

Genealogy Brick Wall Solutions

At some point, every family historian encounters a barrier in their genealogy research. In genealogy, these barriers are known as brick walls and they can often appear impossible to work around. When you have exhausted all the obvious possibilities, consider the less obvious. This article is all about the less obvious. It is a compilation of some of the best genealogy brick wall solutions that we have accumulated over the years. We hope that some of these genealogy brick wall solutions will give you that "Aha!" moment that will enable you to dig deeper into your family's past. Good luck and happy hunting! Check out our collection of free genealogy brick wall images that you can use as background images for your computer monitor.

Names

Names are often the first brick wall that people researching their ancestors stumble upon. Here are some suggestions to work around name brick walls.

1. Maiden Names - Most countries have a national identification number. In the United States they are called Social Security Numbers; in Canada they are called Social Insurance Numbers. Most countries also allow genealogists to search the application forms for these records if the record is older than a specified cut-off date (usually several decades, it varies by country). These applications always list the mother's maiden name. This is one of the few places on official records where maiden names are found.

2. Maiden Names Again – Another extremely useful place to find a woman's maiden name are in court documents. Divorce cases, property disputes, immigrant change of name, applications for guardianship of a child, etc. all required a woman's maiden name. It should be noted that in early court documents (pre-1900 in the US), a woman was often represented by her husband, father or uncle so be sure to search under their names as well.

3. Middle Names – Names are more fluid than most people realize. It is not unheard of for people to start showing a preference to refer to themselves on official records by their middle name. This can happen even once a person reaches middle age. Always cross check archival records by first name and middle name.

4. Common Family Names – Trying to trace the genealogy of a family with a common surname can often be a challenge. It often comes down to probabilities. For example, wading through page after page of listings of Smiths is not an enjoyable chore. One way that you can tilt the probabilities in your favor is to look at the names of all the immediate family members. Initially, focus your research on the person in the family with the least common first name. This will increase your chances of finding a successful match and also hopefully speed up the search process.

5. Short Family Names – People with short family names often mistakenly think there is little likelihood of a misspelling of their family name in old records. After all, how could you misspell an easy family name like Ball. Well, it is not so much the possibility of a misspelling as the possibility that the spelling of the family name has evolved over time. For example, there is a distinct possibility that a family name that ended in a double letter, like the double 'l' in Ball at one time could have had an 'e' on the end of the name. Ball becomes Balle, Tall becomes Talle, Mann becomes Manne. Always consider this possibility.

6. Aliases – In historical records, people used aliases all the times. A couple of common aliases: using the middle name as a last name, using the mother's maiden name as a last name and anglicizing a non-English family name.

7. Naming Conventions – Most families and many cultures have naming conventions for first and middle names. It is worth asking family members if they know of any naming conventions in the family. Knowledge of naming conventions can often be used to determine the names of the parents and grandparents. For example, it was common in Victorian England that the first name of the first male child was named after the father's father. The second male child was named after the mother's father. The third male child was named after the father. The first female child was named after the mother's mother and the second female child is named after the father's mother and the third female was named after the

mother. You can use this information to take a reasonable guess as to the first names of the parents and grandparents if you know the names and order of birth of all the children.

Of course, this naming convention had a downside. Children of the period often died at childbirth or at a very young age. It was not uncommon for the name of a parent or grandparent to be recycled or reused and given to the next child that was born. To put this another way, if you have an ancestor with a large family and two of the children have the same name, this tells you two things: the first child likely died before the second child was born and the name has great significance to the family.

This brings up another point that needs to be mentioned. Some genealogists do not feel comfortable recording in their family tree the names of children that died very young. We feel you should make the effort. After all, it is your family. If your family will not remember these young children, then who will?

8. Surnames Beginning with a Vowel – Most genealogists are familiar with the need to check spelling variations of family names in old records. People tracing American ancestors need to become familiar with Soundex. However, there is a special case for family names that begin with the vowels a, e, i, o, u and y. These names are often misspelled in records by people adding a consonant in front of the vowel. The most common consonant added to a family name in this kind of situation is an H. So, a name like All becomes Hall, And becomes Hand, Illier becomes Hillier, etc. The reverse is also true for all names that begin with H. Consider searching the family name with the H removed.

