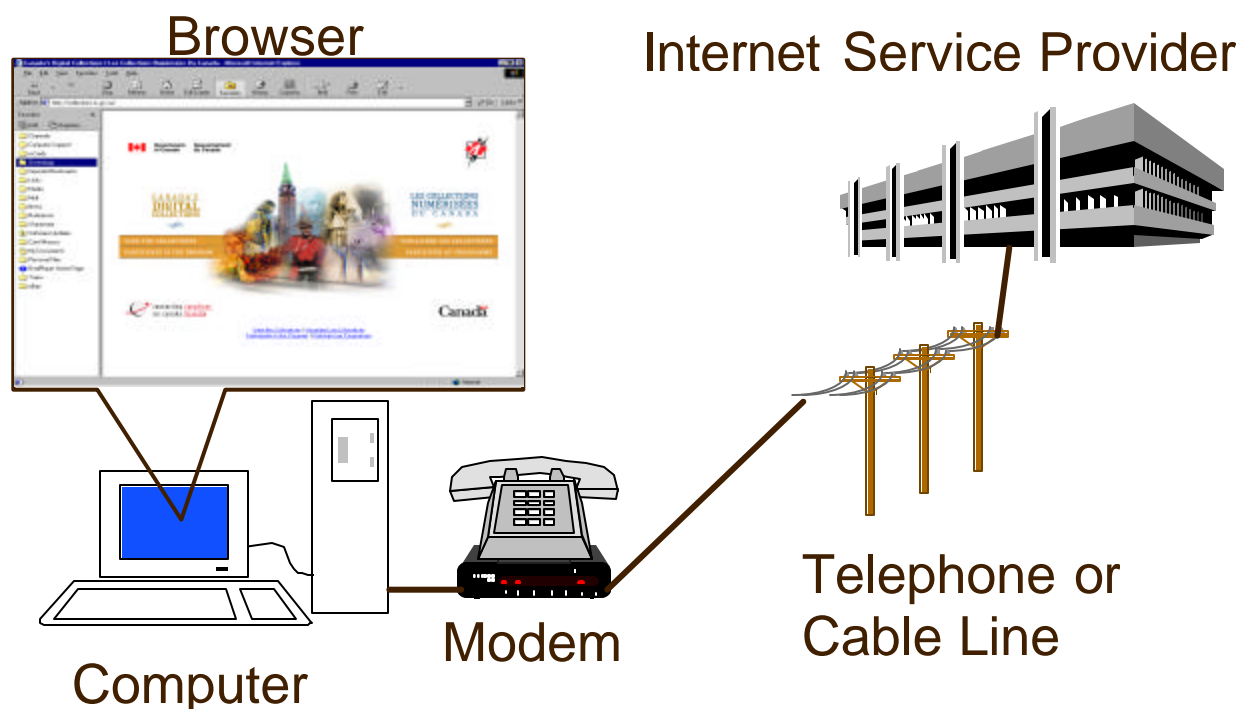


Starting Out on the Internet

By Bob Dawes © (2002) Dawes & Associates

The Internet is a really useful resource for the genealogist whether you're just starting out or an experienced researcher. It lets you work from the comfort of home, there are no closing times or holidays, it is inexpensive compared to traveling to distant locations and it's growing in capacity and information all the time. BUT and that's a big but, using the internet can also be extremely frustrating and especially so if you are also new to computer technology. I like to think of the internet like a monstrous library where there is no card file and none of the books have cover titles or indexes. How would you find something in a library if you were confronted with nothing but a bunch of pages? Internet research can be done and it can be very rewarding however, we must approach it a little differently from normal research and over the course of this article I will try to guide you through the process.



First things first. For anyone who has not yet done any internet research there are a few basic things that you require. Obviously, you'll need a computer but it doesn't have to be state-of-the-art (no matter what your grandchildren tell you) and it can be either a PC or a Macintosh. The next item is a software program called a browser which allows you to view the web pages which are encoded in a special language called HTML or Hyper Text Markup Language. These programs are free and fall into two major categories, Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape. Both of these programs come with extras such as email capability and image viewers so that you can view photographs and pictures without using anything else.

Finally, you'll need an on-ramp to the information super-highway and that is usually a connection to an ISP otherwise known as an Internet Service Provider. The connection can be your regular telephone line, your cable TV line or a special DSL line for high speed internet. The majority of surfers use their home phone line which they plug into the modem in their computer. The modem allows your computer to transmit and receive signals over the telephone line plus handles things like dialing the ISP phone number and hanging up when you're done. In the case of the cable TV hook-up you'll use a cable modem to handle the interface function.

