource. The next step is to analyze the information that you've found. As a genealogist, you'd spend more time evaluating the information than searching for a specific fact. Genealogists keep a "research log to record sources they have checked and the results of their searches." The research log allows the researcher to take detailed notes on the sources that provided the information as well as those that didn't. It also keeps those details more organized so you don't repeat any research. Being organized with your documents helps a genealogist be more efficient and successful at their job. In addition to online databases, the family tree information can be put into a database program such as Legacy Family Tree, Family Tree Maker, or The Master Genealogist. These databases allow for easier access to searching information and compiling reports. These steps might be overwhelming for some, so it is important to learn about what a professional genealogist is and to look at and how they can be useful.

BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL GENEALOGIST

To be a professional genealogist, you will not necessarily need a degree but it is recommended. A degree will give you the research tools and experience to sift through the mountains of personal records to find the details of family members you are looking for. There are many options for continuing education on different topics. Genealogy needs so much of your attention that it takes a lot of time to do. As his article was previously mentioned, Gord R provides the financial aspect of a genealogist. "The average pay for a freelance genealogist is \$35 to \$60 an hour, or a salary by day or by project. A historian has a median salary of \$55,870 per year." The salary of a genealogist might be appealing to some, but is the schooling worth it?

According to Boston University's Genealogical Program, Genealogists don't need a degree, but getting certified will help someone advance in the field. Genealogists need a scientific background in biology, genetics, and logic for skills in critical thinking. For instance, now genealogists are able to find long lost family members through DNA testing. Researching and writing background can help with proper citation formatting. Genealogists gain business skills and use hands-on experience when networking with families. Study.com, a website where one can get access to video lessons, courses, study tools, study guides, and so much more states that there are "bachelor degree programs in family history and genealogy," when referring to building a roadmap for genealogy. However, these types of programs aren't common. Other colleges and universities offer classes in genealogy from their anthropology and history departments which can help you learn more about the field, including the language.

Like many professional fields, genealogy has its own professional jargon and a wide vocabulary. Some of the vocabulary is worded differently than how we would normally talk about family. For example, *tree* means how you relate back to your family and how it started. A tree can be linked from different families to help you develop your own tree. Your maternal and paternal sides help grow your family tree so you can connect back to how those sides relate. By completing a family tree, it's possible to see how someone is connected to other family names. Some of the other vocabulary are *census*, *lineage*, and *head of relation*. A census is defined as the statistical information about the populations from years ago. Lineage is the connection that you have with each of your ancestors. Head of relation refers to the head of the family, for instance, a husband or wife.

There are several professional associations that I found while doing my research. One being the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG). The APG, according to their website, is an international organization dedicated to supporting those engaged in the business of genealogy. This association has many conferences that professionals can attend to further their education. A few different topics you can learn about from each conference are, Celtic connections, advancement of forensic genealogy, and Eastern European family history studies. Based on information provided by

Study.com, “only members have access to conferences, lectures, seminars, and social events hosted by the association.” Another popular association is the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) which is non-profit and promotes ethics and standards through its certification program and publications. It’s also recognized nationally and internationally. Both of these associations are open to new members. The BCG association requires a certification application and examples of completed genealogical work. The certification is optional but it’s recommended in order to advance professionally.

According to the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), it’s best to hire a qualified professional that’s an experienced researcher. An individual may not be able find out details of what they’re looking for on their own, but hiring a professional could help. A professional cannot promise that they’ll find all the information, but that they’ll do the best they can. The relationship between the genealogist and the client is really important. This relationship helps come to an agreement to work together and trust the professional. The APG has a code of ethics and professional practices “to promote: (1) a truthful approach to genealogy, family history, and local history; (2) the trust and security of genealogical consumers; and (3) careful and respectful treatment of records, repositories and their staffs, other professionals, and genealogical organizations and associations.” This association states that they have “a responsibility to serve both its diverse membership and the genealogical client community.” The associations are very professional in the requirements of their members and the members must agree to the code of ethics. While the code of ethics pertains to genealogists and their clients, what happens if there’s a crime that needs to be solved?

