



South Africa: Beginning Research

Daniel R. Jones, MS, AG[®]

Brief History of South Africa:

- 1652: Arrival of the Dutch, slaves to the Cape
- 1680s: Arrival of the Huguenots as families
- 1689: Arrival of orphaned girls from the Netherlands
- Late 1600s-1800s: *Trekboere* - Expansion inland
- 1795, 1806: British Annexation of the Cape Colony
- 1820s: Beginning of British migration to the Cape Colony, Natal
- 1830s: Voortrekkers into Orange Free State, Transvaal
- 1867, 1884: Diamonds and gold discovered
- 1899-1902: Boer War
- 1910: Independence

Genealogical Sources:

- Published genealogies
 - First set of three volumes researched by Pama and de Villiers
 - Second series, greatly expanded (20 volumes), by Heese
 - Arranged by “stamvader;” descendants listed using de Villiers numbering system
 - Compiled sources are useful as a guideline, but may contain errors
- Birth, marriage, death records – civil documents from the government
 - Access to birth certificates restricted by the South African government
 - Many marriage and death certificates are filmed and available online (FamilySearch)
- Baptism, marriage, membership records – religious records from the church
 - 1665: First congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) in Cape Town
 - 1850s: Creation of the Gereformeerde Kerk (GK) and Hervormde Kerk (NHK)
 - 1800s: Methodist and Anglican congregations established in South Africa
 - Baptism, marriage, and membership records arranged by parish
 - Many available at the Family History Library or online at FamilySearch
 - Very few death or burial records
- Death notices and wills
 - Many adults left notices and /or wills
 - Wills can be generic (“I leave to my children”) to specific, listing all heirs, including grandchildren or great-grandchildren
 - Death notices list birthdate, place, residence, parents, living children, stepchildren, etc.
 - Organized by province/court district
 - Most death notices available at the Family History Library

- Census records / tax lists
 - First census: 1691
 - Varies by district
 - Lists of head of household, usually number living in the household
 - Useful in establishing time, place, family size and structure

Naming patterns:

- Afrikaans – began with the first residents
- Names expanded in 1700s, from one to three or more given names
- Almost complete adherence to naming pattern from 1800 onward
 - 1st son: paternal grandfather
 - 2nd son: maternal grandfather
 - 3rd son: father's name
 - Other sons: relatives of the parents
 - 1st daughter: maternal grandmother
 - 2nd daughter: paternal grandmother
 - 3rd daughter: mother
 - Other daughters: relatives of the parents
- Witnesses are usually close relatives: grandparents, aunts, uncles of child.

Peculiarities:

- Marriage ages: females are 15-16, as young as 12; males around 20, as young as 15-16
- Cousin marriages extremely common
- Rarely, females may be given male names or males may be given female names

Useful websites for beginning researchers:

www.familysearch.org – contains millions of scanned records for South Africa; catalog of records available at the Family History Library that may be viewed at any Family History Centre worldwide

www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/South_Africa – FamilySearch Wiki research guide for South African; describes online FamilySearch collections, and various types of records and how to use them.

www.cyndislist.com/south-africa/general – Website topical listing of dozens of website links on various topics including specific family surname websites, research guides, etc.

www.e-family.co.za/ffy/ - First Fifty Years project, attempting to compile genealogical and historical records pertaining to settlement at the Cape for all people, slave and free, for the first fifty years

www.eggsa.org – Genealogical Society of South Africa, has National Archives document ordering service, large gravestone database, newspaper extracts, and highly diverse genealogical collection

www.gisa.org.za/site - Website for the Genealogical Institute of South Africa