

## finding your roots

Want to shake some history from your family tree? Online genealogy can make that relatively easy. Here's how to start.

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**U**ntil recently, I had little interest in my ancestry. Not because I think genealogy is boring—I just assumed my own lineage was. Then I got an excited e-mail from my father about a message he had received from the ancestry website Geni.com: “You are a direct descendant of King Edward I. He is your 22nd great-grandfather. Click the link below to see the path.”

Say what, now? I’m a typical midwestern mutt (German, English, Scottish, Norwegian), and I had always figured that my ancestors ate hoecake in sod houses. But I clicked my dad’s link and, sure enough, there was Edward “Longshanks” Plantagenet, so nicknamed for his unusually tall stature. (Hey, I’m five-ten!)

Still, I was skeptical. Doesn’t every family have a myth like this? I had to learn more about this online-genealogy thing—either to unearth the error or to figure out why I didn’t possess any crown jewels. Had I sprung from some rotten branch of the family tree?

### getting started

Genealogy has become a big deal now that online records have made it easier than ever to trace your roots. Ancestry.com has doubled its subscriber base since 2009 and adds about 2 million records (voter lists, passport applications, birth and death certificates) every day.

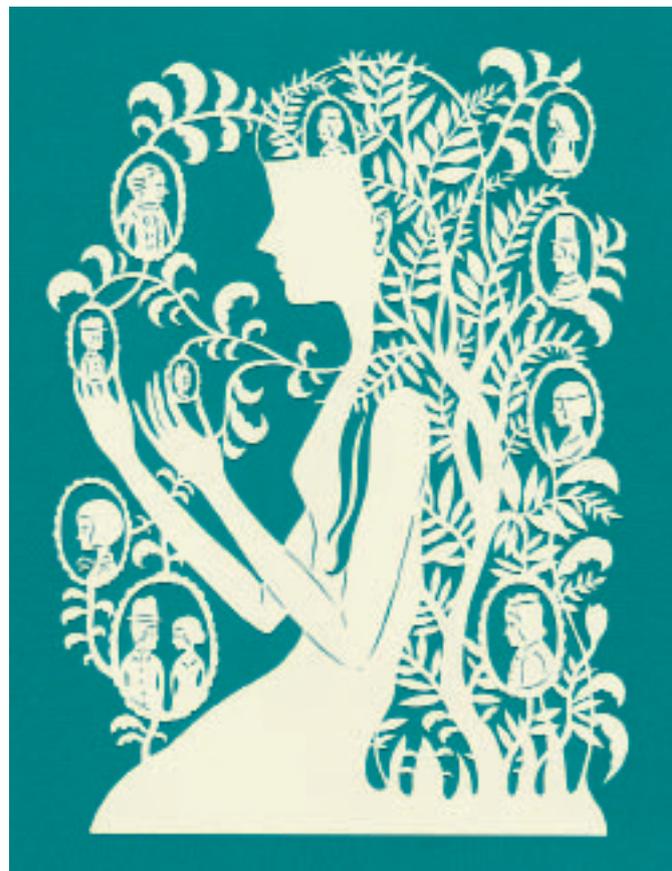
Despite all this accessible information, amateurs still need to start with a little old-fashioned legwork, according to Corey Oiesen, a communications officer for the Association of Professional Genealogists. “People think they can just plug in their grandfather’s name and go,” says Oiesen. “But it will save you a ton of time if you gather a few identifying details before you go online.” Specific search terms, such as dates and middle initials, will yield more fruitful results, particularly if there are multiple people in your family with the same first and last names. Another reason to start offline: Many documents from the

recent past aren’t yet available, since the National Archives and Records Administration keeps data private for 72 years.

Sit down with your chattiest older relative and create a spreadsheet with an entry for each member of the family that you two can name. Include the most vital stats: full name (including maiden), dates (birth, death, marriage), places (birth, residence, marriage, death). Go back as far as you can. Even if you have just one slot filled for some people, every clue helps.

### digging deeper

“I tell everyone to start with FamilySearch.org,” says Oiesen. Sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the nonprofit has been keeping meticulous records for people of all religions worldwide for more than 100 years. The site is free to use, easy to navigate, and allows you to search for a person by location, life event (for example, birth or marriage), or relationship (like spouse or parents). You can also build your tree online and even get personal assistance. There are billions of official documents, such as census



records and draft registrations. These sound dry, but they can yield juicy information, including occupations, names of other people living in the house, or even (in the case of military records) physical descriptions.

