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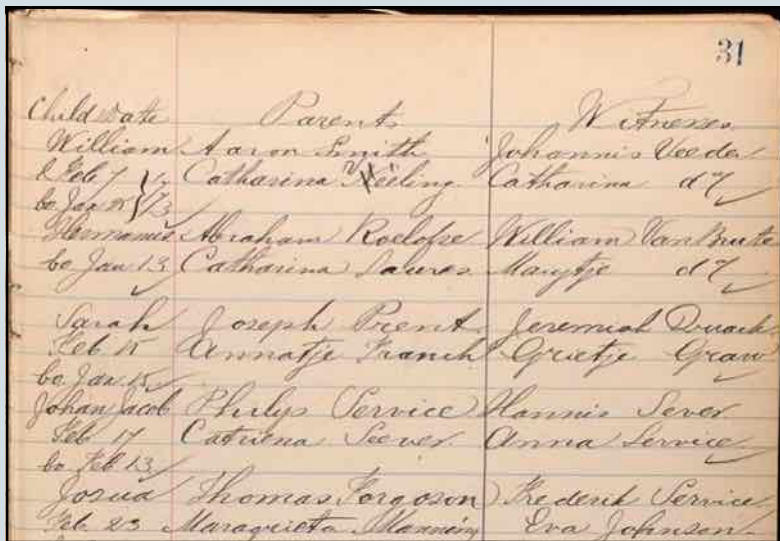
October 2014

SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

# PastFinder

How to find it

## U.S. church records in genealogy



U.S. Dutch Reformed Church records from Cagnawaga or Fonda, New York (Image from Ancestry.com)

By Richard Rands

The good news for us Americans is that we do not have a state religion. The bad news for us genealogists in America is that there has never been a state religion.

When trying to uncover our ancestral details without the benefit of census records, military records, land records, court records, or vital records, we often hope that churches kept at least minimal birth, baptism, marriage, or death records.

But with such a huge diversity of religious practice in Colonial America and the United States, we are faced with seeking a type of needle-in-a-haystack. The task of navigating the plethora of church record-keeping policies, or lack thereof, for hundreds of sects to look for some family history tidbit makes finding church records in America a daunting ordeal.

What advice can increase, however slightly, the chances of success?

To develop an analytical technique for church record research, first pin

down the search criteria that will identify the most likely religion or religions to target first.

For example, identifying the locality and the time frame of your ancestor can significantly narrow the choice of religions. Then by figuring out which religious groups existed in that area at that time, you can prioritize your research tasks.

Of course, the more narrow the locale and time period, the more precise you can be. But more often than not, we do not have the luxury of narrowing criteria. Take, for example, a person named

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Outside and Inside

- U.S. religions' genealogy records (above)
- Fun and games with Family Tree (page 4)
- Whadya think this is? (page 6)
- Ask the Doctor: Centralized (page 7)
- What didja think it was? (page 8)
- Remembering Zoia Horn (page 8)
- About the group, classes (page 8)
- SVCGG board, contact info (page 8)

# U.S. church records in genealogy (*continued*)

(Continued from page 1)

Jacob Helvey, who was identified in his 1850 U.S. Census record in Reynolds County, Missouri, as 32 years of age – thus born about 1818 – born in Tennessee. The task is to discover who his parents were.

Whether you can use church records to find a birth record depends on determining which church or churches were active in Tennessee in 1818. But Tennessee is no small area, and the Tennessee Research Outline published by the Family History Library in Salt Lake City indicates that “the Tennessee State Library and Archives has pre-1900 records from 100 churches.” Even the outline’s statement that “before 1900 the largest religious groups in Tennessee were the Baptist, Christian (Disciples of Christ), Methodist, and Presbyterian churches” doesn’t offer much help. Is this list ordered by size, or is it alphabetical?

Helvey family tradition suggests that many succeeding generations belonged to the Baptist Church. Earlier records suggest that the Helvey ancestors arrived in Tennessee from Virginia and later migrated to Missouri. Historians point out that many early Scots-Irish immigrants settled in eastern Tennessee, bringing with them Presbyterian roots, which led the Presbyterian synod in Virginia to send ministers to establish churches in Tennessee.

