Word Count 1700

Barbara J Starmans, PLCGS
Richmond Hill, ON, Canada
p) 647-401-1519
e) barb@bjstarmans.com

Keep Your Genealogy Research Safe

by Barbara J Starmans

It can happen to anyone: a hard drive failure, a computer virus, a burglary, a flood in the basement, a fire in the attic or storm damage and suddenly years of your genealogy research are gone.

How long has it been since your last backup?

As data storage capacities continue to grow on personal computers and our genealogy data files become more plentiful and larger in size, it is often no longer practical to store backups on CDs or DVDs. Fortunately there are other options.

While it is important to keep a copy of your data in some other location than where your computer is, it is not always convenient to access that remote data when you accidentally delete a cherished family photograph or have a problem with your hard drive and lose your genealogy data. The best solution is to keep more than one backup copy of your files, having one copy at home and at least one copy securely located somewhere else. A good acronym to remember is **LOCKSS** - **Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe!**

Local Backup Hardware

CDs and DVDs

CDs and DVDs hold a limited amount of data but are relatively inexpensive. If you still use CDs or DVDs to back up your files, make sure to use archival quality gold disks and store them in a dry, dark, and cool place. Make multiple copies for extra security and send at least one copy to a friend or family member for storage.

USB Flash drive

USB flash drives are now routinely and inexpensively available in 32, 64 or even 128 GB sizes and are convenient both for transferring files and for storing data backups. They are small enough to carry with you in a bag or on a key chain and can be encrypted to safeguard your data in case of loss.

External Hard Drive

If you have a lot of data, for less than £60, drives with a capacity of 1 TB or more can be readily purchased and at higher price points, storage capacities of up to 6 TB are available.

Network Access Storage

For a little bigger investment, a network access storage system (NAS) or home server can be an even safer way to store copies of all your files, photographs and memories. What makes a NAS safer than an external drive is that many of them come with RAID. RAID stands for "redundant array of inexpensive disks". What that means is that your data is replicated on more than one drive so that even if you have a hard drive failure, you can simply go and purchase a new drive, replace the failed one, and your data replicates again automatically. A NAS can be purchased for as little as £150, depending on the number and capacity of the hard drives included.

Backup Software

Having the right hardware to store your data backups is only half the answer. It is equally important to back up your data regularly and the easiest way to do that is to use software to create a scheduled backup that runs automatically every night. Fortunately today's operating systems come with utilities to allow you to do just that. Windows has a backup and restore utility that can be found in Control Panel and the Mac OS has Time Machine. Both are straight forward to use and help with setting them up can be found at microsoft.com and apple.com. Various commercial backup software programs are also available, and some of the top rated for 2013 are Acronis Backup & Recovery, NTI Backup Now, and Rebit for Windows and ChronoSync, Data Backup, and Tri-Backup for Mac.

Another option, available for both Mac and PC is the free software available for download at www.crashplan.com. This software even has an option to "backup at a friend's". Create your initial backup on an external drive attached to your own computer and then take it to a friend's house and attach it to their computer. Subsequent file changes or additions on your computer will be synchronized to the external drive at your friend's home over the internet.

Online Backup and Cloud File Storage

Having a local backup is great if your hard drive fails but it won't help you if a disaster damages both your computer and your backup device. It is important to keep a copy of your important files somewhere other than at your home. Many options for online backups and file storage and sharing are now available at affordable prices. Increasingly, there is a fine line between services that offer secure online backups and those that offer cloud file storage and sharing. Traditional online backup companies are now offering file sharing while other companies who began as cloud file sharing services now offer the security and enough file storage space that they can be effectively used for online backups as well.

Cloud File Storage and Sharing Services

Companies like Dropbox and Google offer online file storage and allow you to share your files with others should you want to do so. Saving your key genealogy files on such a cloud server allows you to access them from anywhere, a great convenience when you are researching away from home. Because your key files are stored online, they are safe, should something happen to your computer.