Geography

9. Search by Village – Most genealogists get fixated on searching for their ancestors by name. They will then get frustrated when they cannot find a match even after having tried multiple spelling variations on the name. Have you ever thought about searching for someone by another attribute? For example, if you know your ancestor came from a small town or village and you know the approximate date of the record you are looking for, consider performing a search by the village name for that date range. Small villages do not produce that many records. A quick read of the records that pop up for the village may produce some interesting surprises. Like other previously unknown relatives.

10. Street Names Change – Over time, villages grow into towns and towns grown into cities. At least that is how most people envision the past. Towns rarely grow into cities. What usually happens is that several towns close to each other merge to form a city. When this happens, new cities have a problem. There are too many streets with the same name. In other words, there are overlapping street names across the merged towns.

Every town has a main street, an elm street, a church street, etc. but a city can only have one main street, one elm street and so on. That means many streets in the former towns must change names. Therefore, for example, never assume the church street that is listed on your ancestor's record is the same church street today. The best way to check the location of a street name is to consult an old map of the region before the amalgamation and formation of the city.

11. Local Histories – Local histories can be an invaluable source of clues as to what happened to family members. Local histories typically talk about major events in the region that could have impacted the lives of your ancestors. For example, a major drought or a major flood could have forced your ancestor to move. Military conflicts, disease and social influences can also play a major role in migrations. Often, if there a mass exodus of people leaving the region, the local history will give some clue as to where they went.

12. Changing Jurisdictions – Regional and county lines change over time. So do state, provincial and country lines. Genealogists are often tripped up by this fact. When searching for old records in local county libraries and county courthouses, make sure you have the correct county for the time period in question. We cannot stress this one enough.

13. Towns and Occupations – During the industrial revolution (and even today), certain towns were associated with certain industries. Often the associations were specific. For example, in England there

were towns that specialized in making just gloves. This trait can sometimes be applied to entire cities. For example, Detroit is still associated with the automobile.

If the trail of an ancestor has gone cold and you think your ancestor may have moved somewhere else, consider doing a bit of research on the history of the town. It is possible that the town specialized in one industry. This can give a clue as to the occupation of your ancestor. It can also be used to make a reasonable guess as to where your ancestor may have moved. The most common reason people moved is to look for work (which by the way still holds true today). Find other towns that specialized in the same industry as the town where you last traced your ancestor. You may find that your ancestor has moved to one of these towns.

Local Resources

14. Local Grade Schools – If your ancestor comes from a small town or village, you may want to consider writing to the local grade school. Creating family trees is a popular educational lesson for young school children today in many countries. You might find a teacher who is willing to take up the challenge of helping you find a local ancestor. As well, do not forget the children in the local grade school are the living descendants of the people from the region. It is quite possible that one of the parents of the children would know something about the person or family you are researching.

15. Schoolhouse Records – Schoolhouse records are a resource often overlooked by genealogists. Schools always kept detailed class rolls. Schools also took class pictures, which is an excellent way to find photographs of your ancestors when they were children. Schoolhouse records can also be used to confirm dates for an ancestor.

Children often went to school for several years. It is only necessary to find your ancestor listed in just one school year to be able to make a reasonable estimate of their year of birth. Therefore, always try to determine where your ancestor may have gone to school and then see if the schoolhouse records are still available. Typically, old schoolhouse records are located at the local archives.

16. Poorhouses – Poorhouses go by various names in various countries and over different periods of time. However, they always share one common trait of providing welfare and living assistance to those in need. Since this assistance comes at a financial cost, local authorities always recorded and documented who received the aid. Thus, the poorest people in society often had the best records kept on them. Check with local poorhouse societies to see if any of your ancestors are in the records.