One last thing and we're ready to head out onto the internet to find our roots. Selecting an ISP can be confusing. If you're going to use a cable modem then you are limited to your cable TV provider but there is more choice for dial-up access. There are major providers such as AOL Canada (America On-Line) and Sympatico (Phone Companies) or a myriad of small, local companies which will vary depending on where you live. The big companies are dependable, probably won't go out of business, allow monthly billing and you won't get busy signals when dialing in. Smaller companies don't always have enough capacity (called bandwidth) or telephone connections for their customers so their lines may be busy or

slow when you are on-line. I would suggest getting the advice of others who are connected to a small ISP before signing up with them and find out how long they've been in business.

Now we have our vehicle and the road is open before us. Where do we go first?

I'm going to refer to Internet Explorer and it's email program Outlook Express throughout this article although I'll try to use terms that you can apply to Netscape or the Macintosh version of either.

Before heading out on the internet there are a couple of trip planning things we should do to get ready.

① Create Email Signature Files

Using your email program, setup several signature files which you can attach to messages to save typing your name and address repeatedly. Make a general one with just your name (initial and surname plus your email address) and a detailed one that has your full name, telephone number and postal address as well as you email address. You'll use the general one for new contacts and posting queries and the detailed one for responding to others once you've gotten to know them a little better. You can also make up signature files that include the surnames that you're researching but remember that your readers will see these every time you post a message or reply to one.

② Create Folders to Organize Your Messages

Instead of plugging up your In Box with all of your messages, organize some sub-folders by topic such as Family Surname or a Location that you're researching. Then you can move your read messages to the appropriate folder. Use these to store your sent messages too so that you have questions and answers in the same place.

③ Create a Query for Each Family Surname

When you join a Mail List or browse a Bulletin Board you may want to post your own query while there. Instead of trying to do this in haste, create your queries using Windows Notepad or Wordpad ahead of time and then you can simply copy and paste the text into the input window you are browsing. Save your queries as surname.txt in you're My Documents folder so that you can find them easily. Don't try to put too much in each query, just the specific surname, time period, geographic location and any other information you might have to help the reader identify with your family. While you are at it, create a Genealogy sub-folder within you're My Documents folder.

④ Build a GEDCOM File for Each Family Surname

If you have access to a genealogy program and have input your family tree, create a GEDCOM file for each family surname usually each grand-parent so you'll have 4 main GEDCOM's. I like to start from my grandparents back because they are no longer living and it means that I'm not publishing anything on the web about current generations and individuals. I make sure that the GEDCOM doesn't include any notes or information other than B-M-D dates, locations and names. Once you upload this information you can't control who downloads it and how they use it. Don't misunderstand me, it is still a good idea to get your information out on the web so that you get the hits from potential cousins. It's just that some "genealogists" download everything they find and merge it with their own information and then upload it again. I have discovered my family information in the trees of people that I have absolutely no relationship to because they have merged my information with theirs.

⑤ Organize your Browser Favourites

Most browsers make it easy to save web sites, or URL's as they are called, to your Favourites Folder. This is so that you can find them again easily and this is another area that you can organize by creating sub folders to break up the URL's into logical groups.

NOTE: While browsing and moving deeper and deeper into a web site or drilling-down as its called, copy the starting URL from the address window before moving on by highlighting it and pressing <CTRL>+<C> on your keyboard. This will place the URL in you Windows Clipboard and your can get back to the original web page by placing your cursor in the address window and pressing <CTRL>+<V> on your keyboard to paste it. Sometimes the back button just won't get you back to where you started and you been so many places you can't remember where you started.

⑥ Let's Get Started and Find Some Ancestors

Now we're ready to head out on the internet. Our computer is connected and we've got all of our ducks in order so that we can respond to anything we need to while surfing. Just to recap we've:

- ✓ Created signature files for different needs
- ✓ Created folders to organize our email messages
- ✓ Created a query for each family group or major surname
- ✓ Created GEDCOM files for each of our grandparents
- ✓ Created Favourites folders to organize our web URL that we find

There's one last step before hitting the highway and that's our log book. In this case we're going to use **Bob's Internet Genealogy Research Guide** which I've designed to identify what you need to look for and track what you find. Computers are wonderful but sometimes a paper form beside the computer is an invaluable tool to help you keep focused on what you're looking for.

