

# TRADITIONAL GENEALOGY & PAPER TRAIL CHECKLIST

*The complete record-based research workflow to pair with your DNA evidence*

## Before you begin — quick glossary:

**Primary source** — a record created at, or very close to, the time of the event it documents (e.g. a birth certificate filed at birth) — generally the most reliable type of evidence.

**Secondary source** — a record created later, often from memory or another document (e.g. an obituary, a family Bible entry written years after a birth) — still useful, but more prone to error.

**Vital records** — official records of birth, marriage, and death, typically held by a state, county, or national registration office.

**Citation** — a note recording exactly where a fact came from — which document, which archive, which page — so you or anyone else can find and re-check it later.

DNA tells you WHO you're related to. Paper records tell you HOW and WHY. This checklist covers the traditional record-based research that turns a DNA cluster into a documented family history.

## Phase 1 — Start with what you already know

- ☐ Interview living relatives before starting archival research — *ask open questions and let them talk — names, approximate dates, places, and family stories often point directly at the records you'll need next*
- ☐ Record names, dates, and places exactly as given, then verify them separately — *write down what you're told as a starting hypothesis, not as confirmed fact — verify each detail against a document*
- ☐ Gather and scan original documents already in the family — *birth/marriage/death certificates, old photographs with captions, family Bibles, letters — scan them before they're lost or damaged*
- ☐ Build your tree backward from yourself, one generation at a time — *★ don't skip ahead to an exciting distant ancestor before each generation in between is documented — gaps compound and become very hard to fix later*

## Phase 2 — Vital records

- ☐ Identify where birth, marriage, and death records are held for the relevant place and period — *in the US this is usually a state vital records office or, for older records, the county courthouse; requirements and availability vary significantly by state and era*
- ☐ Check the statewide registration start date for your state before assuming a record exists — *many US states did not require statewide vital registration until the early 1900s — earlier events may only be documented at the county or church level instead*
- ☐ Request certified copies where you need one for legal purposes, or research copies where you just need the information

## Phase 3 — Census records

- ☐ Use census records (every 10 years in the US) to track a family's location and household over time
- ☐ Check what information a given census year actually recorded before relying on it — *the content asked varies significantly by year — for example, pre-1850 US census records list only the head of household by name, with other household members recorded merely as tally marks by age range*
- ☐ Cross-check ages and birthplaces across multiple census years for the same person — *these details are often self-reported and can shift slightly from one census to the next — treat consistent patterns as more reliable than any single year*

## Phase 4 — Church and religious records

- ☐ Identify the likely denomination and congregation for the place and period — *baptism, marriage, and burial records are often the ONLY surviving documentation for events before civil registration began*
- ☐ Locate the relevant denominational or diocesan archive — *many have been digitized or indexed by genealogical societies — search for the specific archive rather than assuming national record sites cover them*

## Phase 5 — Immigration and naturalization records

- ☐ Search passenger arrival lists for the relevant port and period — *Ellis Island and Castle Garden databases are free and cover the major historical entry points to the US*
- ☐ Look for naturalization records if the family became citizens — *a Declaration of Intent and Petition for Naturalization often include birthplace, arrival date, and even physical description — valuable details rarely found elsewhere*

### Phase 6 — Military and other supplementary records

- ☐ Check for draft registration cards, muster rolls, or service records for the relevant conflicts and eras
- ☐ Check for pension records if a relative served — *these often include supporting affidavits from family members, which can reveal otherwise undocumented relationships*

### Phase 7 — Evaluate and cite every source

- ☐ Distinguish primary from secondary sources for every fact — *weigh a primary source more heavily when two sources disagree*
- ☐ Cite the specific source for every fact you add to your tree — *record which document, which archive or website, and which page or reference number — a fact without a citation is much harder to verify or defend later*
- ☐ Note discrepancies explicitly rather than silently picking whichever source is more convenient — *★ conflicting evidence is often the first clue toward a more interesting and more accurate story*

**Pro tip:** A document with a name on it is not automatically evidence of a fact. Cross-check every important detail against at least one independent source before treating it as confirmed — records are created by people, and people make mistakes, misremember, and sometimes misrepresent facts on purpose.