17. Electoral Rolls – Electoral rolls are often kept at the municipal or city level to allow local authorities to know who is registered to vote. As well, electoral rolls are often updated on a set schedule, usually at a much higher frequency than census records (which are typically every ten years). Looking through electoral rolls is a good way to narrow down the date range to find out when somebody died or moved out of a region.

Electoral rolls are arguably the most powerful yet overlooked resource available to genealogists. Even countries that do not have census records kept electoral rolls. We have written an entire article on getting the most out of electoral rolls.

18. Neighborhood Church/Synagogue – Most local religious organizations kept annual rosters of their active members. Often, these rosters list the full name of each individual, (sometimes) the date of birth, and place of origin. Besides providing such information, these records also provide an excellent date range for determining when someone moved or died.

19. Vanished Church/Synagogue - During times when government records were sparse or nonexistent, records from religious organizations often provide the best proxy for ancestral information. Churches and synagogues are an excellent place to find records of births, marriages and burials. Do not be discouraged if the church/synagogue of your ancestor has been torn down or disbanded over the years. This does not mean the records have disappeared. Often the records were passed to successor institutions in the region or the records were moved to regional offices. Always check out this possibility.

20. Old Phone Books – In the absence of census information, old phone books can be an invaluable resource. Phone books were usually published once a year. Tracking down old phone books, however, can sometimes be a challenge. Usually the best place to look is the national library of the country. They often maintained the most complete collection. Sometimes major city libraries also maintain old phone book collections of the city and surrounding region.

One thing to remember about incredibly old telephone books (pre 1950s) is that your ancestor might not be listed. It was expensive to own a telephone back then and typically only merchants, wealthy farmers and very rich people could afford such a luxury.

21. City Directories – City directories sorted by street address can also be a valuable source of information. City or street directories (the predecessor of the modern telephone book) often listed useful information such as the occupation of the resident. As well, remember recent immigrants to a city often wanted to live near relatives who had already established a presence in the city. A reading of who lived within two blocks of your ancestor can often produce several previously unknown aunts, uncles and cousins.

Migration

22. Port of Entry – This is a fun one for people looking through passenger ship manifestos to track down ancestors arriving in arriving in Northeastern United States or Eastern Canada. Consider this possibility: they may have arrived by ship in the other country. People migrating to Eastern Canada could have arrived in Boston or another port on the Eastern US seaboard. Similarly, ancestors in the Northeastern United States may have first arrived in Montreal or another Eastern Canadian port and then travelled to the United States.

To understand why this may have occurred, it helps to think like your ancestor. Border guards at the Canada/US border were only formally started in May 1924. Before this time there was usually not even a guard at the border. Thus, crossing the border was not an impediment like it is today. Given that your ancestor's choice of ships was often limited, they would have planned their migration route based on cost, convenience, and accessibility. The Canada/US border would not have been a factor at all.

Always check all possible ports of entry based on the geographic proximity to where your ancestor lived.

23. Migration Home - First generation migrants to a new region or country often got homesick for 'the old country'. When looking for an ancestor where the trail has run cold in the ancestor's later years, consider the possibility that they may have moved back to the region where they were born or where their parents were born. This is more common than most people realize.

24. Migrating Family Units – When a family migrates long distances (and especially across an ocean), don't assume that all the children migrated with the parents. Check the age of the children at the time of migration. Older children may have stayed behind in the old country. This is a fact that is often overlooked when tracing ancestors.

25. Land Records – If your ancestors migrated to farmstead, then they most likely received a land grant. Always check federal and state government land grant records.

26. Place of Birth – One of the great challenges of genealogy is dealing with conflicting information from different sources. For example, a common problem is having two documents showing two different places of birth for the same individual. It is a well-known fact that immigrants often change their name when they move to new countries. For example, immigrants moving to English-speaking countries often try to anglicize their family name. However, it does not necessarily end at just a name change.

Over time immigrants will sometimes want to mask their place of birth and make it look like they were born in their new country, not their old country. Often this is done to fit in better in their new community.