I have found it very frustrating when I've tried a new web site such as the UK Freebmd one and was asked to input information about the person I was searching and then had to scrounge through my paper records to find it. To help organize myself, I created the Research Guide to record this basic information and to help me catalog the information I found or didn't find so that I knew to keep trying or give-up. A lot of web databases are in the process of being built so it is important that you go back and look for the same information over and over again as your ancestors may have just been added by a volunteer imputer somewhere.

Bob's Internet Genealogy Research Guide

The guide is shown in full on the opposite page so that you can photocopy additional work sheets. It is organized into 4 individuals with a generation marker and your research is divided into three basic categories: Search Engines, Reference Sites and Mail Lists. There are some recommended codes at the bottom to help identify each site as a nugget of gold or a lump of coal as the case may be. Finally, like pedigree charts, there is an area at the bottom for filing information so that you can keep these in a binder for easy reference when you're surfing. I have an Acrobat PDF format of this form available that I'll forward to anyone who requests one by sending me an email at rdawes@reach.net.

Pick a family subgroup that you're are wishing to research and fill in the basic information that you know about the family. For example, if you want to research your great-grandparents who immigrated from Scotland and you only know their death date in Canada, fill in a block for your great-grandmother and your great-grandfather. You'll notice that faint guides are printed on the form to enter:

NAME	The name of the person you are researching
PLACE	The location for the event ie. Birth, Marriage or Death
B	Birth date
M	Marriage date
D	Death date
Father	Name of person's father
Mother	Name of person's mother

At the top of the form circle the appropriate generation **5-4-3-2-Gr-Grand-parents**

Obviously you won't have all of this information at the beginning but hopefully as your progress through the various web sites you will be able to add to your form and gradually build the information that you are missing. Even if you don't find what you're looking for this record will identify what you looked for and where because remember we're looking in a colossal library that has no card index.

One final note before you start surfing, I have included the URL's for well known web sites but even these are known to change so don't be discouraged if something doesn't work. It may take a little research to find the new link and you can email me for assistance, at the above address, if you find a broken link.

BOB' S INTERNET GENEALOGY RESEARCH GUIDE

Generation	Search Engines			Reference Sites						Mail Lists	
5-4-3-2-Gr-Grand-parents	Google	Altavista	Copernic	LDS	Ancestry	FTM	Free BMD	GEN-UKI	GENWEB	Roots-L	News
http://www	google.com	altavista.com	copernic.com	familysearch.org	ancestry.com	genealogy.com	http://freebmd.rootsweb.com	genuki.org.uk	worldgenweb.org	rootsweb.com	dejanews.com
NAME											
PLACE											
B											
M											
D											
Father											
Mother											
NAME											
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Father											
Mother											

CODES: **G** = Uploaded GEDCOM **Q** = Posted Surname Query **H** = Found Hit **R** = Received Reply **D** = Dead End **O** = Other

If lost or bored try www.cyndislist.com www.globalgazette.net www.familytreemagazine.com <http://blog.eogn.com/> <http://freereg.rootsweb.com/#dbcontents> www.genuki.org.uk

Ref. No: _____ Family Group: _____

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Search Date: _____

Search Engines

- ✓ **Scour & index the internet**
- ✓ **Some are better than others**
- ✓ **You'll find gold and garbage**
- ✓ **Use care in your search criteria**
- ✓ **Print or save anything worthwhile**

Search Engines are automated computer programs that scour the web for URL's and build them into indexes which you can search for links. Remember that it takes months to go through the entire web and a lot of links may have been disconnected or died by the time you try to use them. This is why I advise everyone print anything valuable you find because it may not be there the next time you look for it.

Some search engines are geared to genealogy and others are geared to shopping so we want to concentrate on the best ones for genealogy. One basic rule with search engines is to format your query so that you get the best possible results. A search for "SMITH" will turn up millions of hits for the Smith family along with towns named Smithfield and occupations such as Goldsmith or companies named Smith & Associates. To limit our findings to genealogy use the PLUS [+] sign to glue your search criteria together such as SMITH+GENEALOGY or SMITH+FAMILY+HISTORY and you will only get hits that contain that exact phrase. Some search engines specify that you enclose the criteria in "quotes" or (brackets) instead of the plus sign so read the search rules on the web site.

