

Online genealogy resources

Harness the power of the Internet to trace your roots.
by Russell Shaw

Your paternal great-grandfather may have passed away many decades ago. Perhaps you know a little about him: where he lived, where he worshipped, and maybe even the year he died. But you want to know more about him, in order to learn more about yourself.

You'll soon discover that the Internet—the World Wide Web, to be precise—is teeming with databases, government records, and church

records that can help you trace your lineage. As new a phenomenon as the Internet and the Web might be, there's no better means of researching your ancestors.

Some of the genealogy information you'll find on the Web is free: RootsWeb.com, for instance, offers no-charge access to the federal government's Social Security Death Index; government death records for the states of California, Kentucky, Maine, and Texas; and a raft of

user-contributed records and databases (birth and death records, land records, military records, marriage records, and much more). The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration's Website (refer to the Contact Information sidebar) also offers a wealth of free genealogy information.

PAY TO PLAY

You'll find even more comprehensive resources if you're willing to cough up a few bucks for access. Typical subscription fees range from \$7.95 to \$29.95 per month, depending on which services and databases you intend to make use of. If you expect your research to stretch over an extended period of time, you'll find that many services offer significant discounts in exchange for annual commitments.

Ancestry.com (owned by the same company that owns RootsWeb.com) is one of the better-known sites. A subscription to their U.S. Premier Collection costs \$29.95 per month or \$199.95 per year. The fee might be hefty, but it does grant you access to a deep well of public records, including U.S. census records and images (up to the 1930s—to maintain privacy, access to individual records is prohibited until 72 years after the census was taken); military records

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying a URL from KarstenGen.com. The page content includes a 'Summary' section with the following text:

Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Schneider (1845-1916) immigrated to America and Ohio, WI Co., in 1897 with his parents Johann Christian Schneider and Catharina Sophia Citz, and brothers and sisters. Their ancestors are Schneiders, see [World Gazetteer](#).

Wilhelm met his wife **Catharina Maria Sophia Reichen** (1812-1878) who came to America with her parents from Osnabrück, near Hildesheim, Germany in 1834. Wilhelm and Sophia were married in 1862 at the St. John's United Church of Christ, Newburg, WA 156, IL.

They married and lived at Chasco, Polk Co., MO in 1884, and are buried in the Chasco City Cemetery.

Below the text is a photograph of a man and a woman, captioned "Sophia Reichen and Wilhelm Schneider".

Below the photograph is a portrait of a man, captioned "Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Schneider".

Additional text on the page includes:

Johann Heinrich WILHELM Schneider
Born: 11 OCT 1845 Schwanau, near Wriedel, Germany
Died: 30 DEC 1916 Chasco, Polk Co., MO
Buried: 01 JAN 1917 Chasco Public Cemetery, Chasco, MO
Father: [Johann Christian Schneider](#)
Mother: [Catharina Sophia Citz](#)

1916 Death Certificate
1916 Obituary
[Catharina Maria Sophia Reichen](#)

Catharina Maria SOPHIA Reichen
Married: 24 NOV 1874 St. John's United Church, Newburg, IL
Died: 20 SEP 1878 Chasco, MO, Schneiders, Germany

→ Churches are often rich sources for genealogists. We discovered this information while visiting Ohio, Nebraska's Grace Lutheran Church and Cemetery Website.

SOUNDS LIKE...

When searching for family records based on surnames, bear in mind that many surnames have alternate spellings. Unless you're absolutely sure about how your ancestors spelled their names, take advantage of the Soundex Indexing technology you'll find on most of the major genealogy sites (including the three mentioned above).

Soundex Indexing is based on the way a surname *sounds*, instead of the way it's spelled. If you're researching the surname "Seeley," for example, Soundex will find records for "Sealey," "Seelye," and "Sealy." Why is this important? Well, one of your ancestors might have decided to vary the spelling of his name for whatever reason: "Roger Smythe" might have become "Roger Smith." It's also an established—albeit unfortunate—fact that the government clerks who processed the waves of immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s routinely misspelled or intentionally anglicized many immigrants' names: the "Wasserstein" family might have been transformed into the "Waterstone" family; many a "Nielsen" immigrant landed on these shores as a "Nelson;" innumerable "Petrillas" were converted to "Petries;" and so on.

