Dig Into the Past

How to explore and preserve family history
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Steel Valley Voices aims to preserve and share the ethnic and racial history of the Mahoning Valley. One of our goals is to help individuals share their own family memories and stories. We hope that the ideas and information in this booklet will inspire you to take another look at the photos and family documents in your attic or closet. Passing on your own history is an important gift for your children and grandchildren, and you’ll find the process enjoyable in itself.

Your history also matters to scholars and students who are learning about this community, the history of migration and immigration, and the role of race, ethnicity, and religion in people’s lives. Steel Valley Voices makes our history available online for local students and scholars. If you have letters, documents, photos, stories, or other materials that you’d like to share beyond your family, please consider allowing us to publish them on the Steel Valley Voices website, www.steelvalleyvoices.com. Please contact, Sherry Linkon (330) 941-2977, or by e-mail at sllinkon@ysu.edu, to learn how to include your family’s history in Steel Valley Voices.
Why is exploring and preserving family history important?

So you’ve decided to explore your family’s history—congratulations! Exploring family history is a fun, rewarding hobby that connects you with your past and brings you closer to your present family. By learning about our heritage, we learn where we came from, how we fit in, and how our families have grown and changed over time. Every family has a history that is interesting, useful, and ready to be explored.

It’s never too late to start exploring and preserving your family’s history, and there’s no better time to start than the present, before older generations pass and family documents and materials get lost or destroyed. Exploring and preserving family history will be an enjoyable experience you, and surely your family members will appreciate your efforts. Preserving family history is important because it:

Gives you (and your family) an understanding of who you are

When you learn the history of your family (where they lived and traveled, their customs, their significant events, their joys and sorrow), you learn why you are the way you are.

Strengthen a family by creating strong connections

This is especially important our families tend to be spread over the whole country. But even when families live far apart, family identity is the tie that binds you and your family. You can carry it with you anywhere.

Connects you to local, national, and world history

For example, World War II could not be fully understood by just studying major figures like Franklin D. Roosevelt; everyday people had a role, and they were affected since they lived through it. It is satisfying to know that your family members were a part of something that had a lasting impact on society.
Collecting and Preserving Family Materials

You can preserve and share your family’s history in many ways, including writing stories or making a scrapbook or website, but first you need to gather information. By simply going through your (or your family’s) closets, basements, and attics you can unearth a treasure-trove of materials that can give you valuable information about your family and their lives. Once you have collected your information and valuable items, it is important to properly organize and store them so that they will be preserved for future generations.

Hunt and Gather

Many people have boxes of old family photographs or old letters stored in a drawer or attic. Perhaps you’ve been wondering what to do with all of that. Or you might be starting to research your family’s history and are wondering where to look for material. In either case, the journey to explore your family’s past can start at home. You might find useful material in all kinds of places. Below are the types of items to look for and the places to look.

- Photo Albums (not only for the pictures, but also for the information that may be written on the back of the picture)
- Books (they may have inscriptions; also, people often place items such as photos and obituaries in books, especially religious books like the Bible)
- File Boxes (for items like titles, deeds, and wills)
- Report cards, awards, certificates, and yearbooks
- Cookbooks and recipe boxes
- Letters, postcards, and greeting cards
- Jewelry Boxes (look for items that have inscriptions or are associated with an organization)
- Scrapbooks
- Diaries and journals
- Address books
- Trunks and chests (for handmade items like quilts or articles of clothing like a communion dress)
- Immigration documents, marriage licenses, and birth certificates
Organizing and Preserving Your Materials

Once you have gathered all of your items, it’s time to organize them. For your photos and papers, the best option for organizing is to use a file-size box (like you would for bills or other important documents) and create folders. Try to buy boxes, folders, and other supplies that are labeled “acid-free” (or archival quality), because these materials are chemically inert, so your items will not fade, deteriorate, or dissolve. Some of these products can be found locally at craft stores and office supply chains, or they can be purchased from archival supply websites (see the Resources page).

