

Making Connections in 5 Steps

Carol Richey shows you how to build historical context to get a better understanding of how your ancestors lived

On display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is a magnificent oil on canvas, John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*. Using numerous sketches he had made at Versailles in 1814, Vanderlyn created a 12-by-165 foot panoramic view of the palace grounds.

As you circle the gallery, you see the palace, the water park, the gardens, the avenue, and the canal. Among the fashionably dressed men and women, you might recognize King Louis XVIII of France, Czar Alexander I of Russia, King Frederick Wilhelm II of Prussia, and even artist standing nearby, pointing them out to his companion. While you may marvel at the many fine details included in Vanderlyn's painting, you cannot fully appreciate it as a work of art by only concentrating on one minute section of the canvas. Rather, you must circle the room to examine how those details interconnect in order to create the all-encompassing view of the palace and gardens of Versailles.

Like Vanderlyn's painting, in genealogy research we need a broader perspective. If we get caught up in examining only the finest details and ignore the bigger picture, our family history remains incomplete. To tell a full story of our ancestors, we must examine their relationship to the larger society and culture in which they lived.

"How can we understand our ancestors without comprehending the times in which they lived?" Dr. David Kyvig, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus in the Department of History at Northern Illinois University, asks. "I know that I could not begin to understand my parents or the way they raised me without developing a strong sense of American society and culture from the nineteen-teens through the 1950s."

In short, genealogists must search for meaning as well as memories. To find such meaning, it is essential to your genealogy research to identify the people and events which shaped your ancestors' lives. But how does one find such information? Much like you have learned to conduct genealogy research, you must learn to use historical inquiry to investigate the many connections of your ancestors to the world about them. With the following five steps, you can discover those connections and build the historical context needed to help you gain a greater understanding of your ancestors' lives.

1 Ask questions

To obtain a fuller picture of your ancestors, you must not only accumulate information, but critically examine it, and ask questions in order to put events in context. When you find a document, try to answer the six basic investigative questions — who, what, when, where, why, and how. Helpful suggestions for beginning historical inquiry can be found in *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, written by Kyvig and Myron Marty, and part of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) book series. Now in its third edition, *Nearby History* guides you through the many types of historical materi-

als you encounter and explains how you can examine them to determine their historical value.

Nearby History includes an extensive list of questions to help guide your historical inquiry. For example, with any documentation you find, the authors point out, you should first evaluate the circumstances under which it was recorded. Who created the document? Were they a neutral party, or did they have a particular interest in how the information was recorded? Were they directly involved, a witness to the event, or obtain the information from someone else? Was it hastily recorded, a routine transaction, or more deliberately created? Was the document intended for personal use only, or to be viewed by others? When was the document recorded — immediately, or long after the event occurred? Is it the original document, an exact replica of the original, or altered in some way? Ask investigative questions about any historical materials you discover.

AASLH also published other volumes in its "Exploring Their History" series which may be of special interest: *Local Schools, Houses and Homes, Public Places, Places of Worship*, and *Local Businesses*. In addition, you may want to check the "Exploring Community History" series, similar in format and covering farms, local government, transportation, volunteer and other community organizations.

2 Learn some history

One of the best ways to understand history is to read history. For example, my paternal grandparents were married in 1928, and their oldest child was born the month before the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression. I learned much about the struggles they faced in those early years by reading narrative histories such as David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, and Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*, both Pulitzer Prize-winning history books.

Well-written narrative history books and documentaries are usually available at your local library and would be excellent starting points for anyone wanting to gain historical context about notable events and people. If you want an overview of a specific time period, you may want to check your library's reference shelves for series which cover the interconnections of everyday life, such as Greenwood Press' "Daily Life Through History," or the "Eyewitness History" volumes. For compelling narrative history books, see the Amazon list, "History Well Told," <http://amazon.com/lm/R1VZ5N54W6DCEC>.

Additional resources for learning historical context are genealogy conferences, magazines, and books. Also look into programs, workshops, and webinars offered through historical and genealogical societies, libraries, museums, and archives. Check out the course offerings at your local community college or university, or consider taking an online history course.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

3 Search the Internet, and then search beyond it

While wonderful historical resources are online, if you rely solely on Internet searches you may be overlooking other relevant material. The electronic catalogs of libraries, state archives, and other repositories may be incomplete or inadequately indexed. Go beyond the online catalogs to look for additional local sources, as older holdings or those with specific

local interest may not be included in digital collections. Since many public libraries have local history collections, you may want to contact the local librarian in the area you are researching to see if other sources on that topic are available in their holdings.