Once you’ve mined FamilySearch.org, a smart next step is to join a site like Ancestry, Geni, Wikitree, or My Heritage, which feature both searchable databases and online communities—possibly connecting you to far-flung relatives who are doing their own research. This can be especially helpful if you have a common last name and are having trouble tracking your particular branch, or if you want to learn more about your ancestors in the Old Country. Users can also upload personal

mementos, like photos and diary entries. (In the Overview section of Geni, I learned from a great-uncle that my great-grandfather Resco migrated from New York to Michigan in a covered wagon with his parents, four siblings, and a cow tied to the back.)

Which genealogy site should you choose? It depends on you: The information junkie might like Ancestry; as you add people to your tree, the site offers “hints” about other potential matches in its database. The family historian may prefer Geni or WikiTree, as these have social-networking functions that let you tag photos and notify relatives when you post updates.

Membership for these sites can cost up to \$300 a year, but “compared with the time you would spend digging things up yourself, it’s worth the price to me,” says genealogist Cyndi Ingle



Howells, whose free site, [Cyndislist.com](http://Cyndislist.com), includes more than 300,000 ancestry sites and resources. (Cyndi's List is useful if you want some beginner's hand-holding or have a specific interest—say, Polish families or adoption.)

### verify your info

The trouble with crowdsourced genealogy is that incorrect information can spread easily. "Think of these user-generated lineages as bread crumbs on your trail," says Howells. "But remember that the goal is always to get to the original documents to confirm the facts."

Diligent users will back up their information with notes or links. The most credible records are those reviewed or signed by the person you're researching or someone else who witnessed the event. A birth certificate signed by a doctor is obviously fairly solid; a marriage certificate or a will is a better source than an obituary (which could have been provided by a family member who was grieving or unsure of details like birthplace). Even census records can be tricky. "For most, we cannot determine who gave the information," says Oisen. "It could have been a landlord or a neighbor." Try to compare these documents with more official pieces of evidence, like vital records, tax lists, or military

records, or at least try to find the information in several places.

### getting past roadblocks

No one's search is linear: A marriage record might lead you to a land deed, which leads you to a will, which leads you to more relatives. This is when beginners start to love it or hate it. "It's like a giant puzzle and you're trying to fit the pieces together," says Howells.

If you get stuck, newspapers can be a rich source of information, including birth and wedding announcements, society columns, or news stories (about your great-uncle's barn fire or your fifth cousin's prize pickles). You can troll through microfilm at a local library or search digital archives, such as [GenealogyBank.com](http://GenealogyBank.com). Even old phone books, also typically found in libraries, might help with names and addresses.

And then, sometimes, you can just hit a wall. "I still don't know where my great-great-grandfather came from, and I've been working on it for 35 years," says Dick Eastman, who founded one of the original online genealogy forums and publishes *Eastman's Genealogy Newsletter*. He recently made progress with the help of the latest ancestry trend: DNA testing. "I had suspected that this one particular immigrant could be the missing link," says Eastman, "and then I found that my Y-chromosome DNA was a match with four other men in his family. It doesn't solve my mystery, but it helped narrow things down."

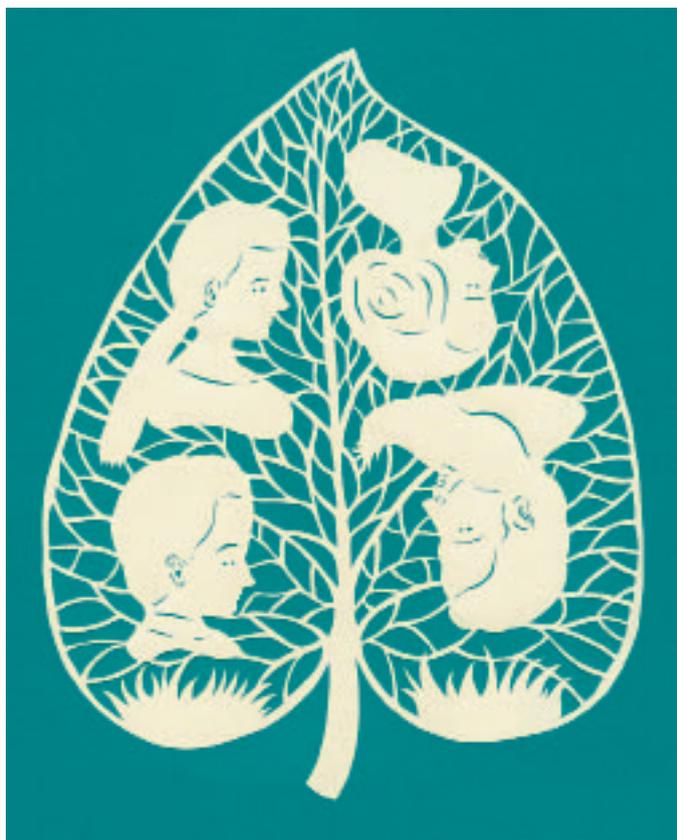
Here's how DNA testing works: You order a kit (available