Ways to Categorize Your Materials

**By time period** (by decade or by generation)

**By individual family members or by surname** (an excellent method if you also have a lot of documents for individuals like obituaries, birth announcements, immigration papers, etc., because then you can file all of the information you have for a person in one location)

**By Location** (ex: “This group of photos was taken in Sicily”; “These were taken when the family lived on Hine Street in Youngstown.”)

**By types of items** (keep all photos together; keep all letters together, etc.)

Even though picture albums are easily accessible and visually pleasing, your best option is to keep your original photographs in acid-free storage folders or boxes, so they will remain vibrant and crisp. If you have photos that you want to use in a scrapbook or put in a frame and hang on the wall, it is best to use a copy, because you don’t want to glue the original in a book or have it displayed in a room where it could be affected by sunlight. Luckily, the technology available today allows for photo reproduction to be done easily and at a modest price, either at home with a scanner, or at a camera store that specializes in high-quality digital imaging and printing. Also, if you have a document (like a letter) that is fragile, make a photocopy or digital scan so you have a backup.
Once you have your items organized, you can write down family tree information and any other basic information you may know. Create a “fact sheet” for each family member with the following information:

- Birth date and place
- Marriage
- Children
- Education
- Military Experience
- Physical Characteristics
- Hobbies
- Organizations, clubs, or churches they belonged to
- Where they lived
- Where they worked
- Health
- Death

By writing down everything you know, you can identify any missing or conflicting information. You can consult family members to help you fill in the blanks. File your family “fact sheets” in the appropriate files in your box.

**Where to store your materials**

The most convenient place to store your materials, a basement or attic, is often the worst. The best place to keep them is in a well-ventilated room that does not have extreme temperature fluctuations. It is also very important to keep them in a cool, dry location where they are safe from such threats as flooding or pet damage. A closet, chest, or cabinet offers the best solution.
Understanding Photos, Recipes, and Letters

When exploring and writing about family history, photographs, recipes, and letters are the best tools to trigger memories, develop descriptions, and spark reflection. You want to become a reader of these materials. Using these materials to create a story is a means to enter the past, so that your family’s history will be preserved for the future.

Photos: Visually evoking memories

Often, photos are passed down from generation-to-generation. Sometimes, a family member has labeled a photo, listing the people in it, the year, place, and/or event, which is the starting point for creating a written story. However, you may need to identify the photos yourself if they lack this information. If you need help, try these tips to help you with the identification process.

- Make it a family affair by having relatives go through the photos with you to identify who is in the pictures. If close relatives don’t know, this is a good opportunity to get in touch with more distant relatives.

- Seek out friends of the family or former neighbors who may have some information on the people in your photos.

- The background of a photo and the objects within it also provide useful clues about the date, such as style of dress or automobile types. Use library or internet research to help with time period. For example, if you see a sign or marquee in the background advertising a movie, find out when the movie was theatrically released to figure out what year the photo was most likely taken.

When identifying the photos and writing the details on the back, use a permanent pen that has acid-free ink. Don’t use a pencil or ballpoint pen; the pressure of the pen may damage the photo, and both will likely fade over time.
Let’s pretend that the woman wearing the corsage is your mother who was born in 1915. Judging by the style of her dress, and making a guess about how old she is based on appearance (mid-30s), we can assume this picture is probably from the late 1940s-early 1950s. The questions you would want to ask yourself or family members would be:

- What was the event?
- Where was the event?
- Who are the other women? Family members, friends, or a mixture of both?
- If food was served, what were those foods?
- Who else may have been there that’s not pictured? Who do you think took the picture?
- Did gatherings like this occur often or rarely?
- What do you think this event meant to your mother?

Let's examine the photo again and pretend we have no information about it. It doesn't appear to be in a house judging by the very large window and buildings in the background. There are also folding chairs, so this may be a rental hall, community center, or church. Three of the women are wearing aprons, so perhaps they were the food preparers for this event. The woman on the far left is very nicely dressed and is wearing a corsage, so it could be assumed that the event was in her honor. Her dress is dark, so the event probably is not a wedding reception.

