

Genealogy Research: Divide and Conquer!

Most Americans are some variety of ethnic “stew.” The ingredients that make up their unique family history recipes are the product of the mix of people who preceded them. The flavors and spices are born of the experience of centuries of daily lives and winding roads from past to present. So, where to begin in the quest to decode one’s genealogy?

The old maxim *divide and conquer* is the simplest answer to that question and the best battle strategy as well. In just three prior generations, our direct number of ancestors includes two parents, four grandparents and eight great-grandparents. The rapid multiplication of family lines continues as we push back in time. Even for the most organized new researcher, trying to juggle multiple family line research all at once will result in crossed eyes and the inevitable headache of redoing steps due to the blurring and mental merging of names, dates, and relationships.

I am often asked for advice on how to start genealogical research. I always recommend the divide and conquer strategy and I use it myself when working with clients. Some clients decide that they want me to focus on one specific family line. Others want me to research multiple lines. (A “line” means just one branch anchored by one specific ancestor and looking back at that person’s family history.)

Even in cases of multiple line research, I work on each of the multiple lines separately, keeping my work organized that way—including putting together a family tree chart for each individual line as a framework while I am working. When I put the results of my work into a binder for the client, I section off each line and write a narrative story for each line. Sometimes, I use separate binders for each line if that makes more sense. For example: A current client retained me to research her paternal grandfather’s Polish ancestry. I completed that assignment, compiling all the research and a family history narrative into a binder. About a month later, the client asked me to research her German ancestry, those roots coming from two family lines—a paternal great-grandfather and a maternal great-grandfather. Each German line was researched independently and the research results will be presented separately in one binder with two sections, two narratives and two family tree charts. So, it will be the client’s overall German roots story with each line clearly delineated.

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Choosing an anchor ancestor as the focal point of research is the first step in a divide and conquer approach. Compile everything bit of information you can about that anchor person and make them the start point of an otherwise blank family tree chart that you will use as a handy outline as your research continues. (Believe me, as you immerse yourself in the layers of the anchor person's ancestry, you will be reaching for that chart for a quick refresh to keep things straight.) As you expand your research and explore more than one of your family branches, you can work on merging them as appropriate to create an expansive family tree chart. You have probably seen the enormous family trees prepared for guests on the PBS show *Finding Your Roots*. Impressive!

Remember to breathe life into that chart by expanding your research to learn about the times in which your ancestors lived. From my experience with both family and clients, the reaction to the presentation of family tree charts (even the big ones) pales in comparison to the wide eyes and gaping mouths that accompany the sharing of stories of what our ancestors' lives were really like. Simply said, it's way more likely that people will remember a poignant family story than recalling where some ancestor sat on a family tree chart. That's why family stories are passed down over generations, often losing key details on the journey but continuing to resonate just the same.

After you've added real-life historical flesh to your skeletal family tree chart and have all the makings of a multi-dimensional family saga, turning it into a narrative is the next hurdle. Where to start and how to weave it into a cohesive and compelling story presents a challenge almost equal to the original search for your roots. A divide and conquer strategy is once again useful. Breaking the story up chronologically and writing individual segments works as does framing the overall story around an anchor person. When I climbed over the last brick wall in my decades-long search for my Irish ancestral roots and all the major pieces of a story spanning two centuries came together, I knew who my anchor person was. It was the beloved person whose reluctantly-shared stories of a broken family and a lost childhood left me with so many questions and a persistent need to find answers and context.

So, get out there. Divide and conquer, add flesh to those old family bones, identify a key person to frame your story around and create a family saga that you can share now and pass down for future generations.

