



Genealogy Terms Glossary

By Family Tree Editors

Like other areas of study, family history has its own vocabulary that you'll encounter in your research. Our editorial staff has put together this list of key genealogy terms to give you a hand.

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You can also use your browser's Find function to search for a particular word. Click Ctrl-F (Command-F on Mac), then type in a word and hit Enter.

A

abstract

An abbreviated transcription of a document that includes the date of the record and every name it contains. It may also provide relationships or descriptions (witness, executor, bondsman, son, widow) of the people mentioned.

Ahnentafel

A German word meaning "ancestor table." This system of numbering gives each ancestor a number and makes organization and reference easier. Fathers are even numbers, mothers odd. To find a father's number, double the child's number. (For example: If you are 1, the, your father is 2). Add one to the father's number to get the mother's number. (Your mother would be 3.)

aliquot parts

In the Public Land or Rectangular Survey System, a description for an exact subdivision of a section of land using directions and fractions, for example, "W 1/2 SE 1/4" represents the west half of the southeast quarter of a section.

ancestors

The relatives you descend from directly, including parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and so on. Your number of ancestors doubles each generation you move backward: four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, 16 great-great-grandparents and so on.

autosomal DNA (atDNA)

Genetic material inherited equally from mother and father. Many companies sell kits that test atDNA, and results provide information on ethnic origins and DNA matches (people with whom you share a sizable amount of DNA).

B

banns (or marriage banns)

Church-generated documents publicly stating couples' intent to marry. The custom dates back to Colonial America; banns were posted or read on three consecutive Sundays.

block number

A one-, two-, or three-digit number that describes a block (or piece) of land within a township.

bond

A written, signed and witnessed agreement requiring someone to pay a specified amount of money by a given date.

bounty land

Land granted by a government as a reward for military service.

bounty-land warrants

Documents granting the right to the land assigned to soldiers, their heirs and other individuals.

Bureau of Land Management General Land Office (GLO)

The US government office historically in charge of administering public land. Usually, several branch land offices existed for each state. Its website contains a searchable database with millions of digitized federal land patents.

C

cadastral map

A plat map showing the boundaries and owners of land, generally used for tax purposes.

cemetery records

Records of the names and death dates of those buried, as well as maps of grave sites. These records are usually kept by cemetery caretakers, and may include in the names of the deceased's relatives. In addition to these paper records, tombstones also can provide information such as birth and death dates and the names of other family members.

census

An official count of the population in a particular area. In addition to counting the inhabitants of an area, censuses generally collect other details, such as names, ages, citizenship status and ethnic background. The US government began collecting census data in 1790, and has done so every 10 years since then. Selected states have conducted their own censuses over the years.

certified copy

A copy made and attested to by officers having charge of the original and who are authorized to give copies.

chromosome

A threadlike strand of DNA that carries genes and transmits hereditary information.

cluster genealogy

Studying your ancestor as part of a group, or “cluster,” of relatives, friends and neighbors and associates. The cluster approach can help you find (or confirm) details you might miss by looking only at an individual ancestor.

collateral relative

Any kin who aren't in your direct line, such as siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins.

consideration

Money or other property used to purchase land.

convey

To transfer property to another, especially by a deed.

credit patent

A document transferring land to be paid for in installments over a four-year period. A delinquent payment or nonpayment of the full balance resulted in forfeiture. In 1820, Congress required full payment for land at the time of purchase.

D

declaration of intention

An alien's sworn statement that he or she wants to become a US citizen, also called “first papers.” These records, which were filed in federal court, list personal details such as name, age, occupation, birthplace, last foreign residence and more.

deed

A document transferring ownership and title of property from one entity to another. Unlike a patent, a deed records the sale of property from one private individual to another.

deed of trust

A temporary transfer of a property's title to a third party as collateral for debt (often to purchase the property); used in some places instead of a mortgage.

delayed birth certificate

Birth documentation created a significant period of time after a person's birth. In the absence of a birth certificate, a person could provide the government with sufficient evidence and generate a vital record that could be used for official purposes.

descendant report

Similar to an Outline Descendant Chart, the Descendant report in Generations also includes dates and places of birth, death and burial. It's useful as a compact format for displaying detailed information on a person's descendants.

descendants

An ancestor's offspring—children, grandchildren and every new generation in the direct line.

DNA

The molecule that contains each cell's genetic code, organized into 23 pairs of chromosomes. Genetic genealogy tests analyze your Y-DNA, mtDNA or autosomal DNA.

documentation

The process of citing your sources of family history information. Thorough documentation makes it easier for you to keep track of the details and sources you've already researched. It also allows other researchers to verify your findings.

double cousin

A non-sibling with whom you share both sets of grandparents. This can happen, for example, if two brothers from one family marry two sisters from another. Their children will all be double cousins.

dower

A wife's right to share in her husband's property; he couldn't sell or mortgage it without her consent.