It is particularly common for an immigrant to change their place of birth later in life if their real place of birth has fallen out of favor. For example, during World War I and II immigrants living in the United States would hide the fact they were born in Germany. Always consider this as a possibility when looking at conflicting information on place of birth and any other information that would tie an individual back to the old country. Bottom line – people often changed their place of birth after they had been in their new country for several years.

Names

27. Scottish Ancestors – For a variety of reasons, immigrants often changed their name when they move to a new country (see *Why Immigrants Change Their Name*). Often, it is an attempt to disguise their country of origin. For example, ancestors migrating to an English-speaking country would Anglicize their name (i.e. make it sound more English). What is often not recognized is that someone from an English-speaking country would also sometimes change their name. This was usually done to disguise the region of origin. For example, Scottish immigrants would sometimes drop the 'Mac' at the beginning of their family name to hide the fact they were from Scotland. If you are having trouble tracing an ancestor back to Great Britain, consider the possibility that they may have come from Scotland. Try adding a 'Mac' to the front of your family name. For example, for the surname Arthur try looking for records under MacArthur, the name Grey would become MacGrey, etc. "Common sense is not so common." Voltaire

28. Names of Women Remarrying – Most marriage certificates list a woman's family name before she was married. Do not assume this is your ancestor's maiden name. The marriage certificate you are looking at could be a woman's second marriage and she may be listed by the family name of her first husband. This was incredibly common back in the days when people often died young and had to remarry quickly for economic reasons. Always look for corroborating evidence that you are, in fact, looking at your ancestor's maiden name. Otherwise, you may end up tracing the family tree of your ancestor's first husband. Economic necessity often required a woman to enter a new household quickly after the death of a previous spouse. It was not uncommon for women to remarry within 6 months. If you suspect this may have been the case for a female ancestor, consider looking back at the death records in the same church that your female ancestor was married in starting back from the date of the marriage. Since women typically pick the church for a wedding, it is logical to assume your female ancestor may already have been a member of the church before the wedding. You might find evidence in the church records of a previous spouse.

29. Maiden Names – Here is another innovative way to trace the maiden name of a woman. If one of your female ancestors ever attended a teacher's college or women's school, then consider contacting the alumni association. Most women would have kept in touch with their alumni association after they graduated and would have informed them of any name change when they married. You can use this information to contact the alumni association and trace backwards to determine a woman's maiden name.

30. First Names and Social Status - Several academic studies have shown a link between a parent's level of education, their social background (class), their cultural preferences and the first names they give their children. These patterns can help direct you towards certain types of ancestral records.

31. Naming Convention – In many cultures, children are named after their ancestors. This information can be invaluable in trying to track down previous generations. Sometimes, naming conventions in families can provide even more information. For example, Eastern European Jews typically named children after deceased relatives, not living relatives. Not only does this provide a name into the previous generation but it also provides a date range for the death of one individual and the birth of another.

32. Anglicized Family Names – We have talked before about how people would often anglicize their family name when they move to an English-speaking country. Anglicization is the process of making a name sound more English.

Another possibility is the family (or more likely a ship's officer if your ancestors immigrated by ship) may have translated the name into English. This can occur if the family name happens to be a thing, a color or an occupation.

For example, the French family name Boisvert is popular in Quebec. It directly translates into the name Greenwood in English. So, if your last name is Greenwood and you suspect that your family came from France (or Quebec) then try tracing your ancestors through the name Boisvert.

Always consider the possibility your family name was translated into English when trying to trace your family back to the 'old country'. A neat trick you can use to reverse engineer this possibility is to take your family name and run it through an online translator from English into the language of your ancestors. Just remember, this likelihood is most likely to occur if the family name happens to be something that translates easily into other languages.

33. Anglicized Family Names Again - France was one of the three main countries that helped colonize North America (the other two being Britain and Spain). As a result, many people in North America have French ancestry, even if they are not aware of it. This is most likely if you have ancestors originating from Eastern Canada, Northeastern United States and around Louisiana.