By looking at the details, both ordinary and unusual, you can see the story behind the image. When you look closely at the details of one photo, you can start to understand the daily lives or special events of your family members, especially if the people photographed are no longer around to tell you their tale.
Recipes: Your food heritage has many tales to tell

Within your recipe box, among all the index cards and scraps of paper, there is also family history. Many family memories revolve around the preparation, serving, and eating of food, including memories of every day mealtime, holidays, or special occasions. A memoir or story that focuses on a recipe and the memory that accompanies it is a wonderful way to preserve your family’s history.

Once you have selected a recipe and the memory associated with it, thinking about these questions can help you develop your story:

- Which family member does the recipe come from?
- Where and when was the first time you remember tasting the food? Who prepared it and who else was present?
- What did the food taste like? Try to be as descriptive as possible. For example, if your recipe is spaghetti with homemade red sauce, was the sauce spicy or sweet? Was the sauce thin and have chunky tomatoes, or was it smooth and thick? Was there meat in the sauce?
- When was the first time you made this recipe? Did you change the recipe in any way? If so, why?
- How often is the recipe prepared? Is it a staple meal, or reserved only for special occasions or holidays?
- Are there any kitchen tools associated with the food? For example, “I make grandma’s recipe for pizzelles on her iron that I inherited. It is not electric, and has to be turned over by hand on the stove top. As a child, it was my job to flip the iron when she made pizzelles.”
- Are there any stories related to your recipe? For example, “Mom would only buy her meat from the neighborhood butcher shop. Often, she would send one of us kids to the shop to buy her meat. We would shop there so often, the butcher would greet us by first name”
- Have you ever shared the recipe with friends or other family members like your children? Do you know of any experience or memories others have of the recipe?
In the passage below, Martha tells a delightful story about her grandmother preparing pasta and her belief on the use of knives.

When I was little I did not realize that you could buy pasta in a box from a store. Stuff such as elbow macaroni I knew came from the grocery, but not spaghetti or fettuccine or “caps,” or Cavatelli. Those came from Grandma’s kitchen, from a magical process that started with white castles of flour mounded on her ceramic-topped kitchen table.

She heaped what looked like a mountain of flour into the middle of her space and made a deep hole in the center so it appeared to be the deep crater of a volcano. I told her that once and got one of her rare smiles. She chuckled, sort of a lower rumble, and told me it was just like Vesuvio. At the time I did not understand what she meant. I wondered who Vesuvio was, so I asked. She laughed again and that was something because very few people could make Grandma even smile. Into the crater, Grandma broke her eggs, ones that had been sitting on the counter not ones from the refrigerator. Then she used her fingers to swirl the flour into the eggs. When it began to get pasty, she poured in another clear liquid gradually expanding the wet center until she had a large mass. She sprinkled flour on the mixture, the table, and her hands, and began to knead. At that point she would sometimes give me my own glob of dough to practice.

Watching her roll the dough out was like watching a ballet. Grandma’s rolling pin appeared to be a broom or mop handle, about three feet long and an inch and a half in diameter. With it, in what seemed like just a few minutes, she rolled a sheet of pasta that covered the whole table out to the very edges in a perfect rectangle. Then came the awesome part. She folded, or perhaps doubled over, the sheet of dough, got out her knife, and cut the ribbons of pasta. Her hands and the knife moved so fast it was over almost before it began. On the table would sit the huge pile noodles, each one exactly the same size and thickness, and approximately three feet long. She kept the blade well honed and dry.

When I asked when I would be ready to cut pasta like her or if I was ready yet, she always replied in the same fashion: “Never pick up a knife until you know how to use it and are willing to live with your mistakes.” At the time, it did not seem like much of an answer. She was quite cryptic. I think now she referred to more than cutting pasta with a knife. It was a life lesson we would all do well to heed. Don’t rush into things, understand what you are doing, and what can go wrong. Another time she told me, “You should never pick up a knife unless you are willing to use it.” Yet another lesson; do not start something unless you commit to it 110%.
Letters: Finding the meaning behind the words

Family letters are more than just correspondence: they can reveal personalities, motivations, emotional states, struggles, defeats, and triumphs, while also containing hard facts. Letters give us a unique glimpse into their world at the most personal level, and can fill in gaps, answer questions, and provide new information.