Start your search by using Google at <www.google.com> and Altavista at <www.altavista.com>

What you are looking for are family Home Pages with your research surname. These may lead you to other researchers working on the same ancestors you are. If you find something worthwhile, add the URL to your Browser Favourites and save or print it incase the site disappears on you. Using some basic Windows 101, the easiest way to save the text on a web page is to select what you want with your cursor and copy it to the clipboard, then open Windows Notepad or Wordpad and paste the information into it. Save it with a descriptive file name in you're My Documents folder under the surname sub-folder you created earlier. The reason I chose these two is that Google is very fast and Altavista supports multiple languages so if you find a Polish home page you can convert it to English.

Finally, use Copernic at <www.copernic.com> to try your query. Copernic requires you to download special software and install it on your PC. There are two versions: a basic, free one and a paid, advanced version. The advanced version actually has a genealogy search category although I find that the basic program does a good job. Some advantages with Copernic are it's search criteria wizard allows you to pick "any word" or "exact phrase" from a list box so there is no need to use the plus sign as with the others. Also, Copernic saves your searches so that you can review them off-line or at a later date. However, this search engine's biggest advantage is that it sub-contracts your request to a group of search engines and then compares the hits and presents you with the results organized, in order, by the best response. Even though Copernic uses other search engines, I would still try some of the individual ones because they use different techniques to scour the web.

In all of the above cases, I start by doing a search on each search engine using my four basic family group surnames. Those of my grandparents.

Using search engines is just a start and hopefully you found something useful but most importantly, since new information is being created on the web all the time, you will need to re-try your searches every couple of weeks if you came up empty the first time.

Reference Sites

- ✓ **Genealogy specific databases**
- ✓ **Beware of collection techniques**
- ✓ **Some are free other are not**
- ✓ **Repeat your searches often**
- ✓ **Print or save anything worthwhile**

Genealogy reference sites are databases where genealogical information is posted for specific purposes. Some are free and others are only accessible by paid subscription and some new ones are coming on line that are pay per view so while you can access them without a subscription you will have to provide a credit card to see detailed information.

A note about credit cards here, I have been using credit cards to purchase material and information over the web for years without incident. However, I don't use my main credit card that I carry in my wallet for shopping and travel, I use another card with a low credit limit just for on-line purchases. This way, if I ever have any trouble I can cancel the card without limiting my normal transactions. Watch your bank though, they'll raise your credit limit, without asking, when you always pay off your balance.

You'll notice across the top of the Research Guide that under each heading is it's associated URL. To save space I put the <http://www> at the left although at least the www is required to prefix any web address. As soon as your browser sees <www> it automatically adds the <http://> to the address. In some cases, a URL doesn't begin with <www> so you have to spell it out completely. The FreeBMD site is the only one here that will have to be completely entered and the full address is at the top of that column. If you are ever having difficulty accessing a URL someone has given you, try omitting the <www> and add <http://> to the front of the address before asking for help.

The idea with the Research Guide is to work your way from left to right across the form. The first Reference Site is the LDS <www.familysearch.org> which is the most extensive free site. The more information you can provide in the search window the narrower your results will be and this is the reason behind filling in the form before you start. The LDS material has been gathered from their extensive microfilming of source documents all over the world. What you see on the web is only a fraction of what is available through the LDS library in Salt Lake City or your local Family History Centre with new material coming on-line all the time.

As you work across the form, each site provides a different set of information. Ancestry contains contributions by individuals plus commercial databases. Family Tree Maker's site or <www.genealogy.com> contains the World Family Tree contributions by FTM users. Both of these are subscription websites with only a limited amount of information available for free. If you get a hit on the WFT and want to follow it up without subscribing, you can try to access the WFT CD's through a genealogy society or a public library. These also sell on eBay <www.ebay.com> for much less than they are available commercially. To find what's available go to the eBay site and follow the links to Everything Else – Genealogy. A few words of caution, bidding is primarily in US\$, check the shipping charges before bidding and make sure the item is "available to Canada."

The Free BMD site is being updated weekly as volunteers copy the UK County Record Office documents and some counties are farther ahead than others which makes it a good site to check back with often. Gen-UKI is a popular starting point if you don't know where to look in the UK and Ireland. With this one I make sure my coffee mug is full before surfing because it has a wealth of genealogical and geographic information. Through this site you'll find all of the local record repositories, contact names, postal addresses and usually each county has a surname search facility which will link you up with others doing the same research. A trick I use is to look at the email addresses of the researchers and try to find ones that match your own needs. For example, I am researching the Ellis family in PEI who immigrated from Devonshire. I found a researcher on Gen-UKI from New Brunswick doing the same family and when we connected she gave me another two generations back for my family.