With this in mind, my recommendation would be to focus initially on Presbyterian and Baptist baptismal records to identify Jacob Helvey’s parents. Further justification of this plan arises from the story that the rancorous religious fervor among the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in Tennessee during this time frame led some Presbyterians and their ministers to flee to Missouri. A study of the religious situation in Reynolds County, Missouri, at this juncture might also add clues to the religious leanings of the ancestor.

Needless to say, it is not commonplace to have this much detail about your ancestors, or to know much detail about the early religious history of a locality. Thus we are usually left to scour the church records of a variety of religions in our quest for details. Here are some additional factors that can help you prioritize your search time and narrow the scope.

**If a religion practiced a baptismal rite, it is**

**crucial to know whether they performed infant baptisms.** Infant baptism does not rule out baptisms of adult converts; however, baptisms frequently occur relatively close to the child’s birth date and thus can provide a much tidier progression from child to parent. Records from religions that practice so-called “faith-based” baptism make it hard to establish family relationships because age at baptism bears no relationship to the baptized person’s birth date.

**It is always helpful to have a clear knowledge of the historical precedence of record-keeping for a religion.** Some immigrants who came to America to escape persecution and discrimination in their homeland avoided maintaining any family records. In the event their religious or ethnic affiliations might lead to banishment, forced poverty, or even death, every traceable hint of what they believed or how they worshipped might be eliminated. Recognizing that hoped-for records will not be available can prevent futile searches or at least can prepare you for a far more challenging search.

**A few religious groups established the practice of collecting records in a central repository,** sometimes with the added convenience of cataloging and indexing them for searching from a single site. This is rare in America. Here, it is usually the case that when birth, baptism, marriage and death records have been recorded, they remain at the local church repository.

Consequently, your search might involve **contacting local church officials** in the hope that they will be willing to respond to a request for information. Occasionally, older copies of records might have been passed on to local historical or genealogical societies. To prepare for such a circumstance, it will be helpful to know how to determine the contact information for the locality you are researching. Many churches have yearbooks, directories, or online listings to help with such a task. Some libraries, academic institutions, seminaries, and historical societies have copies of these directories that cover hundreds of years of parish or congregational details.

You might benefit from knowing about **seminaries, colleges, and universities associated with particular religious traditions,** even if the institution is not affiliated with a specific religion. Academic institutions often establish a program to

(Continued on page 3)

## U.S. church records in genealogy *(continued)*

gather and archive collections of historical records that will facilitate students' and faculty members' research requirements. These collections might be catalogued and even digitized. A research staff might provide fee-based or free research assistance. Many such repositories welcome visits from the public. You might discover genealogical treasures in their holdings.

**Sometimes the religious affiliation of an ancestor is revealed in subtle ways** among family records or objects. You might first need to learn a variety of general details about many religions to detect subtle hints buried in your family history — hints such as unique terminology, health practices, food traditions, preferred Bible translations or publishers, naming patterns, surnames, given names, calendars, languages, holidays, celebrations, and magazines and newspapers. Many such minute details can lead to discovering the religious affiliation of an ancestor.

One family searched for many decades in England for their ancestral roots, firm in the belief that their family name was clearly English. It was only after a review of an oft-studied will that they noticed at the end of the belongings inventory list a collection of German books and a German Bible, suggesting German lineage. Only after they started searching local Lutheran Church records did they finally discover the truth about their lineage.


The presence of slaves in the household census records may be a significant clue. In fact, which side the family supported during the Civil War can be meaningful, since some churches were abolitionist. The types of livestock, the crops planted, the architecture of the family homestead, the style of clothing, the day of worship, the title used for their church official — all of these hints can help in your research.