CONTROVERSY OF USING DNA IN GENEALOGY

I find it interesting that genealogists can use DNA to find relatives, solve crimes, and find many records from different families from many years ago. For instance, genealogists can find how people are linked to other relatives through DNA. The DNA can piece together the lineages. Natalie Proulx writes an article for *The New York Times*; “According to Proulx in “Should Law Enforcement Be Able to Use DNA Data from Genealogy Websites for Criminal Investigations,” in which she provides reasoning for law enforcement to use DNA data to the readers. I think law enforcement should be able to use DNA data from genealogy websites to make their investigation easier and faster. Ethically, storing someone’s DNA is seen as controversial as it could compromise their privacy and we don’t know the possible consequences of this. However, in situations like criminal investigations I feel that it’s important that police are able to use these genealogy website DNA databases. Obtaining DNA samples from a crime scene can be the evidence needed to convict a person of a crime. In some cases, this could definitively determine the person actually responsible for the crime.

Aja Romano’s article, “DNA profiles from ancestry websites helped identify the Golden State Killer suspect,” describes how the detectives in Sacramento used DNA from an ancestry website to find the person responsible for the Golden State Killer crimes; Joseph James DeAngelo Jr. In this investigation, he was arrested for crimes of as many as 50 confirmed rapes and 12 murders over a 10-county area in California between 1974 and 1986. Some of DeAngelo’s DNA was collected from a crime committed in 1978 and submitted to GEDmatch. This information was used to investigate these crimes. GEDmatch provides DNA and genealogical tools for amateur and professional researchers and genealogists. The article also discusses the unsolved mystery of identify thief Lori Erica Ruff, whose real name was Kimberly McLean. Thanks to DNA analysis, the case was cracked in 2016 from a relative submitting their DNA to an ancestry website. Romano mentions another case that took place in March of 2018. Police were able to solve a similar case to McLean’s by using “genealogical profiling to narrow down family trees and ultimately identify the Jane Doe known as *Buckskin Girl*.” It can also be noted that another criminal case from 2010 used familial DNA matching to apprehend the serial killer known as the Grim Sleeper. Even Romano stated that

“the result seems to be a trade-off between privacy and justice that many are willing to make.”

I’m conflicted in the submittal of DNA for crimes to ancestry websites. I’ve submitted my own DNA to an ancestry website to find out more about where my ancestors came from, without realizing that a police department could search through the website to find suspects. I appreciate the fact that the investigators are using all the resources to find the people responsible for crimes. However, I feel like my privacy has been undermined. I think it’ll take some getting used to the idea of ancestry websites being used to find suspects. I’m curious how DNA will be used in the future and I’ll plan on keeping myself updated on these issues. Solving crimes isn’t the only thing DNA is used for, it’s also used for helping those who were adopted find out more about themselves and their biological family.

On a positive note, people that were adopted can connect with their biological parents through DNA. This can either be a life-changing moment to have a relationship with one’s biological parent or heartbreaking if the parent doesn’t want anything to do with the child. It can be difficult for a person that learns that they were a foundling; an infant that has been abandoned by its parents and is discovered and cared for by others. As a foundling, a person wouldn’t know anything about their biological families with not knowing where to start. A professional genealogist, who has the research experience that can help open the door to a family’s DNA, is the key for people who don’t know who they are or where they are from.

As Alison Bowen stated in the *Chicago Tribune* article “Genealogy sites are helping birth parents find children they placed for adoption,” many people who are looking for relatives can use different kinds of websites like Facebook, Adopted.com, and Ancestry.com. People who are interested in having a relationship with their biological families have many ways to connect and stay connected. Bowen states, “genetic testing sites like Ancestry, 23AndMe, and MyHeritage are expanding the options for biological parents seeking to find adoptees.” The options birth parents have are limited and a genealogist can help these parents go through adoption agency information, complete online searches, and search social media. Adopted.com helps connect searchers with investigators and genetic researchers and began letting users upload their own DNA profiles. Adopted.com even works with other genealogy websites to offer users a way to check matches across several sites. Using 23andMe can help a foundling be able to determine if they have any genetic health problems and lots more because they are not able to ask their parents. Providing information to a client who’s not able to communicate with their biological family may be difficult, but it can be lifechanging with the connections made once the information is found.