The screenshot shows the NARA Genealogy website. The main heading is "Genealogy". Below it, there are sections for "Search Number Records", "Sections" (with links like "US Census 1900", "US Census 1910", etc.), and "Resources" (with links like "Soundex", "How to Use Soundex", etc.). A prominent section titled "The Soundex Indexing System" includes an update from 11/2006 and an image of a hand holding a document. Below this is the "Basic Soundex Coding Rule" and a small diagram of the coding process.

➔ Soundex Indexing will search based on the way a name sounds, rather than the way it's spelled.

(including Civil War rosters and pension records); records from the U.S. Immigration Department (including naturalization records and ships' passenger lists from major ports of arrival); and searchable archive images of U.S., U.K., and Canadian newspapers (from 1786 through the late 1900s).

If your roots-research needs are more modest, Ancestry.com also offers less comprehensive database collections for smaller fees. Their Starter Collection, for example, provides access to U.S. census records from 1880 and 1930, the Social Security Death index, and a few other useful sources.

Genealogy.com offers access to similar—in some cases, the same—records as Ancestry.com, but they also provide a copy of their Family Tree Maker software with an annual subscription (prices range from \$49.99 to \$199.99; monthly subscriptions are also available).

USING ANCESTRY.COM

The best way to initiate a search on Ancestry.com is to click on the site's Search Records tab. Enter the first and last name of the person you're searching for in the boxes provided.

To narrow your search, use the drop-down menus to specify as much information as you know: The country or state in which they resided, the period of time in which they lived, and any keywords that might further narrow your search. Activate Soundex Indexing (refer to the sidebar "Sounds Like...") by choosing that option from the Spelling menu.

Next, take a look at the types of records that Ancestry.com can access by clicking on the Record Type menu. Your options are to search all records (the default), or to narrow your search citations to Birth, Marriage & Death records (including the Social Security Death Index and obituary collections); immigration records (including passenger lists of ships that carried immigrants to various U.S. ports); military records (including World War I draft-registration cards); Trees & Community (ancestry charts and message boards); newspaper articles; biographical records (including slave narratives); a selection of court, land, and probate records; and city directories listing residents and local businesses).

When I decided to search Ancestry.com's databases based on my father's name, Theodore Shaw (a name neither particularly common nor unique) I was almost immediately presented with 708 citations, including:

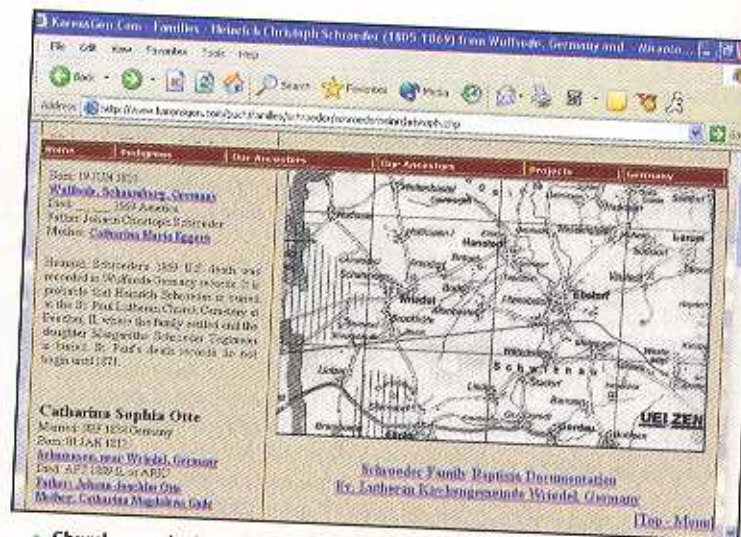
- 19 matches in the Obituary Collection, which contains primarily recent obituaries from hundreds of newspapers.
- 166 census records, including 131 U.S. Census records dating as far back as 1850. There were also citations from 11 states.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a family tree diagram titled "Current Schroeder Pedigree". The tree shows several generations of a family, with names and dates listed for each individual. The browser's address bar shows the URL "http://www.familytree.com/...".