Over time, many people with a French background Anglicized their family names. Sometimes these Anglicizations are fairly easy to figure out, such as the French surname Allain being converted to the English equivalent of Allen. Often, however, the forms of an Anglicized name can be difficult to predict, even for someone well versed in the French language. For example, the French surname La Liberte becoming the English surname Bow.

Fortunately, the *Quebec Genweb Project* maintains an excellent and detailed list of English surnames and their North American French equivalent. This is a wonderful resource to consult if you have French ancestry in your family. Even if you don't think you have any French ancestry, it may well be worth taking a look. Who knows, it could open up a whole new avenue of exploration that you hadn't considered.

Contrary to popular belief, your ancestor's family name was not changed by an immigration official. Official immigration records were derived from ship passenger lists. It was the responsibility of the ship's officers to maintain the passenger list. Unlike immigration officials, many ship officers had limited understanding of foreign languages. They often wrote down the wrong family name.

34. Junior and Senior – The titles junior and senior can provide so much misinformation that we sometimes wonder if it is better to just ignore the titles. Here are some reasons why junior and senior can lead you down the wrong path.

First, don't assume that junior and senior are father and son. The titles junior and senior just means there are two people in the same family with the same first name. It could be a man and his grandfather or a man and his uncle, for example.

In small communities, junior and senior were even sometimes used to distinguish *unrelated* people who happened to have the same first name.

The second major problem with junior and senior is that the title can shift over time for the same person. For example, junior becomes the senior when the senior dies.

The only real information the titles junior and senior provide is that you know someone else in the family or neighborhood had the same first name *and that is all you know*.

Geography

35. Unknown Place Names – When researching your ancestors, it is not uncommon to come across an unknown place name. A quick search of Google maps and other online resources generally end up drawing a blank. What do you do? First, place names are often spelled incorrectly. Consider alternate spellings. Second, realize that if the genealogical record was written a long time ago by a clerk then the place name is most likely written out phonetically. That is, the clerk phonetically transcribed a place name given to him verbally.

For example, consider the spelling variations that could occur one hundred years ago if an American immigration clerk had to write down the name of the German town of your immigrant ancestor. Chances are your ancestor could not read or write so the clerk would just take a best-guess and phonetically spell out the name.

In this example, find someone who is fluent in German and familiar with the general region of your ancestor. Then say the name to them out loud to see if it sounds like any place name in the region. Finally, place names change over time. When all else fails, check a historic map of the region, and say the names on the map to yourself out loud (yes out loud) to see if there are any potential phonetic matches.

36. Censuses - A frequent problem when tracing ancestors is not being able to find them on historic censuses. Have you ever considered the possibility that your ancestor may have moved repeatedly between censuses? This is more common than most people realize.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, people tended to move much more frequently than they do today. This period coincided with massive industrialization in most countries. People moved from farms to cities and from city to city in search of work. As well, widespread home ownership (particularly in cities) was not common. For many of our ancestors, housing accommodation was often a temporary rental.

People who rent tend to move more frequently than people who own (a trend that, incidentally, is still prevalent today). It is also worth noting that historically, our ancestors moved more frequently if they lived in cities, as opposed to the countryside. In addition to moving for jobs, people in the past often moved at times of marriage, childbearing, widowhood, and divorce.

One trick to trying to find an ancestor on a census return who may have moved frequently is to look at all the members of the immediate family. Try to determine who in the immediate family was born, married, or died closest to the date of the census. Then obtain the appropriate certificate for this individual. The address listed on this certificate will be the closest address in time to the census date. You should therefore search census records for this address. It will provide you with the best possibility of finding your missing census record.

Another trick is to use historic online city directories or farm directories. These existed for most communities from about 1880 onwards. Many historic city directories and farm directories have been put online. Try a Google search for historic directories in your region or consult the local library. Historic directories were often updated every one or two years for major cities and thus can be a good source for locating ancestors between ten-year censuses.

37. City Directories – A city directory is in some ways the predecessor to today's telephone book. City directories, however, predate the telephone, contain much more information than a telephone book and often go back over two hundred years in most cities.

