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FamilySearch
by Barbara J Starmans

FamilySearch is a non-profit family history organization sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their mission is to help people around the world who want to learn more about their ancestors by offering free access to historical records, research advice and a place to create and share personal genealogical research.

Originally known as the Genealogical Society of Utah, FamilySearch was founded in 1894. By 1938, they became pioneers in the use of microfilm to preserve historical records from archives around the world. By 1965, their microfilm collection had grown substantially and to protect this collection, FamilySearch built a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled vault called Granite Mountain in the side of a mountain in Utah. Then, as digital technology became more advanced in the late 1990s, FamilySearch began digitally imaging records in place of microfilming.

The FamilySearch website, familysearch.org, went online in 1999 with the first version of their searchable database of family history and historical records. It almost immediately crashed due to overwhelming popularity. Since the launch of the FamilySearch website, it has been continually updated and improved and it currently receives over 10 million visits per day and has more than 1 million registered users.

Collections

FamilySearch has over 3.5 billion names in a searchable database, with over 35 million new records being published online every month most of which include digital images from original source documents. The searchable collections include record sets from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Continental Europe, Mexico, the Pacific Islands, United Kingdom and Ireland and the United States. The types of collections include census records, birth, marriage and death records, probate and court records, military records, migration and naturalization records and smaller collections of city directories, burial records, and more.

Scanning Projects

FamilySearch volunteers capture more than 1.5 million images each week all over the world. The volunteers work with record custodians at churches, court houses and archives everywhere to identify,

organize and take digital photographs of historical documents to preserve them and make them available on the FamilySearch website. They also provide digitization services to archives that have already microfilmed some of their document collections. FamilySearch currently has over two hundred active scanners and cameras around the world.

Collaborations

Although FamilySearch is a non-profit organization, they often collaborate with commercial record providers on imaging and indexing projects that benefit the entire genealogy community.

For example, in 2008, FamilySearch, in partnership with The Origins Network, provided the images for the 1851, 1871, and 1881 Censuses. Findmypast.com provided FamilySearch with copies of its English and Wales Census indexes from 1841 to 1901. The Federation of Family History Societies helped to complete the index for the 1851 census. Through this collaboration project and others, the England and Wales census collection from 1841 to 1911 is now available for free on FamilySearch, along with the Scotland census from 1841 to 1891.

In April 2012, the US 1940 Census was released by the US National Archives and FamilySearch joined forces with Archives.com, ProQuest.com and findmypast.com to launch the 1940 US Census Community Project. By August 2012, FamilySearch volunteers had indexed 99% of the 1940 census with approximately 134 million records indexed and the 1940 census is now available for free on the FamilySearch website. After the major success of the 1940 Project, FamilySearch announced that its next major community project would be the imaging and indexing of 30 million US immigration and naturalization records.

Collaboration and crowd sourcing is clearly going to be an on-going programme for FamilySearch and the genealogy community.

Volunteer Indexers

In April 2013, FamilySearch announced that they reached a major milestone with one billion records having been indexed and made searchable since the launch of their volunteer indexing project in 2006. New collections that have been digitized and published on the FamilySearch website are initially browsable but not yet searchable. A team of over 200,000 volunteer indexers will then begin transcribing the text from the images into databases, making them searchable online. Each record is transcribed by two different indexers and in the event of a discrepancy, the record will be reviewed by an expert arbitrator to help ensure accuracy.

To become a volunteer indexer, choose 'volunteer' from the familysearch.org home page and then click on 'start indexing'. Download the software, watch a few tutorials and begin indexing. There are always indexing projects to join from around the world with various record types suitable for beginners or advanced transcribers. Indexing records is a fulfilling and rewarding way to give back to the genealogy community.

Wiki

The research wiki at FamilySearch can be found by clicking on 'Get Help' at the top right hand corner of the homepage of familysearch.org and then choosing 'Research Wiki'. The wiki contains advice for beginning researchers, information about genealogy research by locality and research tools. The wiki is written by genealogists for genealogists and contributions are always welcome to expand existing articles, create new articles, add sources, link to online resources or general editing.

Online Lessons

To access more than two hundred online lessons, click on 'Get Help' at the top right hand corner of the FamilySearch home page and the choose 'Learning Center Video Courses'. There are a variety of free online courses for beginners to advanced researchers in both audio and video format. Courses are now available in fourteen different languages from Chinese to Swedish and cover over thirty different locations including the UK, England and Ireland.

In addition to recording and posting FamilySearch classes previously only offered on-site at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, FamilySearch is also working with many associations to record and post classes including the Association of Professional Genealogists, the Board of Certified Genealogists and the National Archives UK (TNA).

Family Tree

Family Tree is FamilySearch's latest tool for creating your family tree online with opportunities to find and connect with distant cousins and collaborate with other people researching your ancestors. Find the link for Family Tree on the homepage of FamilySearch. Creating your family tree is as simple as creating a username and password. After creating your account, you can begin entering information or you can upload a GEDCOM file and compare it to records already on Family Tree.

HINT: Most genealogy software programs can export to a GEDCOM file format. To upload a GEDCOM file to Family Tree, sign in, and click on Search. Choose the Genealogies tab and scroll to the bottom to find the option to submit your tree and then follow the on screen prompts.

Besides entering names and dates on Family Tree, all events can be referenced with a source citation to show where the information came from. Photographs and family stories can also be attached to ancestors and shared with other researchers.

The 'Possible Duplicates' tool will help you connect with other researchers and the discussions area will offer a place to compare notes. The merge feature allows two records for the same individual to be merged. Should you find a discrepancy in an online record, you are able to correct the change and include the reason for your correction.

FamilySearch is committed to free access to family history records, collaborative learning, and research. If you haven't visited familysearch.org lately, now is a great time to check out what they have on offer!