Also remember to check for local history resources available through some of the major genealogy libraries. The Library of Congress genealogy collection, www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy, contains more than 100,000 local histories. You can also find local history materials in the Family History Library by conducting a place-name search of its catalog, <https://familysearch.org/catalog-search>. The Genealogy Center at the Allen County Public Library, www.genealogycenter.org/Home.aspx, which has the largest English-language genealogy and local history periodical collection in the world, collects meaningful resources for every parish and county in the United States and Canada. The Newberry Library, www.newberry.org/genealogy-andlocal-history, a privately endowed research library, has an extensive collection of local histories from all regions of the United States, Canada, and the British Isles, and also holds a sizeable collection of New England town histories and county histories from Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states.

State and provincial archives are yet another helpful resource for finding local history materials. The Council of State Archivists' portal, www.statearchivists.org/genealogy/index.htm, provides contact information for each of the US state and territorial archives. Canadians, www.canadiana.ca, has a discovery portal which provides access to the digital collections of Canadian libraries, museums, archives, and other cultural institutions.

Don't forget to check local historical and genealogical societies. For example, the Wisconsin Historical Society, www.wisconsinhistory.org, includes histories for nearly all 72 Wisconsin counties, and 16,000 historical and biographical local newspaper articles published from 1860 to 1940. Most state historical societies have information on county and regional historical societies. Also check Society Hill's directories of US and Canadian historical societies, www.daddezio.com/society/hill.

4 Verify your information

Local sources can be valuable assets when building historical context. Yet again, it's important to remain skeptical about what information you find until you can verify it with other sources. For example, commercial histories and county atlases contain a great deal of information, including narratives and biographies of local citizens. Yet such sources are often "long on local pride and short on critical observations", Kyvig and Marty caution in *Nearby History*. You will run into similar reliability issues with many other local history resources.

Again, asking questions will help you verify the authenticity and accuracy of what you've discovered. Who recorded the information? What was their intent in doing so? What did they stand to gain or lose by making this information available? How long after the event was the information recorded? Look at the source citation. Is it a primary source or a secondary source? Do you have any other documentation supporting that claim? Is there any documentation that disputes it? A little skepticism and investigation can go a long way in strengthening your historical research.

Learn to apply the five elements of the Genealogical Proof Standard to your research, as outlined in the Board for Certification of Genealogists' *BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*: Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search; include complete and accurate source citations; analyze and assess what you've collected; resolve any conflicting evidence; and write a sound conclusion. For more information on how to apply these standards in order to properly judge the reliability of your sources, see Christine Rose's *Genealogical Proof Standard: Building a Solid Case*, or Elizabeth Shown Mills' *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*.

5 Incorporate what you've learned

While researching the history of your ancestors, find a way to include historical context in your family history. You can add local, national, and worldwide events to your timeline. Rather than briefly mentioning historical events which occurred during your ancestors' lives, make the extra effort to give historical context — to go beyond names and dates — in order to construct a family history narrative rather than mere chronology. Award-winning history books, which cover a wide range of subjects and are written by a diverse group of historians, journalists, and other writers, all have a common element: They read well. These narrative histories go beyond facts, describing events in great detail to develop an engaging story. You can do the same.

Not only will historical context give you a more accurate and complete picture of your ancestors' lives, but it will help you create a more compelling family history narrative to hand down to future generations. Learning to conduct historical inquiry will also improve your research skills, helping you sift through the evidence and allowing you to better assess your sources and analyze the information you've gathered. Best of all, searching nearby history will help you see the connections your ancestors had with the society and culture in which they lived.

To fully appreciate our ancestors' lives, we cannot focus on gathering only names and dates. While those fine details are an important part of our genealogy research, it is essential for us to look beyond those details. Each of us has a personal history waiting to be told, but we also have connections to a family, community, region, and nation. Making those connections were what made life meaningful for our ancestors, and understanding those connections are what make family history meaningful for us.

CAROL RICHEY is a freelance writer who lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana with her husband and five children.