Originally, most city directories were essentially business directories. They would list the name and address of the business, the name of the proprietor and other useful information. Over time, however, city directories expanded to include individual households. A typical listing would provide the name of the head of the household, their occupation, their address and often their employer. City directories can be a very reliable means of tracking down individuals and provide a good proxy especially in regions and times where census data is not available or when you suspect your ancestors moved frequently.

Many old city directories contain street maps showing the original names and locations of streets. This can be invaluable in tracing ancestors to a particular location from either census records or the city directory itself.

38. Fire Insurance Maps – A fire insurance map (usually called a Sanborn map in the United States) were detailed maps drawn up by fire insurance companies. These maps list each building in a town, the structure and style of the building and (often) the owner of the building. Although these maps were originally intended to allow fire insurance companies to set policy rates, they can be a valuable source of

genealogical information. You can use them to trace your ancestors to a specific building in town. Most fire insurance maps are now located in local archives or local universities. It is always worth checking to see if fire insurance maps were drawn up for the towns and communities of your ancestors.

Family

39. Dating Photographs - Historic photographs can be an important source of information for genealogists. Too bad many of our ancestors neglected to write down when and where the pictures were taken.

Dating an old photograph can be a challenge. One approach is to look at both the photographic style and the type of paper used by the photographer. This approach, however, can be very technical and requires an in-depth knowledge of photographic techniques and how they evolved over time. A simpler approach is to look for clues in the image itself.

One obvious source of dating an old photograph is to look at the style of clothes worn by the people in the photograph. Fashions changed regularly, usually at least once a decade. This was especially true for woman's fashions.

One thing to note is that you do have to exercise some judgement when using clothes to date a photograph. It is usually best to focus on young women, if possible. They tended to stay up to date with the latest fashions. Men rarely changed fashion and older women often wore the same dresses into their forties and fifties that they had bought when they were in their twenties and thirties.

40. Photocopy the Back of Old Photographs – Having old family photographs can be a real pleasure because a picture tells a thousand words. Too bad your relatives forgot to tell you who is in the picture. You turn the back of the photo over and there is nothing written on it. Well, maybe they did write on it but you just can't see the writing anymore. Try to photocopy the back of the photograph by setting the photocopier to high contrast. You can even try using the enlarge feature on the photocopier.

If there is any faint pencil handwriting on the back, this trick should help bring it out. Why? Traditionally, photographs were very expensive and were only taken on special occasions. Since photographs were expensive, many people wanted to keep the pictures in pristine condition and did not want to write on the back of them. Instead, they relied on their memory. Those that did write on the back tended to use pencil because pencil can be more easily erased.

Pencil can leave a shallow impression on the surface. It is this shallow impression that the photocopier might pick up, not the actual graphite from the pencil, which wears off over time. One word of caution: we do not recommend photocopying the front of the photograph (the side with the picture). The strong light from a photocopier can damage delicate old photographs and make them fade.

41. Men and Double Families – Another marriage puzzle that can occur is when genealogists find evidence that a male ancestor appears to have entered a second marriage without any evidence that the first marriage was terminated. Genealogists often get stumped with this presumed brick wall. Maybe, however, it is not a brick wall at all.

Multiple marriages were more common than most people realize. Always consider this as a possibility when looking at men who seem to have two families. After all, many jurisdictions lacked a central marriage license system. As well, it was quite easy for a person to go by an assumed name.

Are there any clues that can help point someone to this possibility? One attribute of men that have engaged in multiple marriages is that they often had jobs that required them to travel on a regular basis. This would allow them to keep two families more easily in two separate towns. It also took money to maintain two households (where women likely did not work outside of the home). A travelling businessman was the most common profile of someone with two families.

Some cultures/societies also allowed men to have more than one wife. It took money to keep multiple families. Men who did this tended to fit the profile of someone who had their own business *and* travelled frequently.

42. Women's Age and Marriage Certificates – An interesting challenge in genealogy is dealing with conflicting facts. For example, having different documents with different dates of birth for the same individual is a classic conundrum.

