
How Computers & Gadgets are Changing Genealogical Research



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Things have changed radically in the genealogy community since the typewriter era.

Some problems have been overcome, others have worsened.

Prognosticators predict technology users face three C's in the future:

greater Convergence, Convenience, and Connectivity.

PART I: The Era B.C. (Before Computers)

First there was the pen and pencil era of genealogy. Then the typewriter era overlapped the pen and pencil era. You bought packs of printed blank family group sheets and tried to summarize your findings on these sheets.

Problem: without images and audio files it was nearly impossible to summarize exactly what you saw in records and heard during interviews.

Problem: family group sheets made it difficult to share, preserve, and publish your findings and analysis. Each time you typed and/or re-typed a family group sheet, you introduced more errors than you corrected. Family group sheets also lacked sufficient space for some essential types of information. They lacked a space for the children's marriage places (thus leaving us decades later at a loss for that family's migration patterns) and the space on the front of the sheet labeled **Sources of Information** (a misnomer if there ever was one) was woefully small. There was hardly space to copy one source citation, much less all the sources used to put that family's vital information and relationships together. Genealogists from this era typically flipped the sheet over and continued their list of sources on the back. Some even went to the effort to number their sources and superscript names, dates, places and relationships on the front of the sheet with those source numbers in an effort to convey how they derived each vital piece of information. Even with the advent of the photocopier, the back of the family group sheet was seldom copied. The skeletal information on the front was usually all that was passed on.

In the old days (up through the 1980s) you typically researched for twenty years or more, took two years to type your findings in a family history book format, then spent an additional six weeks indexing your opus on three by five cards. If you wanted longevity for your work, you spent fifteen to twenty thousand dollars to do an offset printing of five hundred copies, and sold perhaps a hundred of them to family members at a significant loss. No one made money writing family history books in this era.

PART II: The Era A.D. (After Disks/Discs)

As the computer era progressed, personal genealogy database programs improved. You could (if you took the time and effort) source (document how you derived) each name, date, place, and relationship. This took genealogy to a whole new level of convenience and accuracy...except it was now possible to lose more years of research at the push of a button than ever before. Electronic databases often became corrupted and unusable. So genealogists made lots and lots of backups, in different formats, on different types of media, stored in different locations—and then wondered which copy was most up-to-date.

What was not overcome in the computer era of genealogy was the tendency to transmit junk genealogy with just the push of a button. Family trees were often shared without sources and analysis (for a variety of reasons)—and became mere fairy tales. Some electronic family trees were generously shared via GEDCOM files (with carefully added notes and sources) and shared and shared until at some point they were pirated and passed on as someone else's work (minus the notes and sources that would have told who did the work and made the conclusions). You ended up with un-sourced trees where the information and conclusions might be good but there was no way to tell without the original notes and sources and analysis.

Now we are moving into the Cloud era of genealogy with online family trees. Unfortunately, all the problems of the past are included in online trees. The typos of the typewriter era have been typed into the personal computer era and now uploaded into the cloud era. The fairy tale family trees from the personal computer era (those without notes and sources due to sloth, inexperience, or deliberate pirating) are now published online. Things are even more of a mess out there because now at the push of a button, online family trees (with only a few exceptions) can be corrupted by anyone (if made public). Branches are being incorrectly linked...you often become your own grandpa. Purported connections are made to new generations of ancestors without the reasons for those conclusions being attached (the sources and analysis).

We are generating more junk genealogy than ever before! There is, however, hope on the horizon.

PART III: The I.E. Era (Internet Era)

The Internet Era began in 1969, but didn't initially catch on in popularity with genealogists until the late 1990s. It was at first just the playground of rocket scientists and brain surgeons. E-mail was the only thing keeping the Internet going in its early days. Then computer operating systems developed GUIs (Graphical User Interfaces) where you just clicked on an icon to open a program (you no longer needed esoteric computer languages to get even a little work done). Two college students developed the first Web browser software. It did for the Internet what word processing had done for typing (and personal genealogy database programs did for family group sheets). It was a revolution. Genealogists could now surf the World Wide Web with just the click of a mouse. Hyperlinks (now just called links) led to the discovery of a world of resources online.

Then the first search engines were developed. Lycos came online in December 1994 (at Carnegie Mellon University's main Pittsburg campus) and Alta Vista shortly thereafter. A few genealogy-specific search engines followed, faded, and are recently making a comeback. Push technology

(where you are e-mailed notification of a change or addition to online material in which you register an interest) has evolved into Ancestry's shaking leaves and the watch lists at the FamilySearch Research Wiki today.

Free, all-volunteer projects (like the Arkansas GenWeb project and various local history projects) provide even more online resources for genealogists around the world. Truly the Internet has become a Swiss army knife of tools for genealogists (wikis, maps, calendars, directories, and language aids to name a few tools).