When examining a letter, you first want to determine the following information:

- Date (on the actual letter or postmark date if you have the envelope; if there is not a date, make a guess based on the content of the letter)
- Postmark place
- From whom to whom
- People, locations, and events mentioned

Once you’ve noted the basic information, you can analyze further:

- What is the tone of the letter? Happy, somber, romantic, angry?
- Why was the letter written? Was it to inform about a specific event, or just general “catching up”?
- Does the penmanship or paper choice reveal anything about the writer?
- What is the language like? Formal or informal?
- If you have a lot of letters, see if you can find any matching correspondence.
- If you have letters in a language that you don’t speak and want to have them translated, try contacting the foreign language department at a university. Often, students need translation projects for credit. Another resource might be a church, which might have members who speak the language.

Letters can tell you about events and relationships among family members that you might not know about, but they can also give you a sense of how people used the language, where they were, and what issues and problems concerned them. Some letters describe big events, but letters often relate ordinary day-to-day experiences, so they give us insight into what life was like for previous generations.
Interviewing Family Members

Every person has many important, unique tales to tell. Your relatives are the sources for the history and traditions of your family, and you can collect your family members memories by conducting an interview. Interviews are rewarding because they often provide information not found in paper records. Your interview can be in person or a written questionnaire; do whatever works best for you and your family members’ situation.

**Face to Face**

- When doing an interview in person, the best method is to record the conversation with an audio or video recorder. Make sure you ask for permission to record in advance. Some family members will be completely comfortable being recorded, while others may be a bit shy or nervous. Do your best to make them feel relaxed and comfortable: smile, laugh, and be friendly.

- Even if you record the conversation, bring a pen and paper to take notes.

- Bring materials along, such as family photos or scrapbooks, to evoke memories. The use of props may bring old memories flooding back.

- Prepare a list of questions to ask in advance, but be prepared to let the interviewee take the discussion in different directions. This can lead to exciting discoveries; they may have many things to say that you never thought to ask. Your interview should be a conversation, not just a Q&A session.

- Ask questions that encourage more than simple “yes” or “no” answers.

- Be a good listener. Don’t interrupt your interviewee when they are answering a question; use non-verbal communication (eye contact and nods) to show interest and to reassure them.
Below are some sample questions, but don’t limit yourself to these suggestions. Every family has attributes that make them special, and you can probably think of ideas or events to ask about that relate specifically to your family. When preparing questions, ask yourself, “What do I already know, and what do I want to learn?” Also, consider which people and events your interviewee will be the most knowledgeable about.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childhood</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Where did you live and go to school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What’s your earliest childhood memory?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Describe the personalities of your family members.</td>
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<td>- What did your parents do for a living when you were growing up?</td>
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<td>- What part did religion play in your family?</td>
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<td>- What was your neighborhood like?</td>
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<td>- Describe a typical family dinner. What type of foods did you often eat?</td>
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<td>- Who were your friends growing up?</td>
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<td>- What did you do for fun?</td>
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<td>- How is the world different today from what it was like when you were a child?</td>
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<td>- Of all the things you learned from your parents, what do you feel was the most valuable?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adulthood</strong></td>
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<td>- What jobs have you held and when?</td>
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<td>- How did you meet your spouse?</td>
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<td>- What are your children like?</td>
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<td>- What are your proudest moment as a parent?</td>
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<td>- What family traditions have you passed on to your children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What are your hobbies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Which historical events had an impact on your life?</td>
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<td>- What about family heirlooms? Is there anything that’s been handed down from generation to generation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What accomplishments are you the most proud of?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?</td>
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If you record your interview, you may want to transcribe or make notes from it. Do your transcription as soon as possible, while the interview is still fresh in your mind. The interview can be added to your collection of family materials, along with your photos, letters, etc.

