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# FREE ONLINE GENEALOGICAL RECORDS

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We all conduct our genealogical researches by using well-known internet resources such as FamilySearch.org and various paid subscription websites. However, there is also a vast reservoir of additional, often freely available, genealogical source material online. Websites of that sort are rapidly increasing in both number and content. This talk will introduce some of these resources, along with a few examples to demonstrate their usefulness.

Our discussions this evening will be divided into three broad categories: (1) the *National Digital Newspaper Program* newspaper digitization project; (2) online vital records and indexes; (3) biographical and historical narratives. Each of those sections is supplemented by a corresponding appendix which lists websites. The lists are certainly not comprehensive; they merely represent a selection that I have found to be useful.

## The National Digital Newspaper Program

The Library of Congress has partnered with the National Endowment for the Humanities to provide grants for the digitization of all non-copyright-protected pages of U.S. newspapers. Many states and localities are now participating in the project, known as the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP). Eventually all digitized pages will be searchable and freely available through the Library of Congress *Chronicling America* website. Many states have created their own NDNP-specific websites, complete with powerful, fast search engines. For more populous states, the digitization process is actively ongoing, with new records being added frequently. For instance, as of this date the *California Digital Newspaper Program* has digitized over 15 million pages and is adding approximately 10,000 new pages per month. Appendix 1 lists NDNP websites. It's important to keep in mind that newspapers for all states, not just states with their own websites, will eventually be available via the *Chronicling America* website.

**Example:** A patron at the FSC was stymied while trying to understand a large gap in his family history during the latter half of the 1800s. It was apparent that his relatives moved from somewhere in the upper Midwest to California. A search for his family surnames using the *California Digital Newspaper Program* website provided a wealth of information (*Marysville Daily Appeal*, 20 January 1905, page 1, column 4). The obituary of the earliest relative who migrated to California revealed that he came from central Ohio to Yuba County CA by ox cart during the gold rush. Several years later he traveled back to his Ohio origins via the new transcontinental railroad. There he married and then returned to California with his bride, followed shortly thereafter by many other family members.

**Example:** My great-great-grandmother Mary J. Matthews was born in Somerset County, Maryland but lived her adult life in Accomack County, Virginia. I knew the year of her death from a tombstone inscription. But, I couldn't find any death documentation in either the Virginia or Maryland records. A search of the *Virginia Chronicle* website showed that she died suddenly in Georgetown, Sussex County, Delaware while visiting one of her daughters (*Peninsula Enterprise*, 24 January 1903, page 3, column 4). Problem solved – I got her death certificate from Delaware.

**Example:** I wanted to locate any articles that might pertain to the later life period of my paternal grandfather Joseph Andrew Davis, a native of Pennsylvania who died in Worcester County, Maryland in 1940. The Maryland State Archives maintains its own digitized newspaper collection, but that proved to be unproductive. The big, more comprehensive *Chronicling America* database yielded results. Various searches provided many discoveries about my grandfather, including an unsuccessful run for political office, a near-fatal traffic accident, participation in amateur theatrical and musical productions, multiple obituaries, and a very touching post-mortem poem tribute written by a friend (*Worcester Democrat and Ledger-Enterprise*, 31 October 1841, page 2, column 4).

**Example:** One FSC patron was curious about a family rumor that a relative had attacked a policeman in or near Chapel Hill, North Carolina back in the 1960s. A search of the family name using the *DigitalNC* website showed that the rumor was indeed true (*The News of Orange County*, 24 May 1962, section 1, page 6, columns 1–4).

**Example:** I knew from census data and family lore that my great-grandfather Owen Davis died at a comparatively young age, possibly during the great Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood of 31 May 1889. However, his name is not listed in any of the rosters of flood victims. Pennsylvania did not issue death certificates until decades after the flood, so what were the specifics of his death? A search of the *Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive* website gave the answer (*Johnstown Weekly Democrat*, 17 January 1890, page 1, column 5). His obituary describes in detail how the flood waters swept him from his job location as a clerk at the B&O Railroad depot and how he received a severe head injury from which he never fully recovered. He died about 7 months after the flood, leaving a pregnant widow and 4 young children.

## Vital Record Indexes and Documents

A cursory survey of U.S. state archive and library websites indicates that most states either charge explicitly for downloads of vital records or contract with one of the subscription genealogical websites which require membership, and hence indirectly extract payment as dues. Most, however, at least provide some sort of vital record index information free of charge. A few locations, such as Virginia and New York City, offer free downloads of original older vital record documents. (Shortly after Virginia began doing so, FamilySearch also began providing free Virginia records.)