PART IV: The Gadget Era

Technology moved from desktop computers, to luggable computers, to laptop computers, to notebook computers, to ultra-lights, to gadgets taking on what had once been the prime functions of desktop computers and traditional electronic devices (like telephones with cords).

First there were cordless phones, then mobile phones, then smartphones. The younger generation today doesn't know what it meant to be waiting around the house for the phone to ring. Tech gurus lecturing at the 2011 AARP Life@50+ Conference in LA defined the future of technology as three C's: Convergence, Convenience, and Connectivity. They also contended (in September 2011) that only six percent (6%) of computer users needed a desktop computer!

Genealogists may be the exception to this declaration. If anything, we typically dream of working with the fastest Internet connection possible on a desktop computer system with two or three LARGE screens; but when we travel it is another story. Genealogists are finding their smartphone and a tablet computing device suffice for many research trips.

A smartphone today replaces at least ten traditional devices: mobile phone, alarm clock, calculator, digital camera/camcorder, voice recorder, eBook reader, LED flashlight, GPS device, dictionary/encyclopedia/wiki, and Internet access device.

Gadgets make it possible to record even the mobile research experience. A trip to a cemetery is a vastly different experience today than it was in the 1970s: GPS to get you there, taking pictures of gravestones and making sure you didn't cut off the last digit of the dates, transmitting images almost instantaneously to an online site, and linking them to an ancestor's tree online.

PART V: The Tablet Era

You know the Tablet Era of genealogy is here when 24% of those signing up for accounts at Ancestry.com—after watching *Who Do You Think You Are?* on television—did so from tablet devices. Even Microsoft (founded on its DOS operating system for early PCs) has just released Windows 8 designed to work on both tablets and desktops (although how well this “one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat” approach will work is yet to be seen).

Today, sitting in your doctor's office with your tablet, you search Google Books and find a likely book titled *Pennsylvania Archives* published in 1880. You every-word search it and find several of your surnames. You click on **Read Now** and see it is available (formatted for viewing) via the Web and Tablet/iPad devices but not for eReaders or Smartphones. You continue to search and don't care how long it takes the doctor to see you.

PART VI: The Cloud Era

Can you imagine no more hassles updating the hardware and operating system on your desktop computer...or only needing a simple system that gives you Internet access? No more buying and updating software and having to find and type in those obnoxious key codes? Maybe not even worrying about recovering your data when your personal computer system crashes? Such are the promises of having both programs and your data/work stored online (in the “Cloud”).

What it takes typically is a user name (often your e-mail address—if you can remember which one you used at that particular site) and password. Aye, there’s the rub...a plethora of passwords. One system that creates very strong passwords (estimated to take 19 years to crack by hackers working 24/7 at current computing speeds) consists of three parts. You can choose any three items you can always remember and use them in any order you choose, just so long as one is three capitalized letters long, one in a word in lower case letters spelled backwards (so it is nonsense) and one is a number (two to four digits in length). Example: first three letters of the name of the Web site capitalized, your pet’s name spelled backwards in lowercase letters, then the year your favorite ancestor was born. This creates a unique and memorable password for just about any site. Example: FAMyllas1870 at FamilySearch and ANCyllas1870 at Ancestry.com and LANyllas1870 at LandsEnd. Yes, when you first adopt this system you will be changing many of your old passwords, but when was the last time you did so for safety’s sake?

The Cloud Era has introduced severe disagreement in the genealogy community as to whether or not you should put your family trees online. Online trees are subject to corruption and piracy.

Despite these problems, there are still some strong reasons to put your family trees online:

1. **BAIT.** By putting your work online you allow other people to mess it up. Yes, you might want to do this deliberately to gain hints or find other people’s errors (or maybe some of your own) so your documentation and analysis of why those errors are wrong can be published and attached to that online tree. At FamilySearch FamilyTree you do this via the **Discussion** and **Not a Match** features. Perhaps as early as January 2013 you may even be able to attach files (images, scans, documents, etc.) to you FS Family Tree.
2. **PUBLISH.** ePublish your findings and conclusions from your research projects and attach them to the appropriate families on your tree as soon as completed [a.k.a. “Publish as You Go”]. This helps prevent duplication of effort and gives you immediate public credit for what you have done (before it can be pirated). This also permits other people with additional records, sources, knowledge, and research experience to contact you.
3. **SHARE.** It is cheaper and faster to publish your findings online than to physically copy and mail or e-mail them to all the cousins you collect when your online tree is at high-traffic sites (like Ancestry and FamilySearch).

Genealogists in the future may well publish their research online as they do it. What? No boxes and boxes of paper files for future generations to toss away when we are gone? Our years of experience preserved in published reports with our educated analysis attached to online trees? We have the technology. We can build a better tree.