GENEALOGY BY GOOGLE

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Google is much more than just a search engine – family historians should consider it to be one of the most vital resources at our disposal.

Google allows you to find nuggets in some of the most obscure websites; to search the full text of books; to explore the earth from your computer, to search for images; to use maps; to read the news; to exchange email; and to watch video. It will help you to translate text from one language to another (and sometimes give you a chuckle in the process, because it is not perfect.)

It will also help you create blogs, send email, keep track of your life, join groups, sort your photographs, send instant messages and more. These Google "apps" can bring great benefits to genealogists, but we need to take the time to explore them.

You probably have a Google account – and if you don't, you should. Google might be part of your daily web experience thanks to its Chrome browser. (More than 60 per cent of us are using Chrome, making it the most popular browser in the world.) You might even have a Chromebook, a laptop optimized for use with Chrome. In short, Google is everywhere.

Google came into being in 1998 as a web search engine. It soon became known for its amazing speed and its ability to return relevant results – and over the years, it has expanded its range of products so many times that it would be hard to imagine using a computer without using Google as well.

For genealogical research, Google Search remains the most vital feature. Along with searches of millions of websites, you can search maps, images and news sites. Another family history favorite should be Google Books, which offers snippets, previews, or full texts of hundreds of thousands of published works.

This presentation uses examples from my own research, primarily my Ellerby ancestry and probable Ellerbe cousins. The techniques should be the same no matter which family you are searching, wherever they might be. You will need to adjust when dealing with foreign names, or names that could be spelled in a variety of ways.

Your strategy behind a Google search should be simple. Your goal should be to get as many valid hits as possible, while not having to endure a string of hits that are not relevant to you. That is the goal; achieving it will often not be possible. Do your best to focus your searches, but not restrict them so that you miss the pages that could help you.

In Google searches, every word that you enter in the search box will be reflected in your results. Do not worry about capitalization or punctuation, because Google will ignore them. It

will also try to fix spelling mistakes – but sometimes it will try to fix words that are spelled as you want them to be spelled, so take care to ensure that it is searching for the terms you want.

Google's simple design should remind you that as you search, keep your demands as simple as possible. If you are looking for a site with an ancestor or a place, enter the name and see what happens. Narrow your search from that point by adding more words that might be relevant to genealogical research; "cemetery" or "parish register" for example.

Use as few terms as possible, remembering that the goal of each word is to focus the search further. Each additional word could limit the results, which might exclude a site that could help you. And try to envision what you are seeking – a page with cemetery transcriptions might have the name of the town and the county, but probably not the country, so don't bother including it in your search box. Try more than one search, even if you believe you found what you are looking for with your first try.

If you are searching for a family name that is also a common word – such as Spring or Church or Kirk or White, for example – you will need to add words to your search string to get meaningful results. "Genealogy" or "cemetery" or the name of the place might help.

Use the search tools to give more efficiency to your research. You can specify a time frame, the location of the website and more.

Search terms can include more than the words you are looking for. There are many tricks that an advanced user should use. Here are some examples:

• By default, Google assumes there is an "and" between all the words in your search string. You can also use an "OR" between words to get results that will include one word but not the other. The word OR needs to be capitalized. It doesn't always work.

• Use quote marks around two or more words to indicate that you want references to those words in that exact order. Use this feature with caution; a search for "Helen Gordon Stewart" would not catch references to Helen G. Stewart, Helen Stewart, H.G. Stewart, Miss Stewart and so on. It would also not retrieve Ellen Gordon Stewart or Helen Gordon Stewert. You can't always be sure about how your ancestor's name was misspelled or mistyped.

• Use quote marks around a single word to stress that you want the word precisely as you typed it.

• Use a minus (-) sign to show that you do not want the specified word or phrase to appear. Make sure there is a space before the minus sign so Google knows it is not part of a hyphenated word.

• To search within a specific website, add "site:" followed by the web address of the site to the words you are looking for. You can use this parameter in other ways as well. Adding "site:.ca" to the search term will give you results from websites ending in .ca, the Canadian suffix. (But be warned that you would miss Canadian sites that use .com, .org and so on.)

• Use more than one search feature at once to increase your odds of success. For example, a minus sign before "site:.ca" would eliminate all pages with .ca suffixes from your results.

• Search with a date range. Just add (date)..(date), for example 1865..1875.

• Use an asterisk (*) as a wildcard. The theory is that it will deal with unknown terms in your search. It is most effective when your search includes several words, not just one or two, but adding an asterisk will often give you a different list of results.

• Search for words in close proximity to other words of interest. Use the word around and a number on parentheses – for example, Obee around(10) Kent will return results for the word Obee within 10 words of the word Kent.

• Except in rare instances, Google will ignore common words such as "the," "and" and "for," so don't bother including them in your search terms.

• Specify social media sources with an @ symbol. For example, a search for "obee @twitter" will give results showing my surname on Twitter.

• Looking for something that might have been removed from a site? Try putting "cache" in front of the site address, for example (search term) followed by cache:cnn.com

• Want to simplify things? Use the advanced search option, which will guide you through most of the options above, along with a few others. Bear in mind that Google believes in constant updates and changes, so you might find features not in the list above.

• For variety from time to time, use the I'm Feeling Lucky button under the search box. It will take you directly to a page – one you might not have clicked on otherwise.

• Rather than searching for the same terms over and over, let Google do it. Google.com/alerts allows you to set up searches that will be done automatically every day. Just check your inbox for results.

Other Google features:

Google Books: This collection includes references to printed materials from decades ago to the present day that have been digitized and placed on the Internet. Some books are there in their entirety; others are only available as sneak peeks. In any event, it is worth looking through books that might help your research. It is like having a library at your fingertips.

Google News: Often, neat discoveries, new resources, conferences and the like will make the news, at least somewhere. Use genealogical terms to find the latest information in news sources – which is what many bloggers do.

Google News Archive: For a few years, Google digitized newspapers from throughout North America. The project has stalled, but the newspapers remain online. Coverage is not consistent and it is easier to browse than to search, but better than nothing. The Canadian newspaper sites are listed on the CanGenealogy newspaper pages.

Google Maps and Google Earth: You can't do proper research without knowing where places are. And you can't do proper research on the road without knowing where you are, either. Fortunately, help is at hand. Use Google Maps to find places and plot routes (remembering, of course, that things can change with time). And don't forget the Google Maps app for smart phones and mobile devices. Also, be sure to check earlier images, which allow you to see recent changes in a community.

Google Images: Search for images using words, just as you would for a regular web search. But wait – you can also search using other images. Just drop the file into the search box on the Google Images page. (It's cool, but sadly, it's not that accurate.).

Google Docs: Word processing that allows you to share your work with others.

Google Sheets: Spreadsheet that, like Docs, allows easy sharing.

Google Drive: 15 Gigabytes of cloud storage space. If you need more, try Google One. Moving some of your work to "the cloud" can help you in many ways. Google Drive makes it easy to move files from one computer to another, exchange material with distant contacts, or back up your work.

Google Sheets: Presentation software, similar to PowerPoint, that allows you to create an online album.

YouTube: Hundreds of presentations on family history have been posted online. Also check for videos of your areas of ancestral interest.

Google Photos: Organize your photos using this feature.

Google PhotoScan: You can do basic scanning from a mobile device.

Google Translate: A quick way to convert text from one language to another. Be warned, however, it is not perfect; it pays to go through the translated text after Google does its magic, just to be sure.

Google Calendar: Calendar that is accessible across all your devices.

Gmail: Handy, free email service.