Finally, since Gen-UKI is limited to the UK and Ireland I've included Genweb which is worldwide and has projects in most Canadian provinces and counties. Like Gen-UKI, Genweb will guide you to the location information you need and there are always new inputting projects being started making this another place to keep coming back to.

There are make more that these, but hopefully these popular sites will give you the experience and confidence to explore the web more deeply on your own.

Mail Lists

- ✓ **Message boards & mail lists**
- ✓ **Use their archive capabilities**
- ✓ **Beware of Newsgroups & Spam**
- ✓ **Some require membership**
- ✓ **Lurk before you leap**

This is the interactive part of the net where you can ask questions, post information and get individual help.

The difference between Bulletin Boards and Mail Lists are that either you have to go to the information or you have it come to you. In the case of Bulletin

Boards you have to visit the web site and read the various posts and replies. This dialogue forms what is called a "thread" and you can eavesdrop on the conversation about a research issue. You can post a new question and then wait for replies from other researchers who are interested in the same topic. Following an on-line discussion you might go off-line or off-list as they call it and contact the other person privately, especially if you get into areas that are of little interest to the board in general. You may have to register to use a bulletin board to post or reply to messages but it doesn't cost anything and you can browse the board without joining. Most boards have an archive feature which allows you to search old messages to see if there was discussion on your ancestors in the past.

My favourite are the Mail Lists where you sign up for a particular topic and all of the messages posted to the list are delivered to your email box which is why I indicated that the information comes to you. Beware that this can be overwhelming if it is a busy list and you might get hundreds of messages a day but in most cases you receive about 5 or so with peaks in activity from time to time. If you're new to the internet and email it is worthwhile to sign up to a couple of lists so that you start getting some email and don't feel isolated. Some lists have a "digest" feature where you get a daily synopsis of all of the messages and then you can delve deeper into the topics that interest you.

Some Mail Lists are closed and require membership in an organization to participate and other such as the Rootsweb lists are open to anyone with an interest in the list. Bulletin boards may require membership but you don't have to subscribe and unsubscribe because you go to the board to view the messages. With a mail list you send a subscription email to join and you may want to unsubscribe when away so that your inbox doesn't overload.

When using a bulletin board or mail list there are some basic rules:

- 1) Your Subject Line should indicate what specific information you are looking for.
- 2) Any reference to surnames should be capitalized to make them stand out but only SURNAMES.
- 3) Turn off the "include message with reply feature" in your email program, everyone has seen the original message and doesn't need to read it again and again with the replies.
- 4) Make one request per posting. Don't include a whole shopping list of requirements in a message.
- 5) Send an introductory message introducing yourself and what you're researching when you join.

To see both bulletin board and mail lists go to <www.rootsweb.com> and pick the appropriate tab at the top and follow the instructions. Joining either type is easy and when you subscribe to a mail list you will receive a confirming email with instructions on using the list. After joining, lurk before you leap and watch the discussion for a few days to get the flavour of the list and how people ask questions and respond. Don't get involved in Flames where members are chastised for doing something wrong. Some of the people on these lists have absolutely no patience and get upset if you ask an off topic question. I just ignore them and use my <Delete> key.

Finally, and I've left this until last, we have the oldest part of the internet which was functioning before the world wide web came into being and these are newsgroups. Everything that is sleazy about the internet can be found in the newsgroups and this is where internet advertisers gather email addresses for their Spam junk messages but this is also the home of some of the oldest genealogy bulletin boards. Normally, you need to subscribe to view and participate in newsgroups through a email like program called a newsreader which retrieves the messages from your ISP's news server. Fortunately for us, there is a web site called Deja-News which scours the newsgroups and allows us to view the messages without subscribing or needing a newsreader.

Go to <www.dejanews.com> and from the home page you'll see several prefixes. Pick the [soc.] and then the [soc.genealogy] where you'll find 20 specific newsgroups related to genealogy. Since newsgroups are not moderated by anyone there will sometimes be offensive material which gets cross-posted to all newsgroups but there might also be the cousin you are looking for who is researching the same family you are! You can post messages to the newsgroup through dejanews so that you don't have to subscribe but once you put your email into a newsgroup message you will likely receive spam advertisements. For this reason, I would get a free email account from hotmail.com or yahoo.com which I would only use as a return email for corresponding on the newsgroups. This will keep the junk mail out of your primary email account and you can always forward the good messages from one to the other.

Where do you want to go today? Good luck and happy ancestor hunting.