One area where this can occur is with a woman's age on marriage certificates. Throughout time and across most cultures it is generally expected that a married woman will be younger than her husband.

Obviously, this is not always the case. However, to ensure this happens, it is not uncommon for a woman to 'shed' several years of age on the date of birth listed on her marriage certificate.

Always consider this as a possibility when looking at the ages listed on marriage certificates. In other words, when tracing back to birth records of married women based on their presumed age on a marriage certificate, it is usually a good idea to look farther back in time if you do not have success with the date stated on the marriage certificate.

Also, if you have conflicting dates between a birth certificate and a marriage certificate, the birth certificate is almost certainly the correct date.

43. Occupations – Many genealogists will record the occupations of their ancestors more out of curiosity than as a possible source of research. However, occupations often run-in families. A single family can produce several generations of butchers or bakers or candlestick makers.

Traditionally, occupations were passed on to the eldest son, although other family members would also often get involved. Thus, when tracing ancestors, consider taking a closer look at their occupations. It can give valuable clues as to where they went and what they did when they arrived at their destination.

Every village needed a blacksmith and a butcher, but certain trades such as textiles and forestry tended to congregate in certain towns and regions. Think about the occupation of your ancestor and what this might have meant as to where they may have travelled to find work.

44. Family Letters – Old family letters sitting in the dusty corner of some attic can be an extremely valuable source of information for genealogists. Names, dates, places and important activities are the cornerstone of most family correspondence. However, a surprising number of people overlook the simple act of sitting down and reading a pile of old letters. Often old letters can appear indecipherable because of poor handwriting or because the letter is written in an unknown language. However, it is usually worth investing the time and effort to either figure out the handwriting or to get someone to translate the letters for you.

If translation is required, the entire letter does not necessarily need to be translated. Even in a foreign language, it is possible to spot names, dates and numbers. You can focus your translation efforts around these key sentences. If you want to save a bit of money, there are many free online translation tools to help you, including *Babelfish* and *Google Translate*. This same logic applies, incidentally, to old journals and diaries.

45. Family Bibles - Family bibles can be a great source of genealogy information. Our ancestors often wrote the names and date of birth of family members on the inside blank pages. However, people sometimes dismiss family bibles because they don't recognize the last names written in it. They think it must be another family's bible. This is where this genealogy tip comes into play.

Family bibles are particularly helpful in tracking down the female lineage of a family. This is because bibles were a family heirloom that was almost always passed down to the oldest daughter in a family.

This means that every generation written in the bible will have a different last name (assuming the woman marries and takes on her husband's name). So, if you have a family bible in your possession, what you are probably looking at are one or more generations of ancestors on your mother, grandmother, g grandmother, gg grandmother's side, etc.

Time to perhaps take another look at that family bible.

Local Resources

46. Land Tax Records – People tracing their ancestors realize at some point that the various levels of governments tend to keep good historical records. This is true even in parts of the world where the national governments were weak. And what part of the government typically kept the best records? The taxman. Personal income tax is a relatively recent phenomenon in most countries (usually begun only within the last 100 years), so it is not particularly useful. Land taxes, however, have been around in one form or another for well over one thousand years (one of the most famous examples would be the *Doomsday Book* of 1086 AD).

It really does pay to try to figure out where the historic records are held for land taxes in your ancestor's region. Land tax records can provide a goldmine of information about your ancestors.

A couple of words of caution, however, before you go down this path. First, most people were not wealthy enough to own land if you go far enough back in time. Most of the land would have been controlled by the local aristocracy. Second, in many countries, people from minority groups were often banned from owning land. Jews, for example, were often prohibited from owning land in much of Europe. So, before you go looking for land tax records, make sure you have a reasonable chance of finding your ancestor on the tax rolls.

47. Searching Historic Small-town Newspapers - Newspapers have often been described as the first draft of history. They can be an excellent source for chronicling the lives of our ancestors. Newspapers are particularly useful in countries and times where government records are thin to nonexistent. Some newspapers, however, are more useful than others for genealogists searching for their ancestors.