➔ Many families are posting their family trees on the Internet, making it easy for their relatives to learn about their heritage.

TRACE YOUR ROOTS

- 180 birth, marriage, and death records, including marriages performed in Indiana from 1845 to 1920; Washington birth records from 1907 through 1919; and death documentation from a dozen states, as well as from England and Wales.
- 33 military records, most of which dated back to the Civil War.
- 2 Immigration and Naturalization records, including a citation from the 1820 to 1873 Atlantic Ports, Gulf Coasts, and Great Lakes Passenger Lists.
- 180 citations in the archives of more than 55 newspapers, including 26 from the Chronicle-Telegram in Elyria, Ohio.
- 55 directory and membership list entries, including 1890s entries from city directories for Los Angeles, California and Camden, New Jersey.
- 10 biography and history listings, including one from accounts of Hamilton County, Ohio residents and their accomplishments from 1789 to 1881.



→ Church records, both online and offline, often prove to be a rich source of genealogical information for families tracing their roots.

- 77 Trees and Community Listings, including a message-board posting from the February 13, 1942 edition of the Halifax, Nova Scotia Daily Star. The post noted the passing of Mrs. Walter S. Donkin, the former Ada A. Shaw, who was the daughter of the late Theodore Shaw.

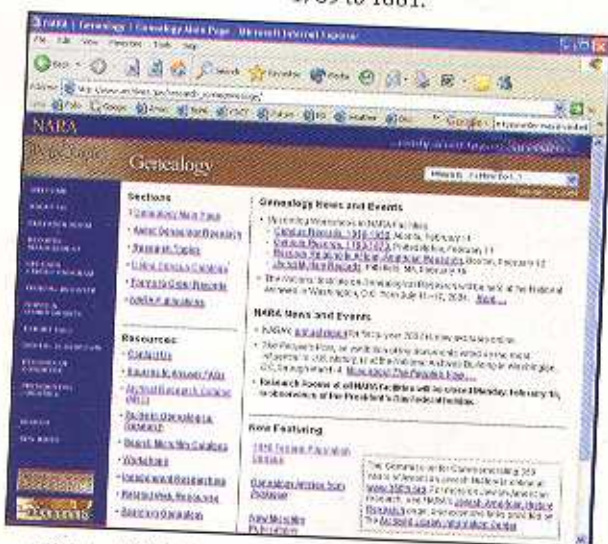
Someone replied that a man with the same name and ancestry (the woman had included this information in her post) was buried in a cemetery in his town. "Wow!" the woman responded "You don't know how long I have been looking for my mother's family."

As useful as these Websites might be, however, there are some of interest to genealogists that are *not* viewable online—but that doesn't mean they're not readily attainable. If you can determine the existence of a record in a federal, state, or local government file, you can typically submit a request for a photocopy of that document. Most of the genealogy sites make this task easier for you by providing pre-made templates.

Whenever you initiate these requests, one of the most useful pieces of information you can provide—besides your ancestor's name, of course—is the date of their death. Many government death records document not only the date and city where the person died, but also the deceased's father and mother; some records even include the mother's maiden name. These details will often enable you to trace your roots even further back.

Although nearly all this information is in the public record, much of it stored on microfilm in places such as the National Archives, it would be quite an undertaking to physically travel to all these places to examine the records. Thanks to these online services, you can view many of these records from the comfort of your own home. What's more, these online resources offer one other service that no physical archive can: online message boards, where researchers can exchange information and findings.

Perusing Ancestry.com's message boards, for instance, I encountered a posting from a woman ardently seeking information about her maternal grandfather, a Theodore Shaw (not my father) who died in rural Colorado during the 1940s.