Several states have long been very restrictive about public access to vital records. Maryland, for instance, has required that researchers actually appear in person at the archives in Annapolis in order to hunt for documents. Maryland was recently sued under the Freedom of Information Act by a group of genealogists, and the state lost. A court order now requires that the state's vital records be made openly accessible to the public. Whether they will decide to open up and provide their own cost-free website like Virginia has done, or contract with a subscription service like Pennsylvania does, or create their own pay-as-you-go website remains to be seen. In the meantime, the first batch of free Maryland vital records is available, un-indexed, at both the MD state archives and Reclaim the Records websites listed in Appendix 2. It is also not clear whether the court ruling will apply to other still-restrictive states, thereby forcing them to make public online access to their records easier.

Many European countries (except Scotland!) are quite open with their genealogical records. Almost all have websites that offer good vital record indexes, and many provide free downloads of actual primary source documents. Australian vital records are also indexed for most areas of the country.

**Example:** I began my own genealogical research back in 2000 with a desire to learn more about the only great-grandparent whom I remember well, Asa Gray Mallet. After renting and arduously searching for months through microfilmed census data, I had built a basic outline of his life. He appears in 9 U.S. federal censuses, 1860–1950, first in Maryland, then Virginia. I also knew his death date. So, I confidently sent a money order to the appropriate Virginia agency for a copy of his death certificate. A few months later I received a reply, without a refund, stating that the state had no record of his death. About a decade after that first attempt, I tried a second time. Again that was a waste of time money. Then, a few years ago, Virginia made older vital records freely available online. I logged on to their website and less than 10 minutes later I successfully downloaded his death certificate.

**Example:** An American patron at the FSC needed information about the birth of an Irish ancestor in order to apply for dual citizenship. Irish research is very difficult because most records were lost in a 1922 fire during the civil war. However, indexes to many church records are available online, which aided greatly in the effort.

**Example:** As you know, FamilySearch.org has for several years been rapidly digitizing and indexing their vast collection of microfilmed records. Throughout this period I have been eagerly awaiting each new digitized offering of census and church records for Wales and England (my PA-born paternal grandfather was of 100% Welsh ancestry; my PA-born paternal grandmother was of 100% English ancestry.) Those digitized records were made available before being indexed, which made efficient searching problematic. They are now (mostly) indexed. Before that, several volunteer UK-based index and record transcript websites were available, making searches for FamilySearch's digitized but un-indexed UK records more straightforward. Some church records for remote and small Welsh parishes are still awaiting indexing, so those UK websites (see Appendix 2) are still of considerable use.

**Example:** An FSC patron grew up in the U.S. knowing virtually nothing about his Czech-born mother, except for her name, birth date and birth place. She was a war bride who married an American soldier just after World War II. The Czechia website listed in Appendix 2 provides complete online access to original vital record documents. By using that website and Google Translate, we were able to map out 3 generations of his mother's family.

**Example:** For a long time it has been frustrating to obtain primary vital record certificates from the state of New York, sometimes requiring more than a year's wait. New York City has now digitized more than 10 million such records from all 5 of its boroughs and made them freely available on line. One of my many Virginia-born grand-aunts married a Swedish sea captain. The couple settled in Brooklyn and lost contact with the rest of her family during the early 1900s. It was straightforward to locate their death certificates using the NYC website. The sea captain's certificate revealed a wealth of information.

## Biographical and Historical Narratives

Over the centuries historians, biographers and genealogists have written countless books, pamphlets and magazine articles that are of interest to family history researchers. The number of such publications continues to grow. Once a researcher has identified a publication of potential interest, he or she may find it difficult to obtain access because it may be protected by intellectual property restrictions, such as a copyright, or it may reside in a restricted repository or library. Fortunately many publications, once their copyrights or other ownership constraints have expired, are being digitized and made free available on line. Appendix 3 lists a few websites that are quite useful in that regard.

Of particular interest for those researching ancestry in the northeast and neighboring midwest areas of the U.S. are comprehensive county history books and local county-wide biographical books (a.k.a. "mug books"). Those were all the rage during the roughly 1880-1910 period. Although they were essentially vanity-press publications that solicited payment from local individuals in order to have their biographies and family stories published, such books can be very useful, provided that their assertions are carefully checked for consistency and accuracy.

