

Effective Use Of Ancestry.com

by Scott E. Lee

Here are some tips on how to most effectively use Ancestry.com's website to build your family tree. They have software that uses other people's trees to suggest how to extend your own tree. Possible matches in census records, death certificates, military records, and many others are provided as "hints" based on those found in other people's trees.

This is a huge time saver because most of the hints, in my experience, are correct. However, you must keep in mind that a few of these hints will be wrong. Remember that these hints are based on examining other people's trees, and some people are more careful than others.

The first hint they provide is frequently "Ancestry Member Trees," which allows you to compare a person in your tree to a matching person in someone else's tree. You can then pull information from the other tree into yours. I strongly recommend never doing this! You will pull other people's mistakes into your tree. Look at the hint, but never, never click the accept button.

Even though "Ancestry Member Trees" is usually the first hint, I recommend delaying that to be the last place you look. The reason is that it may bias you with incorrect information that can cloud your judgment when reviewing source records.

A note to those new to genealogy: A source record is a document, such as a census record, death certificate, or tombstone, used as evidence for dates, places, and other conclusions about the people in your tree and how they relate to each other. A good genealogist will document the source of every piece of information in the tree. That is every date, place, relationship, and all other information in your tree. Without these documented sources in your tree, other genealogists may disregard your tree as the work of an inexperienced novice.

My recommendation is to first look at all of the hints except "Ancestry Member Trees." Second, click the search button in the upper right corner to do your own search through the many source records. Finally, after exhausting all other avenues, compare what you found with other trees by clicking the "Ancestry Member Trees" hint.

If you see differences between your tree and someone else's tree, don't click the accept button. Instead, look at the source records in the other tree. If you have done

your job right, you will frequently have more source records than the other tree. Sometimes the other tree may have few if any sources. That is a red flag that the other researcher is not an experienced genealogist, and you should have more faith in your own conclusions over theirs. If they do have sources in their tree, compare their sources with yours to decide which conclusion is correct.

Only add a source to your tree when you are confident that it matches the person. Just because the name matches doesn't mean it is the correct person. For example, if you are looking for the parents of someone and find a census record hint listing a child with the right name and age, that is not enough. This may be a mistake made by someone else. You must find more convincing evidence. Try looking for additional records before adding that census record. Perhaps there is a marriage record that lists the names of the parents, or an obituary may give the names of siblings. Sometimes it is useful to print several sources on paper and spread them out on your desk to help see the big picture. Highlight important parts with a highlighter. Ask yourself what evidence do I have that these are the right parents? Remember that a hint is just a hint. Never trust it just because Ancestry presents it as a hint.

When you add a source to your tree, Ancestry automatically fills in dates, places, and relatives so you don't need to type that information. Most of the time the transcription is correct and complete, but not always. Especially with blurry images and sloppy handwriting, there may be errors. Even with good handwriting and sharp images, there may be errors or omissions. Always look at the document image and verify that it is correct and complete. I frequently find that there is missing information, for example, a marriage license may list the parents, but they may be missing in the transcription.

One last recommendation is to normalize dates and places. A date may be transcribed as "10/15/32", or "Oct 15, 1932", or "15 October 1932". If you click in the date field and type a space, Ancestry will normalize it to "15 Oct 1932", which matches the standard format used by genealogists. Likewise, typing a space into the place field will normalize it. If it lists only a state, "USA" will be added. It will also add the county if missing.

A summary of my recommendations: Be skeptical of hints. Save "Ancestry Member Trees" hints for last and never click the accept button. Only add sources when you are confident of a match. Verify transcriptions with the document image. Normalize dates and places.