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# Online: How You Get There Does Make a Difference

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For your convenience, links to most of the sites mentioned in this lecture are at:

*[ZRoots.com/links.htm](http://ZRoots.com/links.htm)*

This lecture provides examples from different types of Web sites where initial searches failed, but accessing the site in a different way or making the search in a different way brings positive results.

## Part I. Commercial Genealogy Sites

A. Internet search engines may not be allowed to search proprietary material contained within online commercial genealogy sites. A genealogical search with an Internet search engine often finds matches from RootsWeb (free) or from public genealogy message boards, but not from the proprietary (cost money to search) data collections at commercial genealogy sites. However, this trend is changing as commercial genealogy sites recognize the advantages to being more open about their record collections. Google does find and provide a link to record collections within Ancestry which lets you search them (like the 1860 U.S. Federal Census). Ancestry then provides a list of results, and prompts you to sign up for an account (or a 14-day free trial) to view the actual images for the entries in its results list.

B. While there is overlap in content between some of the commercial genealogy sites (example: their every-word searchable book collections), searching the same material with a different search tool often brings different results.

C. Examples of commercial genealogy sites with large collections for the United States:

1. Ancestry
2. Genealogy.com
3. Fold3
4. GenealogyBank
5. HeritageQuest
6. WorldVitalRecords (MyHeritage.com)

D. Examples of commercial genealogy sites focusing on other countries or languages (some with free searches but most requiring paid subscriptions)

1. Fylkesarkivet i Sogn og Fjordane (Norway)
2. Genline (Sweden)
3. Geneanet (supposedly global but heaviest for Belgium and France)
4. genealogy.net (Germany)
5. Origins.net (U.K. and Irish genealogy research)

E. There are three versions of Ancestry.com

1. personal subscription (\$\$\$)
2. library edition (free in subscribing public libraries)
3. Family History Library/Center edition (free in the FHL and Family History Centers)

F. There are a variety of search templates and search levels at Ancestry.com (and other commercial genealogy sites, too)

1. basic search template on home page
2. advanced search template
3. collection specific search templates
4. keyword search templates
5. geographic search focus
6. many of these templates allow wildcard searching (at least at Ancestry.com)
7. browse a collection (search image by image through the records)
8. not all results displays are created equal, example: the lovely name distribution in search results for U.S. Census records at HeritageQuest Online
9. content, although from the same original source, may not be searched or displayed in the same way by different sites
  - i. the size of the PERSI collection at Ancestry.com is 3,014,406 records (updated 11/26/2012) while at HeritageQuest it is over 2.3 million articles [NOTE: records versus articles is like apples to oranges]
  - ii. Social Security Death Index may be updated weekly at one site but not been updated for several years at another site (and may soon be closed to all searchers)

## **Part II. Think Outside the Lines**

A. The advanced search features allowed by online database sites are more limited (because of the length of time they tie up the heavily worked computer servers doing the searches) than a search you make on your computer of a database on CDs or DVDs. CD or DVD data collections (like the out-of-date May 2003 version of the Family History Library Catalog, Pedigree Resource File discs, and 1880 U.S. Census Index with its many discs organized by region), often have additional search capabilities built into them that you simply won't find online.

B. If online and CD searches don't give you the results you need, search classic resources (books, microforms, manuscripts, etc.). Use online resources to find those classic resources.

C. The smaller the geographic area covered by a resource, the more likely you are to find your obscure ancestor. Therefore an 1850 U.S. Census Index book of one county done by a local genealogist (who is familiar with the family names in that area) may be more accurate than an index for a whole census year outsourced to Sri Lanka or China (but not always—comparison of results between online sources and books may surprise you).

D. When you search, think outside geopolitical lines. If the geographic area you are searching returns no results, do a circular search of surrounding counties or states. Consider typical migration patterns: where they went to or where they may have come from.