Another group of useful sources are the so-called "ethnic" magazines that were published from the late 1900's through the 1920s. Those periodicals typically contained articles about immigrant and/or first-generation individuals and families of various specific European origins.

**Example:** *Biographical and Portrait Cyclopaedia of Cambria County, Pennsylvania Comprising About Five Hundred Sketches of the Prominent and Representative Citizens of the County*, Philadelphia: Union Publishing Company (1896). [Downloadable from <https://www.google.com/books/>] It contains two different articles that pertain to my ancestors.

The first is for Richard W. Gittins and begins on page 382. Richard was a brother of my great-great-grandfather Andrew Gittins (that's the correct Welsh spelling of the family surname). The article describes how two whole generations of the family immigrated from Wales to Virginia (to an area that's now in West Virginia) in 1819, then to Cambria County, Pennsylvania. Of particular interest to my research was the article's statement that Richard's great-grandfather, William Gittins, was a farmer who stayed behind in Wales and lived to be over 102 years old. I found baptism and marriage records for the entire immigrant family living around the tiny hamlet of Llanllugan, Powys (Montgomeryshire), Wales. Furthermore, using the articles' information that my 5th great-grandfather William Gittins lived to be almost 103, I found his burial record in the same area. By subtracting 102 years from his death date, I then found his baptism record nearby, which opened the research path to his forebears and allowed me to trace my ancestral lines back to 7th great-grandparents in that part of Wales.

On page 417 of the same publication begins an article about one of my great-uncles, Elmer Ellsworth Davis, a brother of my great-grandfather Owen Davis whom I mentioned above in the newspaper section. It outlines in considerable detail the structure of that branch of my family tree and how it has descended from two different Davies (Welsh spelling) lines.

**Example:** John W. Jordan, *Genealogical and Personal History of Northern Pennsylvania* vol. 1, pages 235–236, New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company (1913). [Downloadable from <https://archive.org>] Finding this publication was a watershed moment for the solution of a "brick-wall" genealogical conundrum. More than a decade before the discovery of this publication, the problem had turned up as follows: From a brief, two-line announcement in a local newspaper, I knew that my great-great-grandfather Andrew Gittins had married my great-great-grandmother Hannah Jones in Cambria County, PA in 1833. Jones is the most common surname for Welsh families. Assuming that she was Welsh-born and that she had immigrated with her family, I had guessed that at least some of her relatives were living in Cambria County at the time of the 1830 or 1840 censuses. Alas, there were dozens of local Jones families revealed by those censuses. By applying a statistical technique known as cluster analysis to vital record indexes back in Wales and to the names of heads of families in the 1830 census, I had narrowed her probable father's name down to just 4 individuals. And there things stayed, stuck for more than a decade. This publication solved the problem. Hannah Jones' father's name was Owen Jones. The publication also listed the other members of her family. By extending the cluster analysis technique to that new information, I was able to discover where in Wales that Jones branch of my family tree originated (Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire) and to extend it further back in time.

**Example:** *Y Cyfaill o'r Hen Wlad Sef Cylchgrawn Misol y Methodistiaid Califinaidd yn America* issue 38, pages 268–269, Utica, New York: T. J. Griffiths, Publisher (1875). [Downloadable from <https://www.google.com/books/>] This is an example of an ethnic periodical, published in the U.S. in the Welsh language. It is an extensive post-mortem tribute to my great-great-grandfather Joseph Davies, written by a Methodist minister who was his friend. The article describes in some detail my ancestor's birth and upbringing in southeastern (Monmouthshire) Wales and his life in Cambria County, Pennsylvania.

## Conclusions and Acknowledgements

I hope that this talk will have provided you with something of interest and of possible utility for your research. If you find any factual or typographical errors in this presentation, please let me know. And, if you are aware of additional free websites that might interest others, please pass along that information. Genealogical explorations are never-ending due to the continual discovery of new material. That is particularly true in this day and age because of the explosive growth of online data availability. So, thanks for your attention, and happy hunting!

I would like to credit my cousin Deborah Bruno for finding and bringing to my attention a couple of the items discussed in the narrative section. Also, my profound thanks goes out to the patrons and staff of the Monterey FamilySearch Center whose questions and puzzles constantly motivate my quests for new information and self-education far beyond the narrow scope of my own genealogy.

