



Preparing for a Research Trip At Home or Abroad

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Genealogical travel can take all sorts of directions. Do you have a business trip or family vacation that just happens to take you close to where an ancestor lived? Are you attending a family reunion, wedding or other event? Will you be attending a genealogical conference (hopefully in Salt Lake City or Ft. Wayne)? Have you decided on a dedicated genealogical trip overseas to your ancestral homeland? No matter what the reason, to get the most out of your trip you need to prepare...that means doing your homework both online and off before you leave. You'll want to spend your time researching records that only exist in the location of your travel as well as visiting the place where your ancestors lived.

If you are planning a major trip to an area you have not visited before, such as an overseas trip or your first visit to the Family History Center, consider an escorted research trip. Having someone who is familiar with the area and repositories will make your trip more productive. It's also nice to have other people with similar interests with whom you can share meals and research successes.

Ready

Once you have decided upon a location, analyze your database to determine what information is missing. If possible, sort your database by location, then begin with those close to the area where you will be traveling to create a research plan for the missing information. Can you fill in the missing information using local resources or the Internet? You don't want to spend your valuable time on a research trip filling in information you could have accessed from home. If you are traveling to a repository with a large number of records such as the Family History Library, prioritize your research by location and family.

Obtain maps of the area. If you will be driving, look at other possibilities for research on your route to and from your destination. In addition to the location of the repositories, mark places of historical interest, as well as cemeteries and churches.

Set

Research the repositories (libraries, archives, courthouses, churches, cemeteries) you plan to visit. Check their hours and any closing information. You don't want to arrive at your location only to find that the repository is undergoing renovations, or that there is a local holiday and the facility is closed. Frequently churches or cemeteries only have part time workers and limited hours. Find out if there are specific fees required to use the facility. Check their policy on electronics. Will you be able to use your laptop? Is there Internet access? Can you use a digital camera or scanner? Do they use copy cards or do you have to have change. If you are using microfilm, do they have printers and are they paper or digital? If the information is not on their website, make a phone call or send an email.

(Hint: Contact the local genealogical society to see if someone is available to assist you. I once hired a local genealogist to spend the day with me at the courthouse. She was familiar with the records and layout and I got so much more done that I would have on my own. This also prepared me for future visits to the courthouse.)

Once the housekeeping issues are taken care of, use their catalogs to determine what records will answer the questions in your research plan. Find out if the documents are onsite, or whether they need to be ordered prior to your arrival. If you are traveling outside the US, you will most likely be working in a facility that has “closed stacks.” You will need to have a Reader’s Ticket and will order the material you wish to review, which will be pulled by the staff. This also requires some planning so material is waiting for you and not the other way around! Read the repository’s policy to understand the requirements for a Reader’s Ticket. Usually, it is a matter of filling out an application, providing identification (passport and sometimes a second form of photo ID with your address) and possibly a passport size photo.

Learn about the history of the area and the people who lived there. Were there specific influences that forced people to leave, or drew them to the area. What were the migration routes in and out of the area that might help you better understand how and why your ancestors got there or left. Some areas have specialized records that you may not be aware of, or have not worked with before. Make sure you understand the context of the records...why they were created...which may explain why your ancestor was, or was not in the record.

Plan for downtime. Working from 8 am until 9 pm every day without time to analyze and adjust your research plan will leave you overwhelmed. Plan to spend some time each evening reviewing the information you collected and adjusting your research plan as necessary. Also consider arranging your trip from Wednesday to Wednesday giving yourself time on Sunday to rest and renew.

GO

Travel light especially if traveling by air! Light weight clothing which can be layered works best (you can never guess whether a repository will be warm or cold). The most important items for genealogists are our records and the best system is the one that works for you! I travel with very little paper, but if you’re a paper person, work to get the material in as concise a form as possible. I would recommend report folders as opposed to rigid binders. You are not likely to have a great deal of space to work in. Another suggestion...keep your files in your carry-on, along with a change of clothes. If the airline loses my luggage, I can live without all my clothes, but not my files. Since my files are typically electronic, they’re on my laptop, tablet and my phone (as well as backups in Dropbox).

If traveling overseas, make certain you have the correct power adapters for your electronics. Most devices have switching power supplies so you’ll only need a plug converter, but verify with your manufacturer. If you plan to use your phone, check with your carrier about adding International service. Make certain you understand how your phone works, and turn off “Roaming” so you don’t get hit with a huge bill on your return. You will usually be able to use the wireless service at your hotel or research facility. There may be a charge for this...always check before you go.

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