For more information on conducting interviews, the book *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History* by Donna DeBlasio et al. offers information and tips for the novice interviewer.
Writing Strategies

Writing about your family history or memories is a priceless gift to give to yourself and your family members that can be passed on to future generations. It’s OK if you’re not an experienced writer because your audience is your family who loves you and will enjoy your stories. However, even the most experienced writers sometimes have trouble starting the writing process, so the tips, exercises, and examples below should help guide you through the writing journey.

Talk to Your Family

Before you start writing your story, you may want to sit down with a family member or members to talk about shared memories. Even though you are related, every one of your family members is unique and has an individual perspective. The more information you have, the more engrossing your story will be. Talking can also help you get started with writing, since it will not only give you more information but also give you a chance to practice telling stories and describing situations.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming can help you generate ideas for your story. One method is to write a list of all the words and phrases that occur to you in relation to your topic. This will help you both expand what you have to write and identify important words, phrases, and details that you can use to emphasize and develop any interesting points. Let’s say your topic is your grandma’s recipe for bread. Your list may look like this:

- Recipe was passed down from her mother
- Was always baked on Sunday
- Slathered with butter
- Dough balls everywhere
- Flour dust on grandma’s face and apron
- Just a pinch of salt
- Us grandkids would help knead
- An all-day affair
- Would make her house so hot in the summer

Even though you might organize these ideas differently when you start writing, you can use this method to begin writing your story.
**Free Writing**

If you have trouble starting the writing process, you may choose to do a preliminary exercise known as “free writing.” Free writing is writing without editing yourself. Just let your ideas flow. Give yourself a time limit, anywhere from one to 20 minutes, to record your response to something—an image, an object, a letter, a specific memory. Keep your hand moving until your time is up. Don’t pause to look at what you have written and don’t concern yourself with spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Don’t worry if you drift into another topic or repeat yourself. Just write. When your time is up, look over your writing and circle or highlight words, phases or sentences that may be worth keeping or elaborating on. Use these as starting places for more writing.

**Developing Your Story**

Once you have sorted out the ideas you would like to use from your brainstorming or free writing session, you can structure and plan your story. When crafting your story, try to re-create an experience with as many details as you can think of.

For example, if you are writing about a photo, don’t limit yourself to just the obvious facts of your photo like, “Mom, sister Ann and me on my sixth birthday at the kitchen table,” but also include everything you see: “Mom is wearing her apron with the pink roses and rick rack trim that she sewed herself, her favorite apron, and her hair is tied back, like it always was when she was working in the kitchen.”

Try to include what you don’t see: “Dad is not pictured because he was probably working the afternoon shift. Grandma probably took the picture.” Also include how the people are behaving and their body language and facial expressions, like “Mom looks like she was laughing, but she also looks tired, Ann looks restless in her highchair.”

If you are not in the photo you are writing about, or if it was taken even before you were born, try writing as if you were there, either directly (being a part of the action pictured), or as a “fly on the wall” silent observer, or as the photographer. Your writing will be based on the concrete facts you know and what is displayed in the picture. It is OK to make assumptions when neither you nor any other family members can exactly remember the memory you are writing about; go with what you believe to be the truth.

You could have a sentence in your first paragraph that serves as the launching pad like, “I turned six years old in 1950, and our family had many ups and downs that year.” Write as many details as you can remember, and at the end of your story, you may want to reflect about why you feel the story is significant for you and your family.
The postcard was mailed on May 5, 1913, by T. Leo Casey, a steelworker living in the Brier Hill district. It was addressed to his future wife, Jane (“Jenny”) Coyne, a resident of the Hazelton district on the east side. The postcard reads as follows: “Dear friend Jenn, Will you please give the reson [sic] you did not meet me Saturday night. Leo.”

My grandfather, Leo Casey, was determined to marry my grandmother, “Jenny” Coyne, but he was saddled with overwhelming familial responsibilities. In 1907, his Irish-born father, Michael Casey, Jr, was fatally injured in a mill accident, leaving behind a pregnant wife and seven children. Leo, who was 14 years old when his father died, became the family’s primary breadwinner. For Leo, the prospect of an early marriage seemed unthinkable.

