

Organizing Your Family History “Stuff”

MPAFUG

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Introduction

- Why call it “stuff?” Family History items needing organization include a lot more than paper documents. What else does it include?
- I am not here to tell you how to organize your “stuff.” We are all different and need to be comfortable with our organization plan.
- I am offering ideas to help you put your plan together depending on what you have, why you are organizing and what goals you hope to reach. My ideas are by no means exhaustive. Adopt and adapt anything here to get you going.

Questions to consider

- What is your goal?
- What kind of stuff do you have?
- To whom should you pass your family history treasures
- Set parameters. What do you want to keep? What is important to you?

Make a plan that will address the above questions

Put the plan into action

- Set aside appropriate time. Whether you organize each day or set aside a day each week, plan the time and follow through.
- Start small. For most of us having so much to organize can be horribly overwhelming! Select one family and then one person within that family. Once you have sorted through the information for that person, go on to the next...
- You might want to summarize your research results on a family group sheet for each ancestor. Family Tree Magazine, FamilySearch and Ancestry are some websites that offer a selection of free forms.
- Back up. Back up. Back up.
- Enjoy the journey!

WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?

- To consolidate genealogy documents, photos, other media for storage and hopefully use by other family members? It is difficult to admit, but I am focusing on this goal as I am getting older.
- To downsize the volumes of paper for your own use?
- To be able to find a document, address for another researcher or create a list of documents on file?
- To find information or photos on your computer quickly and easily?
- To be able to prepare for a research trip with ease?
- To identify Family Heirlooms for the rest of the family?

WHAT KIND OF STUFF DO YOU HAVE?

Documents

- Original documents.
- Copies of originals.
- Copies of documents found online.
- How many copies of each document? Keep only one copy in addition to originals.
- Digital copies.

Other Items to Organize

- Photos
- Old family photos
- Regular family photos
- Photo albums
- Digital photos
- Family Histories with updates
- Heirlooms
- Tapes and videos
- Reference Books
- Research Notes
- Genealogy software – need to create a GEDCOM file to enable transferring to another software package by later generations.

IMPORTANT: No matter what your goal is, there is no right or wrong organizational style as long as it meets your needs. The information outlined here is a suggestion based on research and years of trying different styles as research results grew and multiplied. Only you can decide which style works for you.

Organize in folders? Binders? On computer with a backup copy?

- File Folders: You can keep your family history documents organized by Surname, Locality, type of document, etc. These file folders can be stored in a filing cabinet or file boxes, using regular tabbed file folders or hanging files. Many people decide to give each ancestor their own file folder if they are married or have children. Unmarried ancestors stay in the folder with their parents.
- 3-Ring Binders: Using binders can help to keep your papers straight and in the same order. Original documents should be kept in a page protector to keep them safe. **To accommodate the protectors in a binder, use 9" x 11" tabbed dividers.** (Using page protectors for 8.5" x 11" documents will cover the tabs if you don't use the wider dividers).
- When considering documents, keep all originals in protective sheets. Then have one set of paper documents (if you decide to keep paper documents). If you decide to digitize everything, just keep the original paper documents.
- If you are generous of heart and **do research for extended family members and friends**, keep these files separate from your own family research. You may want to eliminate paper files by giving them to the family member or friend for whom you have done some research. Keep a digital copy in case you need to refer to the information at a later date.

File Names Be consistent! Choices could be:

- If Robert Brown is unmarried, you can file all of his documents (i.e. birth, death and military) in his parents' file folder. Many genealogists choose to give an ancestor their own folder only if they get married or have children.

- If Robert Brown is married, he is given his own folder with all of his documents and documents for his spouse and children until they get married. OR
- If Robert Brown is married, he may be given his own folder with only the documents for events that occurred after the marriage, leaving the birth certificate in his parents' folder.
- Documents for Robert's spouse can be filed in Robert's folder. If you leave her birth certificate with her parents instead of moving it to Robert's folder, be sure to follow through for all other spouses in your tree. BE CONSISTENT!
- Filenames for **FOLDERS**: Before you start making up filenames, consider how easy or difficult it will be to find the files. For instance:
 - Robert Brown
 - Brown, Robert
 - Brown, Robert 1922-2002
 - Brown, Robert 1895-1966 and Elizabeth McCall 1898-1987
 - Brown, Robert 1922-2002, Delavan, WI
- Digital Filenames for **DOCUMENTS OR PHOTOS**: There are so many options for naming documents or photos. You should be able to identify the document or photo by the filename. Just remember to be consistent. Identify the ancestor by name. Given that many first names are repeated in the same family, you may want to add the birth and death year for the ancestor. Identify the type of document, year of event and location of event. For instance:
 - Brown, Robert b. 1895 – Birth Cert. – Chicago, IL
 - Brown, Robert b. 1895 and Elizabeth McCall b. 1898 Marriage Cert. 1920
 - McCall, Elizabeth b. 1898 – Birth Cert. – Milwaukee, WI
 - Brown, Robert b. 1895 – Land Record 1930 Racine, WI
 - Brown, Robert b. 1895 – Death Cert – Milwaukee, WI

Photos (See Aimee Cross video listed below)

- Sort photos
- Photos of ancestors and collateral lines – make sure all are labeled.
- Personal photos – keep in a separate file
- Scan photos in color.
- Select file type for your scan:
- TIFF – file type has more detail, no degradation, not supported by web browsers, very large file
- JPEG – file type has superior compression, you can control file size, can degrade over time
- Recommend 600 dpi or higher
- Check out Randy Ray's handout from September 2002

Heirlooms

- Look around and make a list.
- Items could include family histories, jewelry, china, quilts, furniture, baptismal gown, etc.
- Do you have family members who might like any of these things?
- If you have reference books such as a county history or maps, perhaps your library would like it.
- Take a photo of each item and write a bit of history and circulate to family members.
- Invite family members for a visit to receive the heirlooms in person.

Tapes and Videos

- Transcribe audio tapes and make the stories part of your family history. Send to family members.
- Consider making digital copies for family members.

Research Notes - Scan them and throw out the paper.

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