# Appendix 1: Websites for the National Digital Newspaper Program

## Entire USA

*Library of Congress — Chronicling America*  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

## Alaska

*Alaska's Digital Newspaper Program*  
<https://lam.alaska.gov/akdnp>

## California

*California Digital Newspaper Program*  
<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc>

## Colorado

*Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*  
<https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/>

## Connecticut

*Connecticut Digital Newspaper Project*  
<https://ctdigitalnewspaperproject.org/>

## Florida

*Florida Digital Newspaper Library*  
<https://newspapers.uflib.ufl.edu/>

## Georgia

*Georgia Historic Newspapers*  
<https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>

## Hawai'i

*Hawai'i Digital Newspaper Program*  
<https://hdnp.library.manoa.hawaii.edu>

## Illinois

*Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections*  
<https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/>

## Indiana

*Hoosier State Chronicles*  
<https://blog.newspapers.library.in.gov/digitized-newspapers/access/>

## Iowa

*Iowa Digital Newspaper Project*  
<https://history.iowa.gov/history/research/collections/newspapers/iowa-digital-newspaper-project>

## Maine

*Maine Newspaper Project*  
<https://digitalmaine.com/newspapers/>

## Minnesota

*Minnesota Digital Newspaper Hub*  
<https://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/hub>

## Missouri

*Missouri Digital Newspapers*  
<https://shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp>

**Nebraska**

*Nebraska Newspapers*

<https://nebnewspapers.unl.edu/>

**Nevada**

*Nevada Digital Newspaper Project*

<https://nvdnp.wordpress.com/>

**New Mexico**

*New Mexico Historical Newspapers*

[https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nm\\_newspapers](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nm_newspapers)

**New York**

*NYS Historic Newspapers*

<https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/>

**North Carolina**

*DigitalNC — North Carolina Newspapers*

<https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/>

**Oklahoma**

*Oklahoma Digital Newspaper Program*

<https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/ODNP/>

**Oregon**

*Historic Oregon Newspapers*

<https://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/>

**Pennsylvania**

*Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive*

<https://panewsarchive.psu.edu>

**South Carolina**

*Historical Newspapers of South Carolina*

<https://historicnewspapers.sc.edu/>

**Texas**

*Texas Digital Newspaper Program*

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/TDNP/>

**Utah**

*Utah Digital Newspapers*

<https://digitalnewspapers.org/>

**Virginia**

*Virginia Chronicle*

<https://viriniachronicle.com/>

**Washington**

*Washington Digital Newspapers*

<https://washingtondigitalnewspapers.org/>

**Wyoming**

*Wyoming Digital Newspaper Collection*

<https://wyomingnewspapers.org/>

## Appendix 2: Useful Websites for Vital Record Indexes and Documents

### Entire USA

*National Archives*

<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/topics>

### Arizona

*Arizona Genealogy Record Search*

<https://www.azdhs.gov/licensing/vital-records/genealogy/index.php>

### Australia

*Convict Records*

<https://convictrecords.com.au>

*New South Wales Vital Records Index*

<https://familyhistory.bdm.nsw.gov.au>

*Queensland Vital Records Index*

<https://www.slq.gov.au/collections/family-history/whos-your-mob/births-deaths-and-marriages>

*South Australia — Genealogy SA*

<https://www.genealogysa.org.au>

*Victoria Vital Records Index*

<https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/research-and-family-history/search-your-family-history>

*Western Australia Vital Records Index*

<https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-justice/online-index-search-tool>

### Austria (Österreich)

*Matricula Online*

<https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/oesterreich/>

### Canada

*Library and Archives Canada*

<https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/collection/research-help/genealogy-family-history/Pages/genealogy-family-history.aspx>

### Connecticut

*Connecticut Genealogy Index*

<https://connecticutgenealogy.org/>

### Czechia (Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia)

*Brno and Moravia Archives*

[www.mza.cz/actapublica/matrika/hledani](http://www.mza.cz/actapublica/matrika/hledani)

### Delaware

*Delaware Historical Society*

<https://digital.dehistory.org/>

*The Duke of York Record*

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015051122581&seq=5>

*Delaware Public Archives*

<https://archives.delaware.gov/digital-archives/>

*University of Delaware Library*

<https://guides.lib.udel.edu/genealogy/>

### England

*Free BMD*

[www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk)