→ You won't find digitized records here, but National Archives Website is a rich source of information for any genealogist.

72 MILLION NAMES

Where do you start looking for death records? Many genealogy Websites, including the free RootsWeb.com, provide access to the U.S. Social Security Death Index (SSDI). The SSDI is based on information from the U.S. Social Security Administration's Death Master File, which contained 71,801,210 records as of November, 2003. The bulk of these records are of deaths since 1962; prior to that, death records were maintained on paper.

Although it's exhaustive, the SSDI is not fully comprehensive. Go back just a few decades, for instance, and you'll find that millions of women are missing from this record because they never joined the workforce and were thus unknown to the Social Security Administration. That, combined with the fact that the Social Security system wasn't created until 1937, makes this record useless for going back far in time. Still, 72 million names is an impressive collection.

To search the SSDI, enter as much information as you have (first and last name; last known residence based on any or all of the following: state, Zip code, county, and/or city; date of birth and/or death; and so on). The more information you have, the narrower your search results will be; this is particularly important when searching a common surname. Click on the Submit button to begin your search.

Any records matching your criteria will appear in a matter of moments, displaying birth and death dates, their last known residence (including city, county, and Zip code), their Social Security number, and the state in which the number was issued. As valuable as this information might be, you can obtain even more by writing a letter to the Social Security Administration. Request

a photocopy of the deceased's original application for a Social Security card, and you'll obtain information about the applicant's parents and place of residence.

The SSDI will do most of this work for you. In the search-results page, look for the Tools box corresponding to the person whose records you are seeking. Click on the link labeled "SS-5." Lo and behold, a page will pop up with a letter addressed to the Social Security Administration, complete with the specific information for the person whose record you are requesting. Copy this document into your word processor; fill in your name, address, and daytime phone number; print it; and mail it along with a check or money order in the amount of \$27. You should receive the photocopy within weeks.

FINDING OFFLINE RECORDS

As I mentioned previously, not all records are accessible online. Once you've exhausted those that are, you can use the Web to find information about where many of these other records reside and how they can be obtained—without having to make a personal appearance.

It's not surprising that one place most people don't think to look is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC, after all, is best known for tracking and controlling disease. But tucked away on this agency's Website, you'll find a page labeled "Where to Write for Vital Records" (refer to the Contact Information sidebar). On these pages, you'll find contact information for obtaining government records on births, deaths, marriages, and divorces for each of the 50 states, plus New York City, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa.

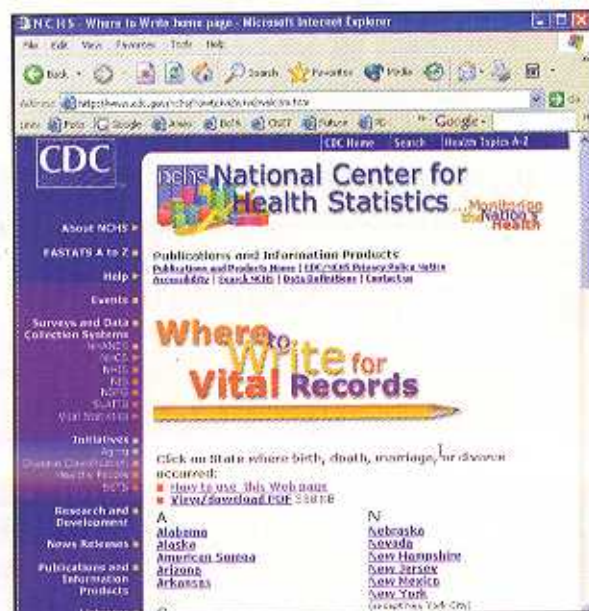
Let's go back to our friend

Theodore Shaw for a moment and see how we would go about tracking down his vital records. We know that Mr. Shaw died in Colorado in the 1940s, so a search of the SSDI would not be productive. But it's safe to assume that Colorado's state government maintains birth and death records.

The CDC's Website tells us which state agency has the records, how far back their records go, fees associated with obtaining copies, a mailing address and a Web address, and much more.

