

Computer Organization

If you're reading this on-line article, then you have a computer. Are you using its power to organize your genealogy and family heritage data? Or are you relying on an overstuffed, disarrayed filing cabinet? If you're doing the latter, then using a computer will provide many advantages, including information retrieval and editing, document tracking, and information preservation. You can use the computer in a do-it-yourself mode, or purchase specific software. Both will be discussed in this article.

Do-it-yourself

To create your own system you will need some sort of office software suite that has word processing and spreadsheet programs.

Word processing software can be used for text-generated items, such as writing family histories, creating a family timeline, writing correspondence, typing up research notes and the like. The outline capabilities of a word processor would allow the creation of a descendant report, for example.

A spreadsheet program can be used to record data and facts by family/person, or to create a cross-reference index of your documents. You'll need to decide what information you want to record and then set up columns and rows accordingly. For example, you could assign each column to a type of document: birth certificate, death certificate, etc. Each row would then be a person. In the cell corresponding to the document/person, you can enter where the document is filed and any pertinent facts from that document. This will not only make the information readily available, but also shows at a glance what documents are still needed. Creating one spreadsheet for each surname will help with organization.

Of course, you'll need to organize all these electronic files by setting up a folder and subfolder system on your hard drive. Start by creating a folder for each surname you are researching. Within that folder, create subfolders for the types of documents you are creating. Subfolder examples include: written histories, research notes, document index, and photos (digital). Use the same subfolder file structure for each surname and follow a consistent file naming convention. You might, for example, name each family history word processor file as "Surname_history", where "Surname" is the family, e.g., "Smith_history". A descendant report could be named "Smith_descendants". Using a consistent method of folders and file names will make it easy for you to find and retrieve your information.

Computer Organization

Software

If your less computer savvy, or simply don't want to spend the time creating your own system, then there are many software programs available that will make your information organization easy. Basic genealogy programs allow you to record all the information you acquire for each person, record the source of that information (i.e., the document), and then store the data in a file. The program also makes it easy to find individuals and create specific reports/charts, such as a pedigree chart. Many programs will even allow you to tie into the Internet for research or store photos to create a family genealogy "scrapbook". An example of such a program is Family Tree Legends, but others exist.

If your looking for document and fact organization, a program called Clooz may be helpful to you. This is a database program that has templates for common types of document, such as census records, birth/death/marriage certificates, and many others. The templates are designed to allow you to enter pertinent information and then make it easy for you to later find the information, and also the actual document in its storage location.

Other Considerations

With the prevalence of email as means of communication, you will want to create a folder structure in your email program that makes it easy to find those old emails. Set up a system like that discussed above for documents. For example, have an email folder for each surname you are researching, then drag-and-drop emails to their respective folders. Folders should also be created for other topics, such as societies or organizations you belong to or communicate with.

Use the file structure concept with your web browser by organizing your bookmarks to easily re-visit your favorite research sites. Most likely, this will not be a surname organization, but rather by other common identifiers, such as geography. For example, create a master folder called "States", with a subfolder for each state where you do research: Florida, Kentucky, etc. Each subfolder would then contain the website links bookmarked for that state.

Whether you have a do-it-yourself system or use a genealogy program, make sure to periodically back-up your files. Make two back-ups. Keep one at home and take the other someplace else, such as the home of a relative or a safety deposit box. You have too much time and effort involved in your research to loose it all because of a hard drive crash or other disaster.

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The whole idea of using your computer is to make information storage, communication, and retrieval easy and fast. Spend your time researching and sharing your family heritage, not hunting for it in a cluttered file!

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