**In some cases the region in which your ancestor lived will be an indication of religious affiliation.** The United States does not have a state religion, but people gathered in certain areas so they could enjoy the company of fellow members. For example, in the late 19th century, someone living in Utah might have belonged to the Mormon Church. Someone living in an ethnic neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland, might have been affiliated with the religion common to that ethnicity. Many people

from certain ethnic groups settled in specific neighborhoods in large communities and brought their religious affiliation with them. Some examples:

- Even today many communities with a predominance of Scandinavian descendants live in the surrounding areas of La Cross, Minnesota. The Lutheran Church is the predominant church in these regions.
- Catholic Irish and Italians dominated the Mahoning River Valley of eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, thus producing a Roman Catholic dominance.
- In the town of New Glarus (“America’s Little Switzerland”), Wisconsin, the local cemetery is associated with the Swiss United Church of Christ. Non-Swiss ancestors are buried in small communities’ cemeteries nearby.

Fraternal and religious groups often have their own sections in established cemeteries and in some cases maintain their own cemeteries.

Using church records to expand your understanding of a family’s history is both challenging and rewarding. Once you have pinned down a religious affiliation, you may suddenly have a whole new range of avenues to pursue. Discovering Quaker, or Mormon, or Huguenot, or Jewish ancestors can explain so much about a family. 



A cemetery in Balta, North Dakota, shows the German Russian Christian traditions of early homesteaders. Their homesteads may be gone, but the enduring cemetery markers made by blacksmiths have put this cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places. (Photo, Wikimedia Commons.)

# Fun and games with Family Tree

By Janet Brigham

Some people don't consider family history research fun. Call them spoil-sports or uninformed, but they somehow don't get it. They still attach the word *work* to the word *genealogy*, turning it all into the notion of *genealogy work*. Drudgery. Boredom. Looking for Dead People.

Then comes along FamilySearch.org's Family Tree, with a small army of affiliates creating tools — or should we say toys? — designed to make family history fun for those who never thought that day would come.

With the advent of these web-based tools and games, the previously uninitiated now can see that doing and learning about family history actually are more interesting than watching golf on TV. To find the products, go to [familysearch.org/products/](http://familysearch.org/products/).

To use any of these FamilySearch Family Tree affiliate tools, you'll first need a FamilySearch.org login. It is free, no credit card information is re-

quired, and anyone age 13 or older can sign up (or age 8-12 with parent/guardian permission).

Once you have a FamilySearch account, you can upload a GEDCOM file into FamilySearch Family Tree to create an online tree. For instance:

**TreeSeek.com** can access your Family Tree information to turn it into any of the options shown below (and more), including a solitaire card game, a Name Cloud, or a fan chart showing up to 9 generations.

Although I have played thousands of games of solitaire, I found the solitaire game from TreeSeek (below left, top) difficult to win. In fact, I haven't won it yet — even though I win frequently at computer solitaire. I know that not all solitaire games are winnable or even playable (don't believe me? See [www.techuser.net/klondikeprob.html](http://www.techuser.net/klondikeprob.html)).

The **Name Cloud** feature of TreeSeek (below, right) depicts the frequency of given names in your

(Continued on page 5)

The image displays three distinct visualizations of family tree data. The top-left panel shows a solitaire game interface with a green background, a deck of cards, and a score of 200. The top-right panel is a name cloud where names are sized and colored based on their frequency, with 'John', 'Elizabeth', and 'William' being the most prominent. The bottom-left panel is a fan chart showing multiple generations of a family tree in a semi-circular layout, with an arrow pointing to a specific branch labeled 'Scots-Irish still in hiding'. The FamilySearch logo is visible at the bottom of the fan chart.

Information entered into a FamilySearch Family Tree can be viewed as a solitaire game (top left), as a Name Cloud of frequent given names (above), or as a fan chart (bottom left); all of these tools are from TreeSeek, a FamilySearch.org affiliate.