E

enumeration districts

Divisions of each county and some large cities used to make census taking more efficient and accurate. For large cities, the boundaries of enumeration districts often match those of wards or precincts.

F

Family History Library (FHL)

The world's largest genealogical information collection, founded in 1894 by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The main branch is in Salt Lake City, Utah, but many of the library's resources can be accessed at its Family History Centers spread across the world. The FHL also operates FamilySearch, a free website with billions of digitized records.

fee simple

Ownership of land that is unconditional, and has no restrictions on how property may be sold or bequeathed.

fee tail

Ownership of land that is restricted to inheritance via a certain heir or type of heir, such as direct descendants.

first cousin

A relative with whom your most recent common ancestor is a grandparent—for example, the children of your parent's sibling (i.e., the children of your aunt or uncle). See “How to Calculate Cousinhood” for more.

five-generation chart

Displays information about a subject and four generations of their ancestors. The five-generation chart has five columns reading from left to right. Column one (a single box) contains your vital information. Column two (two lines) contains the names of your parents and their vital information. The third, fourth and fifth columns have four, eight and sixteen lines, respectively, for you to list the names and vital information of everyone through your great-great-grandparents.

freedman

A male released from slavery; an emancipated person.

G

gazetteer

A geographical dictionary; a book giving names and descriptions of places, usually in alphabetical order.

GEDCOM

GEnealogy Data COMmunications, the universal file format for genealogy databases that allows users of different software programs to share their data with others.

gene

A hereditary unit consisting of a sequence of DNA that occupies a specific location on a chromosome, and determines a particular characteristic in an organism.

genealogy

The study of your family's history; the process of tracing your ancestors back through time.

genetic marker

Represents a specific location on a chromosome where the basic genetic units exist in a variable number of repeated copies.

grantee

A person receiving land.

grantor

A person transferring land to another.

Gregorian calendar

The “New Style” calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 that replaced the Julian calendar. Most Catholic countries adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1582. But other countries adopted the calendar later, creating difficulties when examining historical documents from different countries.

H

haplogroup

An identification of the genetic group your ancient ancestors (10,000 to 60,000 years ago) belonged to; sometimes referred to as your branch of the world’s family tree. Haplogroups are given as part of your mtDNA and Y-DNA test results.

headright

A system, used in several American colonies, in which land was granted to those who paid passage for immigrants, or (generally) land acquired in such a fashion.

homestead

Land obtained from the US government under homestead laws. Part of the agreement between the homesteader and the government was that the individual had to live on the land and make improvements to it, such as adding buildings and clearing fields. Can also refer to a home built on such land.

Homestead Act of 1862

A law allowing people to settle up to 160 acres of public land if they lived on it for five years and made improvements (e.g., built a house or grew crops). The land didn’t cost anything, but the settler paid a filing fee.

index

In genealogical terms, an alphabetical list of names taken from a particular set of records. For example, a census index lists the names of people named in a particular set of census records, such as the 1870 or 1900 census. Indexes can come in many forms: printed documents, CD-ROMs, microfilm or microfiche, and online keyword-searchable databases.

International Genealogical Index (IGI)

An index of people's names that were either submitted to the church, or were extracted from records that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has microfilmed over the years. An archival version of the index is available on FamilySearch.

intestate

Description of a person who died without leaving a will.

J

Julian calendar

The calendar used from 46 BC to about 1582, named for Julius Caesar. It's often referred to as the "Old Style" calendar and was replaced by the Gregorian calendar.

K

kindred

Blood relatives.

L

land-entry case file

A file created when a person claimed land under an act of Congress, such as the Homestead Act of 1862. The person first filled out an application at the local General Land Office, and sometimes provided other information (such as marriage or immigration documents). The file also might contain receipts; affidavits of occupation, immigration, marriage and homestead application; or other materials.

land claim

In record-keeping, an application to receive public land, which became part of the applicant's land-entry case file.

land grant

Public land given to an individual by the government, usually as a reward for military service.

land patent

A document transferring land ownership from the government to another entity.

legacy

Property or money bequeathed to someone in a will.

legal land description

In a land patent, an exact identification of the land being transferred using survey terms.

lien

A claim placed on property by a person who is owed money.

local history

Usually, a book about a particular town or county. Local histories were quite popular in the late 19th century. While they often give the history of the development of the area, they usually also include some information about the important families that lived there.