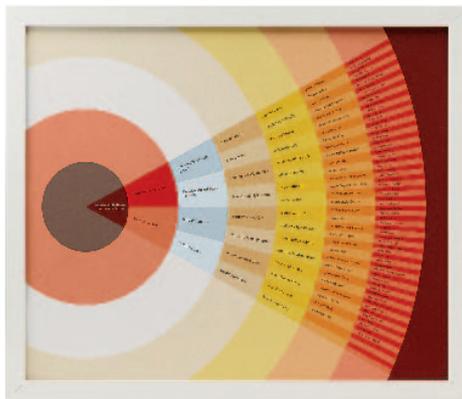
at [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) or [23andMe.com](http://23andMe.com) for about \$100), mail back a saliva sample, and in three to eight weeks (depending on the site), you'll get a full breakdown of your genetic ethnicity as well as a list of other members who share your DNA. [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) will also continue to send DNA matches so you can keep expanding your search. "It's becoming quite popular," says Oiesen, "especially for people who think—or hope—that they have Native American blood."

As a last resort, you can also hire a pro. At the Association of Professional Genealogists site ([apgen.org](http://apgen.org)), you'll find a directory of certified professionals organized by areas of expertise and geographic regions of interest. The cost varies, depending on whether you're hiring on an hourly or project basis. Hourly rates can range from \$30 to more than \$100; project fees can range from \$10 plus expenses (for making copies of records) to thousands of dollars for fleshing out your entire tree.

### fairy tale or fact?

So what about Mr. Longshanks? I confirmed just about every link in the chain, all the way back to my seventh great-grandfather. Beyond that, it could be hogwash. But allegedly my link with the king is Sir William Stanley, my 16th great-grandfather, beheaded by King Henry VII after being accused of treason. Did my family's fortunes all go wrong at the block? Maybe. All I know is that I want to keep searching. After all, this is only one grandmother's chain. I've got three more to explore.

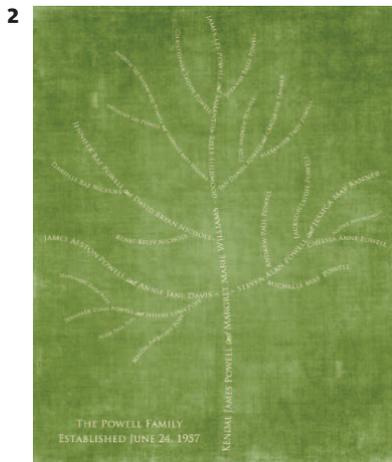




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owned for five generations. At Blurb.com, you can create a family-history book with photos, art, and text (from \$3.99 for a five-by-eight-inch book).

**COMMISSION A PIECE OF ART**

The frameworthy prints shown here turn your family tree into an heirloom.

**1 Slice of Life:** Includes up to seven generations; can be designed for individuals or couples. Size: 31 by 25 inches. \$295, uncommongoods.com.

**2 My Branches:** Includes up to 30 branches; you can put more than one name on each branch. Available in 27 colors and three sizes. From \$30, my-branches.com.

**3 Thyme Family Tree:** Includes four generations. Olive-tree and bird motifs are also available. Size: 13 by 19 inches. \$65, not including frame, evajuliet.etsy.com.

**sharing is caring**

How to preserve your family tree for generations to come.

**GET IT ORGANIZED**

Most genealogy sites offer a family-tree function, which allows you to fill in each piece of the puzzle as you go. If you don't trust that a website will safely store your information forever, consider investing in a software program, such as Family Tree Maker (ancestry.com) or Legacy Family Tree (legacyfamilytree.com). Packages start at \$30.

**TELL THE TALE**

A chart of birth and death dates may be less interesting than the details—for instance, the story of how your family moved to Illinois in 1832 and purchased a 100-acre farm that they



**oral history**

For tips on getting family members to share their stories (and a list of questions to ask), go to [realsimple.com/genealogy](http://realsimple.com/genealogy).