# Fun and games (continued)



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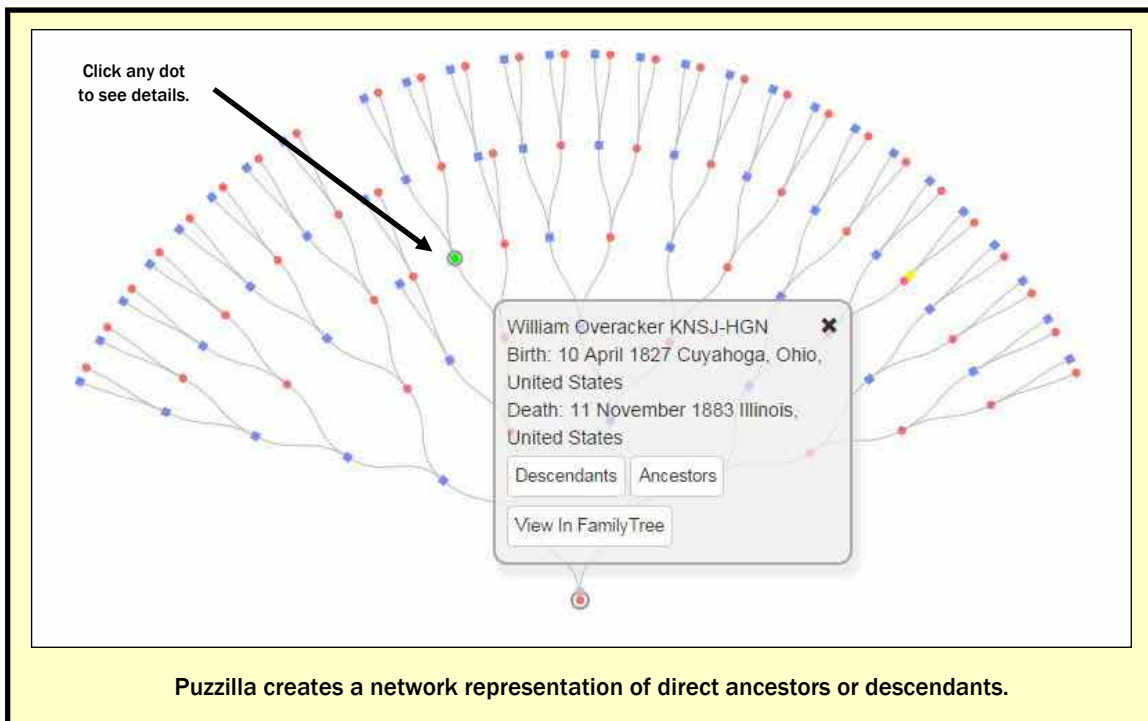
Family Tree. I get that the names *William*, *Elizabeth*, *Mary*, and *John* have been popular for centuries, but I'm surprised that *Janets* are so rare as to show up only on the upper right edge of the Name Cloud.

**The fan chart** (same cluster, lower left) illustrates the difficulty of tracing my father's Scots-Irish line — note the blanks where names would be if these an-

cestors weren't so adept at staying hidden. Nonetheless, those blanks in a fan chart are a simple way to spot lines that need work. Want to know where to start your next research project? Create a fan chart.

Or create a **Puzzilla** chart (below). This FamilySearch affiliate program gives you an alternative view of your ancestry. The ancestry view is

(Continued on page 6)



# Whadya think this is?



Whadya think this is? (Answer is on page 8.)

- A. A fillet tenderizing implement
- B. A honey/jam dripper for toast
- C. A pea knife
- D. A cheese slicer
- E. A holder for table knives, to keep the tablecloth clean
- F. A ginger scraper (watch your fingers!)

## Fun and games *(continued)*

*(Continued from page 5)*

shown here; by clicking on a dot, you can bring up details about that individual. Puzilla also has a descendency view.

The affiliate **CreateFan** allows you to create a circular chart (see right) that is color-coded for ancestral lines. Again, missing names are obvious.

The **RootsMapper** tool (top figure, page 5) illustrates the migration routes of your ancestors.


Another benefit — beyond engaging previously uninterested family members — is that using these tools can show you where unwanted information has been merged into your Family Tree.

