

# Research Breakthrough Strategies

By Shirley-Ann Pyefinch

**Bio:** Shirley-Ann Pyefinch has served as the Director of the Ottawa Family History Centre since 2005. She is a family history researcher, MIM graduate student at Dalhousie University, Records Manager for the Federal Government, and has lectured on family history throughout the province.

**Summary of Presentation:** Finding your ancestors can lead you in many directions. Using research strategies to help you isolate and identify information about your ancestors will help you to reach your research goals and breakthrough your research challenges.

Here are some family history research strategies to try out:

- a) **The Research Process:** Use the research process throughout all of your research efforts, no matter what level of expertise you are at; these basic principles of researching your family history will help you be successful.

1. **Identify what you already know** - Start with yourself and work backwards through each life event.

Write down what you already know. Use Pedigree Charts and Family Group Records to document what you know. Often the act of writing down what you know can trigger more memories that you may have forgotten about, and you can visually see what information is missing.

Gather additional information around your house, and from family members. Some additional sources of family history information could be found in family journals, scrapbooks, old letters, family bibles, BMD certificates, photographs, school records, military records, obituaries, deeds, and wills.

Record what you find. Organize your records to facilitate easy access and retrieval for example by arranging your records in alphabetical or numerical order.

2. **Decide what you want to learn** – Examine what information is missing, incomplete, or not verified, and if there is conflicting information. Select a research question.

I decided to look for death information first because it is the most recent life event working backwards on my paternal ancestral lines. Try calling funeral homes for information, and contacting cemetery offices. Sometimes there are clues on headstones that can guide you to further information.

Death information whether it be on a headstone, from the funeral home, cemetery records, civil records, parish records, or obituaries can lead you to finding a birth year, birthplace, and other relatives to research.

I used free BMD for searching the birth year and location of my paternal grandfather.  
<http://www.freebmd.org.uk/>

You may also need to employ different research strategies such as cluster or collateral research strategies. In my case I found an obituary record that identified extended family members to research since my grandmother was the oldest of nine children in her family.

**Cluster and Collateral Research:**

**Cluster Research:** Based on the core idea that people lived and migrated in packs. Usually cluster research would be non-blood related, but lived near, e.g. neighbors, in-laws, etc.

**Collateral Research:** Tracking laterally closest living relatives, e.g. siblings, cousins, great-grandparents, etc.

**Types of records best suited:** Census, vital, church, newspapers, land transfers, wills, immigration and emigration records.

3. **Select and research records** – Identify a category of record to research.

**Some basic record categories are:**

**Compiled records** – records that were previously researched. For example, family histories, biographies, online pedigrees, genealogical periodicals, family newsletters, etc. Remember to verify information from original sources when referring to compiled records.

**Original records** – records created at the time of an event that document the lives of your ancestors. For example, vital records or civil registration records (BMD – birth, marriage and death records), church records (christening, marriage, burial, and tithing records), cemetery records, census records, probate records, military records, immigration records, land records, business records, school records, taxation records, and court records. Remember to research all levels of government records when researching government records, for example, town, county, provincial, and federal records.

**Background information** – records that describe local culture, geographic, or history of the region you are researching. For example, maps, gazetteers, FamilySearch Wiki ([http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main_Page)), FamilySearch Books (<http://books.familysearch.org>), language dictionaries, and free online courses (<https://familysearch.org/learningcenter/home.html>).

**Finding Aids** – records that help you locate specific information. For example, catalogues (<https://familysearch.org/catalog/search>), and indexes, for example, like Free BMD (<http://www.freebmd.org.uk/>).

In my case after looking at burial records, I selected military service records (following a clue from the headstone – the military records provided marriage information through the

*Declaration of Entitlement to Marriage Allowance* and the parents names, and their addresses was also located), census records (to identify place of residence and family relationships), and birth records (provided further information about parents).

4. **Track your research** – Use research logs to track what, when and where you have researched your family history in order to avoid duplication of effort.  
([https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/File:Research\\_Log.pdf](https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/File:Research_Log.pdf) )
  5. **Returning to analyze previous research** – Look for clues that you may have overlooked, and missing information that you may need to locate.
  6. **Use the information** – Create a case study, contribute your information online – online pedigrees at FamilySearch Trees, and in FamilySearch Memories – uploading photos, documents, and stories (<https://familysearch.org> ).
  7. **Repeat the research process** – once you have completed these steps you will have found more information to research on your family and the process is then repeated.
- b) **Applying Case Studies to Help Identify Research Gaps** – Creating a timeline of events can help you better understand the lives of your ancestors, help you select further research goals, and determine what records you need to review.
- c) **Collaborating** – Helps to fill in gaps, further extend your research, you can help others find missing pieces of the puzzle, and perhaps find new extended members of your family that you did not know.
- d) **Utilizing Resources Available in Family History Centres, Archives and Local Family History Societies**

#### **Family History Centres:**

- Use the online portal to access premium family history subscription websites for free.
- Access unique local family history collections along with helpful volunteers that can point you in the right direction ([www.ottawastakefhc.on.ca](http://www.ottawastakefhc.on.ca) ).
- Access thousands of online family history books on FamilySearch.org that can only be accessed in your local family history centres.
- Attend free family history classes (register at our local family history centre).
- Free family history conferences (Voices from the Dust – June 18, 2016).

#### **Archives, Public Libraries, and Local Family History Societies:**

- Check out sources of local history located in archives, public libraries and local family history societies to gain a greater understanding of what the social/historical circumstances were like for your ancestors.

Some that I used are:

- SGO – Société de généalogie de l'Outaouais for French and Ottawa area research (<http://www.genealogieoutaouais.com/> )

- LAC – Library and Archives Canada for military records(<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx> )
- BIFHSGO – British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa for background information on researching in the British Isles (<http://www.bifhsgo.ca/>)
- Look for local family histories, old maps, land records, memoirs, etc. See the Ottawa Room at the Ottawa Public Library (<https://bibliottawalibrary.ca/en/ottawa-room> )
- Seek out educational opportunities offered through both archives and local family history societies. Also look for individuals who are researching the same geographic area or ethnic/cultural group within family history societies.

**Keys to Research Success:**

- ▶ Use the Research Process and case studies (to help you identify gaps and examine records for missed clues)
- ▶ Use the Collateral Research Strategy (to help you find extended family members and prove you have the right family)
- ▶ Let your research rest, then go back and analyze your findings (to help you identify new and missed items in your research)
- ▶ Collaborate, put your tree online to find, and to be found (to find help and to help others)
- ▶ Go to FHCs, Libraries, Archives, and Societies (to help you learn and discover)

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