Following the link from this page takes us to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Vital Records. Here we learn even more details about which records are available, and how far back the agency's records go, including death records beginning in 1900. In order to obtain a death record online or via fax, Colorado's site will direct you to a private firm: Vital Record Services (this company handles records requests for most other states, too).

To comply with Colorado's privacy laws, Vital Record



➔ Who'd have guessed that the Center for Disease Control would be such a great resource for genealogists?

Social Security Administration
Office of Central Records Operations
Attention: FOIA Workgroup
P.O. Box 17772
300 N. Geneva Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21220

Please send me a photocopy of the actual application for a Social Security card (Form SS-5--Social Security Number Record Third Party Request for Photocopy) filed by the person listed below.

I obtained this information from the Social Security Death Master File at RootsWeb.com, Inc. who obtained it from the Social Security Death Master File, originally compiled by the Social Security Administration.

My understanding is that the fee is \$27, when the Social Security number is provided or \$28 if the Social Security number is unknown or incorrect. Enclosed is a check or money order for \$_____, made payable to the Social Security Administration.

Thank you for your assistance.

SWAENSKY, SAM
062-95-8883
Birt: 13 Jul 1891
Death: May 1963

Sincerely,

Address:

➔ Many genealogy sites that maintain copies of the Social Security Death Index can automatically produce the letter required to obtain paper records.

Services will issue copies of death certificates only to "the next of kin or to persons who can establish a direct and tangible interest in the certificate." In addition to providing your name and contact information, you'll need to provide either your Social Security number or your driver's license number.

You'll also need to know some specific information about the deceased, including the county and city in which the person died and the approximate date of death. It's important to get this information as accurate as possible, because the firm won't refund their fee (\$15 per

copy, plus shipping and handling) if they're unable to obtain the record.

CHURCH RECORDS

Church records are another fertile field for genealogists. The majority of these records are maintained offline, at individual houses of worship, or in some denominations, at central repositories.

Don't know where to begin your search? Check out Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet (refer to the Contact Information sidebar). Click over to the Topical Category Index and you'll find links for nine Christian denominations,

as well as one for the Jewish faith. One of these links might lead you to information about an ancestor who worshipped at a particular church and who might even be buried that church's cemetery.

Here's an example: A researcher looking into Lutheran ancestors who lived in Nebraska in the early 1900s would start their search by clicking the Lutheran category link on Cyndi's List. Armed with the knowledge that their great-grandfather, Fred Schroeder, resided in Fairmont, Nebraska (Fillmore County), the genealogist clicks on the Locality Specific link and finds a subsequent link to Fillmore County's Grace Lutheran Church and Cemetery.

Grace Lutheran's Website lists the birth and death dates for many of its members, including that of Friedrich Heinrich Schroeder. Clicking on this link delivers a photograph of a tombstone bearing the names of Fred H. Schroeder and Louise G. Schroeder.

Clicking on the Pedigrees button at the top of the page delivers another page containing more than 15 family trees, including one for Schroeder. Following this link, the genealogist learns that his great-grandfather had six sisters and three brothers; that his great-great-grandfather, Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Schroeder, immigrated to the United States—with his mother and father—from Schatensen, Germany in 1867.

The year in which the Schroeders arrived in the United States also marked the invention of the typewriter. The development of the personal computer and Internet, meanwhile, were more than 100 years into their future. But thanks to these inventions, one can easily trace the histories of these and millions of other people back through time. How far back will you be able to go? ■

CONTACT INFO

Here's where you can obtain additional information about the online genealogy resources mentioned in this story:

ANCESTRY.COM
www.ancestry.com

ROOTSWEB.COM
www.rootsweb.com

CDC'S VITAL RECORDS SITE
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/howto/w2w/w2welcom.htm>

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/

CYNDI'S LIST OF GENEALOGY SITES
www.cyndislist.com

VITAL RECORD SERVICES
<http://www.vitalchek.com>

GENEALOGY.COM
www.genealogy.com