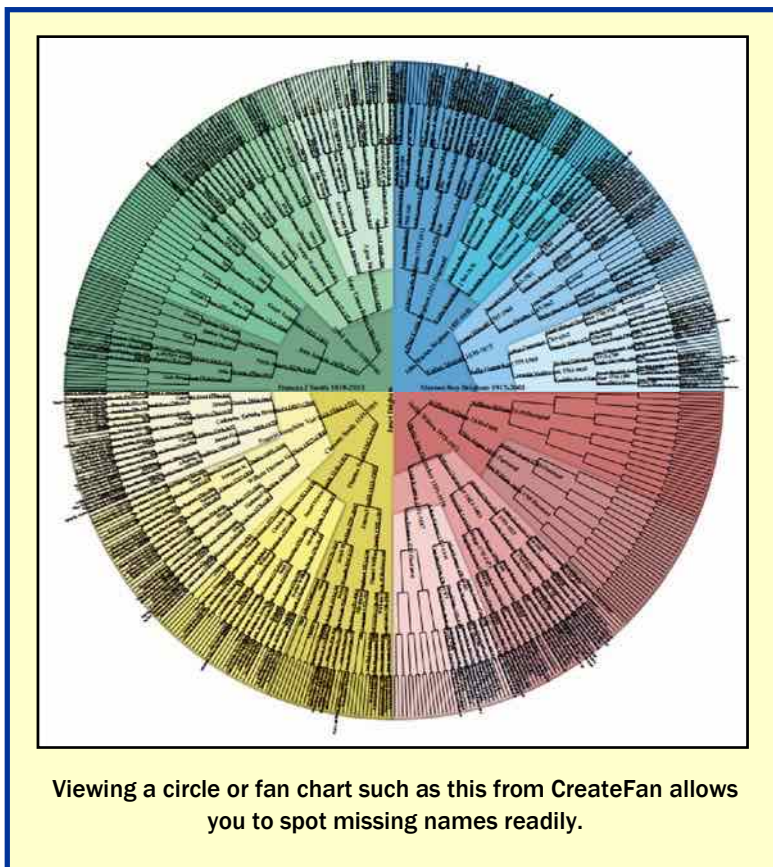
Since Family Tree functions as a wiki rather than a traditional tree, you never know when someone might merge unwanted information into your tree.

For example, someone had merged a stray soul born on an Atlantic island into my mother's Scottish ancestry, which became visible with RootsMapper. Similarly, someone had merged a woman named only "Mrs. William Argue" into my father's Irish line — no original surname, not even a given name. I do not allow women in my database to be designated this way. Better to leave the name blank, I say.

Some charts can be created from a GEDCOM file, rather than from Family Tree directly. Other new tools allow you to search for sources for un-

documented names in your tree or add information to Family Tree from a mobile device.

Why are these tools engaging? One newbie said RootsMapper caught her interest because it allowed her to see her own legacy on a map. Or maybe it's just fun. 



Viewing a circle or fan chart such as this from CreateFan allows you to spot missing names readily.



# Ask the Doctor *Become centralized*

**Q** My family history research has been stalled for several years because I can't settle on a way to organize all the papers, documents, photos, and other stuff I have collected. Some people recommend devising an elaborate, color-coded filing system. I don't have any place to house a fancy file system, and I'm afraid I'll forget what the colors represent.

This process will become much simpler if you just let your personal database software work for you. By personal database software, the Doctor is referring to software such as Reunion, Personal Ancestral File (PAF), Ancestral Quest, Legacy, Family Tree Maker, and RootsMagic.

Whatever database program you are using has its own search engine built into it. Once you enter someone's name, you can find the person through several means — through a pedigree structure, through family relationships, and through an alphabetical search. It's like having your own Bing.com or Google.com (or any other search engine).

Link documents, photos, files, or whatever else you have to the appropriate people in your database. Today's personal database software allows any of a variety of file types to be linked, along with source documentation information. Older software, such as PAF, is more limited in the types of files that can be linked (for example, PAF does not facilitate linking PDF files, whereas other more recent programs do).

If a relative gives you access to a letter written by your great-aunt in the early 1900s, you can scan the letter and attach the digital file to the entry about your aunt in your personal database. If your relative keeps the letter, you can list the relative as the repository. If the relative gives you the letter, you can file the hard copy and note the location in your database.

You don't need to color-code your filing system or do anything more than make note of the number of that file, so that you can include it in your database. If this leaves you feeling vulnerable, you also can create a master list of the contents of the files.

