



United States Online Search Strategies

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Introduction

Are you having trouble finding your ancestor in the online record collections? If so, the following strategies for searching online records might help. Becoming familiar with a website's search capabilities may be just what you need.

Objectives

- Website field search strategies.
- Website collection filters.
- Local websites.

Website field search strategies

- Use a variety of websites.
 - FamilySearch www.familysearch.org
 - Ancestry www.ancestry.com
 - My Heritage www.myheritage.com
 - Findmypast www.findmypast.com
 - Find A Grave <https://www.findagrave.com>
 - Use tree websites.
- Use alternate name spelling in your searches.
 - Make a list of alternate names.
 - Use nicknames, initials, middle names, etc.
 - Use wildcards in your searches; most websites allow for wildcards. Many use the * to replace 0 to a string of characters and ? to replace 1 character.
 - Search with no first name or no surname.
- Helps for field search strategies

Use the help or learning features on a website to understand how their search engines work. Websites often have articles and even videos on using the field search. Below are links to learning aids on the two most popular websites.

- Ancestry: Ancestry's help feature is called the Support Center and is found by looking in the "Help" tap on the search page. Enter your question into the search box. Example: If you enter in "wildcards" articles about using wildcards come up.

- FamilySearch: Help on FamilySearch is accessed by clicking on the “Help” tab. Under Help you can get instructional help in the Learning Center, Community and the Research Wiki.
- Other helps for field search strategies:

FS Research Wiki article: [Traditional Nicknames in Old Documents](#)

FS Research Wiki article: [Abbreviations for English given names](#)

Website collection filters

Filtering down to the record set you are interested in searching is highly recommended over searching in the general search fields covering the entire world. Most websites have filtering options.

Example: If you want to find your ancestor in the 1880 United States census use the 1880 United States Census collection. Learn how to find the collection you need. Filtering is often referred to as search techniques.

- Helps for collection filtering strategies

Use the help or learning features on a website to understand how their filtering works. Websites often have articles and even videos on filtering. Use the learning aids to become familiar with how to locate a record collection on the website you are using.

Local Websites

There may be local websites housing the very information you need. How do you find them?

- State Archives
- State and local Genealogy Societies
- County websites
- Local public libraries
- Helps for field search strategies
 - FS Research Wiki: search the wiki page for the state and county of interest. Known record sets are linked as well as Archives and Societies
 - Google: search google for the type of records you are interested in locating.