Although Leo’s relationship with Jenny developed slowly, his feelings for her took on a certain urgency as he became aware of her situation. The orphaned daughter of an Irish-American steelworker and his Scottish-born wife, Jenny had been taken in by cousins who treated her like hired help. Lively and energetic, she was described as an excellent dancer and “the best ice skater in Hazelton.” Jenny was a tiny person, however, and her cousins expected her to perform back-breaking labor. My grandfather told me that he decided to marry my grandmother when he spotted her carrying two huge wooden buckets of water from a private well to her cousins’ house.

Jenny’s failure to show up for an appointment with Leo may have reflected her concern that he was in no position to get married. She must have known that Leo’s mother, a hard-nosed Irish immigrant, would oppose the union.

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Growing up, Tom heard different accounts of his grandparents’ courtship from various family members, and he combined reoccurring elements to create one story. Tom includes some hard facts, such as birthdates, but he also gives physical descriptions about the people like, “Leo, on the other hand, was a burly steelworker with an oversized hooked nose that had been knocked sideways in a football match.”

Instead, he looked into her eyes, melted, and asked, “Jenny Coyne will you marry me?”

The story gets more complicated from here on. Leo’s beleaguered mother (as expected) was outraged by the marriage. For several years, she refused to have any contact with her eldest son, even though Leo routinely sent money to his mother and siblings. Leo’s paternal grandfather, a two-fisted Irishman named Michael Casey, Sr., took the news hardest of all. After reading about the upcoming wedding in St. Ann’s bulletin, the old man flew into a rage and physically threw Leo out of the family home. The rift wasn’t smoothed over until 1920, when Leo’s mother learned that her daughter-in-law was expecting twins. The couple had two more children, in 1923 and 1932, respectively. In the late 1920s, Leo was able to assist his youngest brother, Patrick, when he pursued a degree at Ohio University.

If you are interested in reading more about how to write family stories, the book Remembering Our Rose Streets: A Guide for Collecting and Writing Family Stories by Carmen Leone and Robert A. Calcagni offers a wealth of information about the writing process. It can be purchased locally at Jimmy’s Italian Food Specialties on Belmont Avenue in Youngstown, or from www.amazon.com.
Resources

Archival Quality Supplies
Gaylord Brothers
www.gaylord.com
Pat Catan’s
6151 South Avenue
Youngstown, Oh 44512
(330) 758-1841
Pat Catan’s
1923 Ridge Road
Warren, OH 44482
(330) 369-1557

Online Research Resources
Ancestor Information
www.ancestry.com
USGenWeb Project
www.usgenweb.org
Genealogy Gateway
www.gengateway.com
Newspaper Database
www.newspaperarchive.com
Ellis Island Port Records
www.ellisisland.org
Family Search
www.familysearch.org
African-American Genealogy
www.afriquest.com
USF Africana Heritage Project
www.africanaheritage.com
Cyndi’s List: A genealogy resource site
www.cyndislist.com
Marriage Records
www.familymarriagerecords.com
Military Records
www.familymilitaryrecords.com
Ohio Historical Society
www.ohiohistory.org
The National Archives
www.archives.gov
Passenger Ships Photos
www.kinshipprints.com
Your Family Tree
www.your-family-tree.com
Kindred Konnections
www.kindredkonnections.com
Family History Databases
www.familyhistory.com
Kindred Trails
www.kindredtrails.com
Christine’s African-American Genealogy Network
www.cccharity.com

Local Research Resources
The Mahoning Valley Historical Society
648 Wick Avenue
Youngstown, OH 44502
(330) 743-2589
www.mahoninghistory.org
The Public Library of Youngstown & Mahoning County–Main Library
305 Wick Avenue
Youngstown, OH 44503
(330) 744-8636
Trumbull County Historical Society
P.O. Box 1907
Warren, OH 44482
(330) 394-4653
www.trumbullcountyhistory.org
Warren-Trumbull County Public Library
Local History & Genealogy Center
444 Mahoning Avenue NW
Warren, OH 44483
(330) 399-8807