One problem people encounter when they get too elaborate in creating a filing system is that families sometimes overlap, separate, or merge. If my father's line is one color and my mother's line is another color, what do I do about my own color? Or my children's colors? Will I run out of colors? What if a color-blind person inherits my filing system?


This isn't to say that you can't keep using whatever has been working for you. If you already have a color-coded (or alphabetized) filing system and you're happy with it, then use it. If you don't have a good system started, this is a good way to start. I'm assuming that if you were happy with what you have, you wouldn't be asking the Doctor what to do.

One necessity of this approach is access to a scanner. The Doctor recommends a flatbed scanner — and, yes, the scanner that comes with an all-in-one printer usually works fine. Scanners have come down in price dramatically over the last couple of decades and now are available for free use at Family

History Centers and some libraries. Scan at a resolution that's adequate to pick up the details in your document or photo (start with perhaps 300 dots per inch, [dpi]; you may need higher resolution for some items).

Computer storage space also used to be a limitation. These days, you can temporarily store such files on an inexpensive flash drive or portable external drive, as well as keeping them on your computer for linking to your database program.

When you link a document or photo (or other item) to someone in your personal database software, it does not actually put a copy of the item inside your database. Instead, it creates a link from your database to the location on your computer where the item is stored.

You'll find it easier to manage this approach if you link a copy of each item to a separate folder named Images, or something similar, where you store the digital images of your documents and photos. That way, if you want to move your software to another computer, you also can move your images readily and easily. 

**One necessity of this approach is access to a scanner.**

## What didja think it was? And were ya right?

Answer: C. A pea knife.

This 19th century British eating utensil was designed to hold peas in place. British utensil customs now involve crushing peas onto a fork for eating, rather than spearing them or eating them off a knife. This children's poem, sometimes ascribed to Ogden Nash, comes to mind (thanks to our own Martha Wallace):

*I eat my peas with honey; / I've done it all my life.*

*It makes the peas taste funny, / But it keeps them on the knife.* 


## In remembrance of Zoia Horn, librarian

As genealogists, we are confronted on a regular basis with issues of freedom of information and personal privacy. We hope that records pertaining to our ancestry will be available for our purview, but we also recognize the need for a boundary that protects current per-

sonal information. Those who maintain collections of information grapple with this paradox daily.

In July 2014, Zoia Horn, a famed California librarian, died at age 96 in Oakland, California, leaving a legacy that we honor and remember. She was a champion for the freedom of information throughout her career as a librarian and archivist, but also had a firm grasp of where and when certain information should remain off limits.

She was best known for spending 20 days in jail in 1972 because she refused to reveal to the government the records of a patron's visits to her library.

The Zoia Horn Intellectual Freedom Award now honors others setting examples of commitment to intellectual freedom that help preserve freedom of information in an open society. 

## Upcoming meetings


The Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group meets monthly except December, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 A.M. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right).

The group is not affiliated with any church or other organization.

### 11 October 2014, 9–11 A.M.

- Indentured servants have genealogies, too
- Photo books for holiday giving
- Reunion 10 for the Mac
- Reunion 10 basics
- Research with Lesly
- Getting started Q&A

### 8 November 2014, 9–11 A.M.

- Virginia research
- Comparison of online trees
- Reunion 10 for the Mac
- Reunion 10 basics
- Research with Lesly
- Getting started Q&A 

## PastFinder

First place, Major Society Newsletter, 2013-14

First place, Local Society Newsletter, 2012

National Genealogical Society

Website: [www.svcgg.org](http://www.svcgg.org)

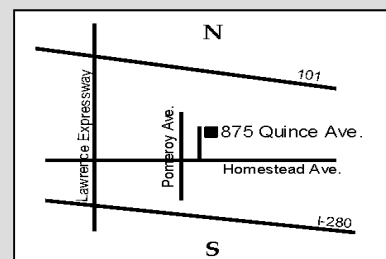
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Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance at the front.

## About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVC GG, the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, is a nonprofit group of more than 500 genealogy users. We are based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California; members live all over the world.

SVC GG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family his-

torians improve their skills in using technology for genealogy research.

*PastFinder* is published monthly except December. It is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter digitally by emailed link. 