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Chronology of Events – A New Way to Look at Genealogical Data

Most genealogy software programs offer a pedigree view and a nuclear family view of the events in the lives of your ancestors. But your ancestors did not live in a vacuum. They shared life events with cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Their lives were affected by local happenings and influenced by world events. Why was your grandmother named after her father's sister? What caused your great uncle to enlist in the armed forces so early in WW1? Why did your great grandparents move from one city to another just after your grandfather was born? Why did your ancestors immigrate? By arranging your genealogical data in chronological order and including world and local timelines, the answers to puzzling questions can suddenly seem to leap off the page. New relationships between people, places and events will reveal themselves. You will be looking at the lives of your ancestors as they lived them, surrounded by their extended families, the places in which they lived and the world around them.

Step One: Choose a Subject

To begin your chronology, choose a subject person from your family history research that you want to learn more about. For example, you might choose to develop a chronology report about your great grandfather.

Step Two: Define the Scope

Next, decide the scope of your chronology. This may be a single generation or multiple generations. In the example of your great grandfather, you may decide to look at his entire lifespan from birth to death or you may work from his earliest known ancestor forward to yourself.

Step Three: Decide on a Format

Next, decide what format you want to use for your chronology. One option is to develop your chronology in a chart or spreadsheet format. This format has the advantage of being easier to sort in date order but the structure of a chart may limit the information you include. Another option is to develop your chronology in a point form text document. Your choice may be influenced by the capabilities of your particular genealogy software's report output formats. My personal preference is to use a point form text document because it allows the most flexibility in the included information and format.

Step Four: List Life Events

Once you have chosen a format, make a list of all the events in the life of your chosen ancestor. When and where was he born? Was he christened or baptized? When and where did he get married? When and where did he die? Where was he buried? Did you find him listed in any census records? Passenger lists? Did he join the military? Put all relevant facts into date order in your document or spreadsheet.

Step Five: Expand to Include Family Events

Your ancestor was affected not only by the events in his own life but also by the events within his family. Look at the facts attached to other members of his household and add these into your chronology. Did he have younger siblings? When and where were they born? Was his father in the military? Did his siblings get married? Go through each of your ancestor's family members and insert events from their lives into your document or spreadsheet, making sure to maintain chronological order.

Step Six: Expand to Extended Family

Consider your ancestor's extended family next. Did he have aunts and uncles living near by or even far away? Were his grandparents living? Did he have younger cousins? When and where were they born? Did one of his grandparents die? When and where did that happen? Did one of his siblings die young? Did he lose a parent? When and where did that happen? Examine the events within the lives of these people and add them into your document or spreadsheet.

Step Seven: Look for Implied Events

Once all of the primary events are listed in chronological order, examine each event listed to see if there are any implied events. One example of an implied event might be the date of onset of ill health if your ancestor's mother has a death record that indicates the length of her fatal illness. Another example of an implied event might be if your ancestor's aunt was married "after banns were called". If your ancestor lived near by, he may have been in church on the three prior Sundays when the minister read out the banns, announcing the intention of his aunt to marry. Did your ancestor's cousin die young? Perhaps your ancestor attended the funeral service. Carefully study each event in your chronology so far and add any related, implied events in your chronology document or spreadsheet.

Step Eight: Local Historical Events

Research local events in the location and time period where your ancestor lived. Were there any local epidemics? Search Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) for a list of major epidemics. Were there any local natural disasters? Were there any laws passed that would have affected your ancestor or their family? Were there railway lines built in your ancestor's area? When did the telegraph come to your ancestor's area? Internet searches are a great way to find local historic events. Look for local history books on your ancestor's town or county in your local library. Search WorldCat

(<http://www.worldcat.org>) for books available through interlibrary loan and ask your library to get them for you. Search Google Books (<http://books.google.com>) or the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>) for books that are now in the public domain and available for download. Consider how these historical events might have changed your ancestor's life or the lives of his family. If your ancestor lived in a rural area, what crops were planted in the area and when would they have been harvested? If your ancestor lived in a town, what industries were started in that town and did your ancestor or his family work in them? Insert any relevant local historical events into your timeline.

Step Nine: World Historical Events

Our ancestors' lives were also impacted by world events. Research published world timelines and extract any events that might have been meaningful to your ancestor. General internet searches will find timelines for various places and times. The World Time Lines site (<http://www.worldtimelines.org.uk/>) as its name suggests, provides world timelines. You can also search About.com (www.about.com) to find many timelines about various places, subjects and times. For example, a search on "18th century" includes results showing 18th century inventions and 18th century fashion. The BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history>) has many interesting timelines on various places, subjects and time periods, such as an interactive timeline of Britain. Did your ancestor live in the time of war? Did he or any of his relatives take part in the war? What was invented during your ancestor's lifetime? When did it come into common use? Make a list of any world events that may have influenced your ancestor's life and include those in your report.

Step Ten: Analyze the Results

Now that your chronology is complete, read through your resulting document. Instead of just a collection of names, dates and places, you should have a better understanding of how your ancestors lived, why they did what they did and who they really were by seeing their lives in context with all the people, events and places around them.

You might now readily surmise that your grandmother was named after her father's sister because she was born at a time when her aunt was fatally ill with cancer. It may now be obvious that your great-uncle enlisted as a soldier in WW1 on the same day as several of his older cousins in a patriotic gesture. You might now understand that your great-grandparents probably moved across the county because of the collapse of a local industry in which the family had always been employed. Knowing that there was a catastrophic crop failure and that the economy in Europe was suffering may explain why some family members chose to follow others who had immigrated to North America before them, searching for a better life.

As with our own lives, it is the why and the how that made your ancestor who he was, and the events unfolding around him that dictated the path he followed in life.