Dropbox – www.dropbox.com
Available for: Windows PC, Mac, Linux, iPhone/iPad, Android, BlackBerry, Web

Google Drive – www.google.com
Available for: Windows PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad, Android, Web

Apple iCloud – www.icloud.com
Available for: Windows PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad

Microsoft SkyDrive – www.skydrive.com
Available for: Windows PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad, Android, Windows Phone, Web

Box – www.box.com
Available for: Windows PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad, Android, Windows Phone, Web

Online Backup Services

With an online backup service, you select which folders and files you want to backup using their custom software. Once the files are specified, you define the backup schedule, usually nightly. Your first backup can take several days or even longer, depending on the number of files you have selected but once the initial backup is done, only changes and additions are backed up every night.

Online backup services use high grade, secure data centres to store your data and protect it, both during the transfer process and during storage with some type of encryption, and some let you choose your own encryption key, making your data even more secure. Most services work with either PCs or Macs and many now have a mobile client for iPhone, iPad and Android devices, letting you access your files literally from anywhere. Besides storing a copy of your current files, many of the online backup providers also have version support, keeping the various versions of your files over the last week or month. Some providers also offer the option of designating certain files for continuous synchronization, ensuring that your most important data is kept up to date on their servers without waiting for the scheduled nightly backup to run.

Each service has a different pricing model and it is worth exploring which model works better for your situation. Some have unlimited data for a single computer while others have a data storage limit for a given monthly rate but the same account can be used to backup any number of computers.

Mozy – www.mozy.com
Features:
256-bit AES encryption, option to choose your own encryption key
Version support
File sharing with Mozy Stash
PC and Mac, iOS and Android

Carbonite HomePlus – www.carbonite.com
Features:
128-bit Blowfish encryption, option to choose your own encryption key
Allows backup of an external hard drive
Allows creation of a mirror image of your entire hard drive
PC and Mac, iOS, Android and BlackBerry

SOS Online – www.sosonlinebackup.com
Features:
Encryption type unspecified
Version support
Continuous protection file support
Facebook backup
PC and Mac, iOS and Android

CrashPlan+ Unlimited – www.crashplan.com
Features:
128-bit Blowfish encryption, option to choose your own encryption key
Allows backup of an external hard drive
Supports local and online backups
Option for initial backup to a 1TB hard drive
PC, Mac and Linux

iDrive – www.idrive.com
Features:
256-bit AES encryption, with option to choose your own encryption key
Version support
Continuous protection for all files by default
PC and Mac, iOS and Android

Making a backup of your files seems like a mundane task until something happens to your data. With all the options available to do the job for you on a regular basis, don't you owe it to yourself to start backing up your valuable genealogy data daily?

Tip Boxes

USB Drives:
Create a text file in notepad containing your contact information and save it on your USB drive. Call the files "readme.txt" or "if-found.txt" in case you accidentally leave your USB drive at the library or record office.

Online Backup Wizards:
Most online backup services and cloud file sharing services provide a wizard to select common file types to backup or sync. More than likely, your genealogy database files will not be recognized by these wizards. Make sure that you know where your program stores its database files and what the file extensions are and select them manually after running the selection wizard.

Downloaded Software:
If you purchase software programs using the download option, always store the downloaded installation files in a clearly labeled folder and copy the instructions and software key from the confirmation email into a text document saved in the same folder. Be sure to include your downloaded programs in your backup selections.

Image Formats:
Photographs and scanned documents are an important part of your genealogy research. Whenever possible, save your images in TIFF or PNG formats to avoid any loss of quality. Saving images in the more common JPG format results in smaller files, but when an image is saved as a JPG file, some of the quality of the image is lost during the compression process. If you must save an image as a JPG, check your software for a compression or quality setting and choose the highest available. If you need to edit a JPG file, keep the original file as your master and make a copy of it to edit. JPG files lose more detail and develop more artifacts each time they are re-saved.