I will have to guide clients and tell them that if they reach out to their biological parents they’ll need to be patient and give them time to decide if they want to connect. This part of genealogy investigation will be a more complicated process. Although the biological family members want a relationship, you have to keep in mind that you have to start from scratch because you don’t know anything about them. Genealogy has many obstacles, like starting from scratch or finding information on someone you know nothing about, but it continuously changes from a hobby to a career despite those obstacles.

Genealogy is a newer career, focusing on helping people find lost relatives or solve crimes, not just a hobby for people to do in their free time. This profession is not an easy one because there are so many historical records that are not accurate. After casually talking with friends and family about genealogy, I felt like it would be an interesting career. I’d even like to specialize in DNA research to help people that are adopted or foundlings. Many people told me about their difficulties with getting some information to fill in the holes of their family tree. I feel like I could take on the challenge of researching and maybe help get information digitized if it isn’t. After researching the career, I think it’ll require a lot of critical thinking and I would have to take some science classes such as biology and genetics. Although I enjoy genealogy as a hobby, I think it would be cool to turn genealogy into a career.

 Work Cited

- Ancestral Findings LLC. “5 Ways To Tell If Your Genealogy Research Is Accurate,”
ancestralfindings.com, copywrite 1995-2019, <http://ancestralfindings.com/5-ways-tell-genealogy-research-accurate/>. Accessed 27 Apr. 2019.
- Association of Professional Genealogists. “Hiring a Professional”, *apgen.org*, copywrite 1996-2019,
<https://www.apgen.org/articles/hire.html>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2019.
- Boston University. Genealogical Programs. Genealogical Programs 2018,
<https://genealogyonline.bu.edu>. Accessed 8 Mar. 2019.
- Bowen, Alison. “Genealogy sites are helping birth parents find children they placed for adoption – but not everyone wants to be found”. *Chicago Tribune*, 18 Apr. 2019,
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/sc-fam-adoption-genealogy-birth-parents-0430-story.html>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2019.
- Money maker, Will. “The Different Types of Libraries Used in Genealogical Research, and Their Unique Values”. *Ancestryfindings.com*, copyright 1995-2019,
<https://ancestralfindings.com/the-different-types-of-libraries-used-in-genealogical-research-and-their-unique-values/>. Accessed 8 Mar. 2019.
- Porter, Pamela Boyer, and Amy Johnson Crow. *Online Roots: How to Discover Your Family's History and Heritage with the Power of the Internet*. Rutledge Hill Press, 2003. P 8-12, 142-143.
- Proulx, Natalie. “Should Law Enforcement Be Able to Use DNA Data From Genealogy Websites for Criminal Investigations”, *www.nytimes.com*, 11 May 2018,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/learning/should-law-enforcement-be-able-to-use-dna-data-from-genealogy-websites-for-criminal-investigations.html>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2019.
- R, Gord. “Hiring a Professional for Genealogy Research.” *Myfamilyhistorygenealogy.com*, June 16, 2016, <http://myfamilyhistorygenealogy.com/genealogy-research/>. Accessed 8 Mar. 2019.
- Romano, Aja. “DNA profiles from ancestry websites helped identify the Golden State Killer suspect.” *Vox.com*, April 27, 2018, <http://www.vox.com/2018/4/27/17290288/golden-state-killer-joseph-james-deangelo-dna-profile-match>. Accessed 27 Apr. 2019.
- Saxena, Jaya. “Why You Should Dig Up Your Family’s History – And How to Do It.” *The New York Times*, 3 Feb., 2019 www.nytimes.com/2019/02/03/smarter-living/why-you-should-dig-up-your-familys-history-and-how-to-do-it.html. Accessed 6 Mar. 2019.
- Study.com. “Become a Genealogist: Education and Career Roadmap.” Copywrite 2003-2019,
https://study.com/articles/Become_a_Genealogist_Education_and_Career_Roadmap.html. Accessed 25 Apr. 2019.