M

manuscripts

Handwritten documents and records such as diaries, letters, or family Bible entries that can contain items relating to family, business or organization papers. You can find manuscript collections by consulting the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), which shows libraries' holdings.

medical records

Paperwork associated with medical treatments. Medical records, because they are considered private documents, may not be accessible to the public. But hospital records, doctors' or midwives' journals, veterans' files and asylum records can be found with some hunting.

meridian

An imaginary north-south line; a principal meridian is the starting point for a rectangular land survey.

metes and bounds

A land survey method employing compass directions, natural landmarks and distances between points.

military records

Records of military service that have been kept in one form or another by a government. Military records fall into two basic categories—compiled service records and veterans' benefits—and can include volunteer records, pension and bounty land warrant applications, draft registration cards and military discharge papers.

Miracode system

An indexing system similar to Soundex that was used to organize the results of the 1910

census. Miracode index cards are computer generated rather than handwritten, and are organized first by Soundex code, then alphabetically by county, then alphabetically by given name.

mitochondrial DNA

Genetic material both males and females inherit from their mothers. Because it's passed down mostly unchanged from mothers to daughters, mtDNA can tell you about your maternal line—but the results reveal only “deep ancestry,” not definitive links to recent generations.

moiety

A share of property, usually one-half.

mortality schedule

A section of the federal census listing information about persons who died during the census year.

mortgage

A temporary transfer of a property's title as collateral for debt (often to purchase the property).

most recent common ancestor (MRCA)

The ancestor generationally closest to you in a family tree that both you and a relative are a descendant of. Identifying this individual (or couple) is critical in determining how you and another person are related. For example, you and your sibling's MRCA's are your father and mother.

N

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

The United States' archive of all federal records, including census records, military service rolls and pension applications, passenger lists and bounty-land warrants. In addition to the primary archives in Washington, DC, NARA has regional facilities across the nation.

naturalization records

Documents of the process by which an immigrant becomes a citizen. An individual has to live in the United States for a specific period of time and file a series of forms with a court before he or she can become naturalized. Naturalization records provide the birth place and date, date of arrival into the United States, place of residence at the time of naturalization, a personal description and sometimes the ship names and the individual's occupation.

NGS Quarterly (NGSQ) system

A narrative report showing an individual's descendants arranged by generation. Every child in a family gets both a Roman numeral (i, ii, iii ...) and an Arabic numeral (2, 3, 4 ...) . A plus sign indicates that a child appears as a parent in the next generation. Named for the journal of the National Genealogical Society.

New England Historical and Genealogical Register System

A genealogical numbering system showing an individual's descendants arranged by generation. All children in a family get Roman numerals (i, ii, iii ...) and every child later listed as a parent also gets an Arabic numeral (2, 3, 4 ...) so you can easily trace a family line from generation to generation. Named for the journal of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

O

oral history

A collection of family stories told by a member of the family or by a close family friend. You can transcribe an oral history onto paper, or video- or tape-record it. Oral histories often yield stories and information you won't find written in records.

orphan asylum

An orphanage, or home for children whose parents have died.

P

passenger list (or passenger arrival list)

List of the names and information about passengers that arrived on ships into a country. These lists were submitted to customs collectors at every port by the ship's master. Passenger lists were not officially required by the United States government until 1820. Before that date, the information about each passenger varied widely, from names to number of bags.

pedigree

List of a person's ancestors.

pension (military)

A benefit paid regularly to a veteran (or his widow) for military service or a military service-related disability.

Periodical Source Index (PERSI)

A print and online index to more than 11,000 genealogy and local history periodicals published in the United States and Canada between 1847 and 1985. PERSI is a project of the Allen County Library in Fort Wayne, Ind., and available through Findmypast.

petition for naturalization

The second document a person needed to file to become a citizen. These “final papers” were filed in federal court after the applicant filed a declaration of intention, had lived in the country for a set period of time, and waited the appropriate amount of time. The document includes name, residence, occupation, birth date and place, date of arrival, marital status and more.

plat

A drawing that shows the boundaries and features of a piece of property. In genealogy, platting refers to creating such a drawing from a metes-and-bounds or legal land description as a surveyor would have done.

pre-emption

The right of a settler to acquire property that he had occupied before the government officially sold or surveyed it.

primary source

A record or other source created at the time of a particular event. A primary source is always the original record—for example, birth and death certificates are primary sources for those events. But an original record is not always a primary source: For example, a death certificate isn't a primary source of birth information.

probate records

Records disposing of a deceased individual's property. They may include an individual's last will and testament, if one was made. The information you can get from probate records varies, but usually includes the name of the deceased, either the deceased's age at the time of death or birth date, property, members of the family, and the last place of residence.

public land

Land owned by the federal government and sold to individuals.