*FreeReg UK*

<https://www.freereg.org.uk>

*Free UK Genealogy*

<https://www.freeukgenealogy.org.uk>

*Cornwall Online Parish Clerks*

<https://www.opc-cornwall.org>  
*Dorset Online Parish Clerks*  
<https://www.opcdorset.org/>  
*Kent Online Parish Clerks*  
<https://kent-opc.org/>  
*Lancashire Online Parish Clerks*  
<https://www.lan-opc.org.uk/>  
*Somerset Online parish Clerks*  
<https://som-opc.org.uk>  
*Sussex Online Parish Clerks*  
<https://www.sussex-opc.org/>

## **France**

*Les registres paroissiaux et d'état civil*  
<https://francearchives.gouv.fr/fr/article/26287743>

## **Germany (Deutschland)**

*Matricula Online*  
<https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/deutschland/>

## **Illinois**

*Statewide Marriage and Death Indexes*  
<https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/databases/home.html>

## **Ireland (Éire)**

*Irish Genealogy Vital Records Index*  
<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/>

## **Italy (Italia)**

*Italian Parish Records*  
<https://www.italianparishrecords.org>  
*Italian Civil Records*  
<https://antenati.cultura.gov.it>

## **Luxembourg**

*Matricula Online*  
<https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/LU/>

## **Maryland**

*Reclaim the Records "Motherlode"*  
<https://www.reclaimtherecords.org/records-request/31/>  
*Maryland State Archives*  
<https://archive.org/details/maryland-state-archives>  
*Dorchester County*  
<https://www.usgenwebsites.org/mdgenweb/dorchester/records.html>  
*Somerset County*  
<https://mdgenweb.org/somerset/histrec/index.htm>  
*Wicomico County*  
<https://mdgenweb.org/wicomico/>  
*Worcester County Library*  
<https://worcester.advantage-preservation.com/>

## **Missouri**

*Missouri Digital Heritage*  
<https://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/birthdeath/#searchdb>

## **New York City**

*Historical Vital Records*  
<https://a860-historicalvitalrecords.nyc.gov/>

## Oregon

*Oregon Historical Records Index*

<https://genealogy.state.or.us/>

## Pennsylvania

*Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission*

<https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Vital-Statistics.aspx>

*Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh*

<https://www.carnegielibrary.org/research-overview/genealogy-historical-collections/>

*Blair County Genealogical Society*

<https://bcgslibrary.org>

*Bucks County Genealogical Society*

<https://www.bucksgen.org/>

*Cambria County Library — Genealogy Indexes*

<https://www.cclsys.org/cambria-genealogy-indexes/>

*Delaware County Historical Society*

<https://www.padelhistory.org/resources>

*German Society of Pennsylvania*

<https://digital.library.villanova.edu/>

*Heinz History Center*

<https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/>

*Jewish Genealogical and Archival Society of Pennsylvania*

<https://jgasgp.org/>

*Lancaster County Historical Society*

<https://www.lancasterhistory.org/>

*Lycoming County Genealogical Society*

<https://lycominglineage.editorx.io/lycominglineage>

*Mennonite Heritage Center*

<https://mhcp.org/library/genealogy-resources/>

*Northeast Pennsylvania Genealogical Society*

<https://nepgs.com/digital-collection/>

*Presbyterian Historical Society*

<https://history.pcusa.org/>

## Slovenia

*Matricula-Online*

<https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/slovenia/>

## Spain (España)

*Spain Public Records*

[https://publicrecords.searchsystems.net/Other\\_Nations/Europe\\_Free\\_Public\\_Records/Spain\\_Public\\_Records/](https://publicrecords.searchsystems.net/Other_Nations/Europe_Free_Public_Records/Spain_Public_Records/)

## Virginia

*Virginia Department of Health*

<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/vital-records/genealogy/>

*GHOTES – Genealogy and History of the Eastern Shore*

<https://www.esva.net/ghotes/>

## Wales (Cymru)

*Free BMD*

[www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk)

*FreeReg UK*

<https://www.freereg.org.uk>

*Free UK Genealogy*

<https://www.freeukgenealogy.org.uk>

*National Library of Wales — Newspapers*

<https://newspapers.library.wales/>

*National Library of Wales — Wills*

<https://www.library.wales/catalogues-searching/catalogues/specialist-catalogues/wills>

## **Appendix 3: Useful Websites for Biographical and Historical Narratives**

### **Google Books**

<https://www.google.com/books/>

### **Internet Archive**

<https://archive.org>

### **HathiTrust Digital Library**

<https://www.hathitrust.org/>