## Part III. Search Techniques

### A. Family History Library Catalog (and other electronic library catalogs)

1. Do a place search for **Jacksboro** part of **Campbell** (as in Campbell Co., TN)
2. You get only one match--a newspaper published in Jacksboro
3. However, do a keyword search for **jacksboro campbell tennessee** and you get four matches (three more than your place search found) [NOTE: When doing place searches do four types of searches: Place, Keyword, Title, and Subject.]
4. Do a place search on **Tennessee, Campbell** and look closely at the topics list. Notice there is no topic for newspapers. Close the Place search box and open the keyword search on **newspapers Campbell Tennessee** and you get no matches. Close the place search box. Search on **newspapers Campbell Tennessee** and you get twenty-seven matches.
4. When searching for surnames, don't just search the Surname search. Search the Keyword, Author, Title, and Subject searches, too, when available.
5. Do a virtual tour of the book shelves in the FH Library by doing a Call Number Search for a book you know is in that county's shelf area (like 976.872 X2 for an 1850 census index from Campbell Co., TN). Then repeat the search dropping off the number 2 at the end of the call number to see all the census books in the X category for that county. Repeat the search again dropping off the space and X2 at the end of the call number to see all the books on the shelf for that county.
6. Beware the vagaries of electronic library catalogs. A search for **CANNON** brings back different results than **Cannon family** brings back different results than **Cannon families** in many electronic catalogs!
7. What a difference a comma makes. Search the NSDAR Library Catalog for **Hardin County** and you'll find no matches. Search for **Hardin County**, (with a comma after the word county) and you'll find forty-two matches. On the other hand, search the FamilySearch Catalog for Hardin County (with or without the comma) and you'll find no matches because the FS catalog does not use the word "County" with any of its places. Including the designation of county in the search terms causes all matches to be missed.

### B. Searching electronically is very different than searching on paper or even on microfilm.

1. The human brain is much better at spotting name variants than the best search engine.
2. When searching electronically you are searching blindly. You are not as likely to notice all the surnames starting with "S" are missing from an online index. You are not as likely to notice that all the marriage records for six months during the Civil War in one county are missing from the state-wide index you search online. However, the second or third time you search that county's marriage record index on microfilm you might notice what is missing. You should always be suspicious of any electronic record collection's accuracy or completeness.
3. When searching electronically, if you don't get the results you expected (example: you don't find the marriage you think should be there), do a test search for a record you know should be there (example: a search for a SMITH marriage when you know there are many SMITHs in the county where your SMALLWOOD lived). This test search may help you determine the county is not included in the index or the letter "S" is missing from that country's surname entries.

4. Whether searching electronically or in classic ways, don't search just once. You may miss something the first time around. Vary your search methods. Mix and match the pieces of information you include in your search.
5. Beware when using your personal genealogy database program or online subscription services to search for your ancestors at other online sites. They can search farther, faster, and more often than you could in huge record collections; but your human brain can interpret results better. For best results do both. These search tools find matches you'd miss, but you will find matches they miss.

C. To be effective in your searching, you need to know the background/history of:

1. When the state, county, or town was organized.
2. When local boundaries changed.
3. When the local courthouse burned, was flooded, was moved, etc.
4. When the local church split off from its parent organization.

D. Perhaps the most effective search technique is collaboration.

1. Sites like Ancestry, FamilySearch, and MyHeritage allow you to build online family trees. Online family trees, because they include relationships, provide the best electronic matching. For example, the Family Trees portion of Ancestry.com returns the most accurate matches to your electronic searches at that site.
2. Collaboration has a synergistic effect on family tree growth enabling you to leap frog ahead in your research. Example: Cousin Al first contacts you because he found your family tree online and you share a ROBERTS ancestor. He is from the ancestor's second marriage and has inherited the family photos. He shares copies of the photos with you. On the back of one photo is stamped **Le Roy, New York**. You determine Le Roy is in Genesee County and contact the local historical society. They recommend you spend \$5 to obtain a copy of the probate file for that family from the town clerk. You do and the file lists the wife's maiden name (Agnes LORD wife of James ROBERTS) and all the children in the family with their birth dates and birth places. The first four children are listed as born in England. Cousin Al searches and finds an alien registration index showing the family came to Schoharie County, New York on 12 April 1800. You search Boyd's Marriage Index and find a marriage in the right time period for a James ROBERTS to an Agnes LORD in Lancashire, England. You then search the christening records of that parish and find the four oldest children christened in England confirming you have the correct couple in the correct location in England.
3. Today's online technology for personal Web sites, Wikis, and Blogs make it easier than ever to share your research findings and multiply your results. Examples:
  - i. Alphabetical and Geographic surnames lists at  
[www.zroots.com/my\\_surnames.htm](http://www.zroots.com/my_surnames.htm)  
See the additional RENICK research results by clicking on the RENICK link in the Alphabetical List at: [www.zroots.com/Alphabetical.htm](http://www.zroots.com/Alphabetical.htm)
  - ii. see the free RENICK Surname Wiki at Zoho.com for sharing research results
  - iii. many sites give you free space for Blogs and make them easy to create while archiving and making searchable the messages/information posted at your blog.