Public Land System

The land-survey method the General Land Office used most often, employing a grid of east-west and north-south lines that cross at a known geographic position. Townships, each generally 36 square miles, are described in relation to an established meridian and baseline, and subdivided into sections.

Q

quarter section

In the rectangular survey system, one-fourth of a section of land, equal to 160 acres.

quitclaim deed

A common type of deed in which the seller relinquishes claim to a property with no guarantee that the property is free of claims by others (liens).

R

range

In a government survey, the east-west position of a township in a survey grid, numbered in relation to the principal meridian.

real property

Land and anything attached to it, such as houses, buildings, barns, timber and growing crops.

removed (e.g., once removed; twice removed)

A term that describes a situation in which two relatives have a different number of generations between them and a most recent common ancestor. The number (once, twice, etc.) reflects the number of generations' difference. For example, say you and Cousin X have Ancestor Y in common. Ancestor Y is your grandfather, but cousin X's great-grandfather—a one-generation difference. Therefore, you and Cousin X are first cousins once removed. See "How to Calculate Cousinhood" for more.

rectangular survey system

The land-survey method the General Land Office used most often, employing a grid of east-west and north-south lines that cross at a known geographic position. Townships, each generally 36 square miles, are described in relation to an established meridian and baseline, and subdivided into sections.

S

self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE)

When you request records or other information from people and institutions, you should include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) in your letter.

second cousin

A relative with whom your most recent common ancestor is a great-grandparent—for example, the children of your parent's first cousin. See "How to Calculate Cousinhood" for more.

secondary source

A record created after an event occurred, such as a biography, local history, index, oral history interview or computer database. Original records also can be secondary sources

for information about earlier events—for example, a marriage certificate would be a secondary source for a birth date because the birth took place several years before the time of the marriage. Use the details you find in secondary sources as clues until you can verify them in original records.

section

A division of land within a township that measures one square mile (640 acres)—about 1/36 of a township. Sections were further subdivided into half-sections, quarter-sections and sixteenth-sections, or into lots.

Social Security Death Index

An index of Social Security Death records. Generally this includes names of deceased Social Security recipients whose relatives applied for Social Security Death Benefits after their passing. Also included in the millions of records are approximately 400,000 railroad retirement records from the early 1900s to 1950s.

Soundex

A system of coding surnames based on how they sound, which was used to index the 1880 and later censuses. The Soundex system is useful in locating records containing alternate surname spellings. Soundex cards are arranged first by Soundex code, then alphabetically by given name, then (if necessary) alphabetically by place of birth.

state land

Land owned by a state or another entity, rather than by the federal government.

T

township

In a government survey, a square piece of land six miles on each side. Can also refer to the north-south position of a township in a survey grid, numbered in relation to the base line.

third cousin

A relative with whom your most recent common ancestor is a great-great-grandparent—for example, the children of your grandparent's first cousin. See "How to Calculate Cousinhood" for more.

tract

A specified parcel of land.

U

union list or union catalog

A bibliography or catalog of materials held by multiple libraries or repositories, such as the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, a Library of Congress-generated finding aid for personal papers in institutions nationwide.

usury

This term used to refer to all interest paid, not just illegally high interest as it does today.

V

visitation number

On a 1910 Miracode index card, the house number of the indexed individual.

vital records

The most basic information available for a person. These statistics—found in vital records—include birth (abbreviated b), marriage date and place (abbreviated m), divorce date and place if applicable (abbreviated div) and death date and burial place (abbreviated d and bur).

vivandière

A woman who followed a military regiment as a sutler or canteen keeper. Though exact numbers are unknown, many women served in this capacity during the American Civil War.

volume number

On a Soundex or Miracode index card, the number of the census volume in which the indexed name appears.

voter registration

A list of registered voters. Voter registration lists are sometimes the first public records of former slaves.

W

warranty deed

A real estate document in which the seller asserts that the title is valid and not subject to any outstanding liens.

will

A document in which a person outlines what should be done with his or her estate after death. The legal process to see that those instructions are carried out is called probate.

witness

A person who sees an event and signs a document attesting to its content being accurate. Although family members often served as witnesses, don't assume that witnesses on a record are relatives—friends, neighbors and business associates also commonly witnessed documents.

X

X

What the signer of a document would often write if he couldn't write his name. A witness would typically label this "his mark."

Y

Y-DNA

Genetic material passed down from father to son. Because surnames also pass from father to son, Y-DNA tests can confirm (or disprove) genealogical links through a paternal line. Y-DNA surname studies are the most popular application of genetic genealogy.

Z

Zouaves

A name adopted by some Civil War Union volunteer regiments, who wore brightly colored uniforms, similar to the French light infantry units of the same name.