

FamilySearch Collections—Tips and Tricks

DAVID E. RENCHER, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS

INTRODUCTION

It may seem strange to start with a definition of “collection” but it will be very helpful in this presentation. Collections at FamilySearch take a number of meanings. They can be indexed or image collections in the “Historical Records” section of the FamilySearch website. They can be an imaged collection cited in the Family History Library Catalog, but not in the “Historical Records” collection.

A collection may be in the form of lineage linked data and be listed in the “Genealogies” section of the search feature. FamilySearch has also gathered the “collections” of noted genealogists for a number of years. It may seem like those collections are hidden in the Family History Library Catalog (FHLC), but you’ll be able to find them after the session today.

A “collection” may also be in the context of a particular archive or repository – this too becomes a challenge to identify what has been gathered from the available records scattered throughout the world. However, using the search functionality in the Family History Library Catalog, this is an easy task.

FamilySearch also has a “collection” of over 375,000 scanned books that are all relevant to genealogical research. Many are family and county histories.

HISTORICAL RECORDS

FamilySearch has over 2,573 collections in the Historical Records section of the website. They cover a variety of record types and geographic areas. They may be searched as an entire collection, a geographic area, or a specific collection. Depending on what information you know about the subject of your search, you may interchangeably use all of these searches over the course of your research. As a general rule, it is best to either:

- Start with a narrow search and expand, or
- Start with a broad search and refine it depending on the results

The website functions best with all of the web browsers except Internet Explorer (IE). This web browser is outdated and sometimes gets poor performance on the FamilySearch website, although it is still a favorite among many genealogists. Web browsers, Bing, Mozilla Firefox, Microsoft Edge, and Google Chrome all function very well.

Search Engine

All of the major genealogical websites have different search engines that run beneath the website and return entries in different sort orders. This is why you do not get the same results when you search the 1850 U.S. Census on Ancestry as you do on FamilySearch or Heritage Quest or My Heritage or FindMyPast.

One of the major differences are the name groupings – how they group given names and surnames. One site may include the spelling variant Wrenshall with Renshaw, but another doesn’t. Some will include the Latin variants of given names and others do not. Some include a wide variety of abbreviations, others don’t have as extensive a name library. This affects the underlying computer algorithm that weights and scores the entries as a close or far match.

The difference in search engines accounts for the difference in the experience that you are getting at each website. It’s this difference that allows us to choose the experience that best suits our needs.

The Historical Records section of the FamilySearch website may be searched in one of three ways:

1. Search the entire set of over 2,573 historical collections
2. Search by a specific named record collection
3. Search by a specific locality, region, date, or record type

Historical Record Collections		Previous	Next
Showing 1-100 of 2,573 Collections. Show More			
Title ▲	Records	Last Updated	
Alabama Births and Christenings, 1881-1930	6,830	Mar 12, 2012	
 Alabama Civil War Service Records of Confederate Soldiers, 1861-1865	1,213,534	Apr 20, 2012	
 Alabama Civil War Service Records of Union Soldiers, 1861-1865	31,582	Apr 20, 2012	
 Alabama County Marriages, 1809-1950	4,915,855	Nov 28, 2018	
Alabama County Marriages, 1818-1936	80,469	Jan 24, 2017	
Alabama Deaths and Burials, 1881-1952	105,683	Feb 25, 2013	
 Alabama Deaths, 1908-1974	1,873,338	Aug 5, 2019	
 Alabama Estate Files, 1830-1976	25,297	Dec 11, 2013	
Alabama Marriages, 1816-1957	1,338,311	Jul 21, 2015	
 Alabama Probate Records, 1809-1985	Browse Images	Feb 19, 2013	
Alabama State Census, 1855	34,978	Oct 9, 2018	
Alabama State Census, 1866	243,781	Dec 12, 2011	
 Alabama, Census of Confederate Veterans, 1907, 1921, 1927	20,403	Dec 21, 2016	
 Alabama, Confederate Pension Applications, ca. 1880-1930's	69,601	Jul 29, 2019	
 Alabama, County Birth Registers, 1881-1930	24,339	Sep 1, 2019	
 Alabama, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1872	Browse Images	Jul 7, 2014	
 Alabama, Jefferson County Circuit Court Papers, 1870-1916	Browse Images	Aug 14, 2012	
 Alabama, Madison County Chancery and Circuit Court Records, 1829-1968	Browse Images	Jun 26, 2014	

Tips and Tricks

Creating straight forward searches is always the place to start. If you are looking for the marriage of George W. Harris to Martha Payne, then start with the standard spelling of both names, search the approximate date and place you believe they would have occurred. However, when that doesn't work, it's time to get creative.

FamilySearch indexers are instructed to "index what they see." This means that if the given name is written Geo., then that is what is typed into the index. If the record is "G. W. Harris" then only the initials

are in the record. What you may not have thought to include are titles. You should also search for entries that are “Mr. George W. Harris” or “Mr. G. W. Harris.” Females also often went by their husband’s names after they were married. It is not uncommon to see a death record as “Mrs. G. W. Harris.”

Exact Search

On names, FamilySearch exact mode returns exactly what you enter, with four allowances: case is ignored, spaces are ignored, diacritical marks are ignored, and punctuation is ignored.

- “Mark John” no longer matches just Mark or just John.
- “Mark John” no longer matches “Mark Jack.”
- “Mark John” no longer matches “John Mark.”

For names and places, if a name or place is marked “exact,” it must be present in the record. This is not the case for dates. Even though FamilySearch always handles dates as exact (the year on the record must fall within the specified range), the date field in the record can be blank and the record still matches.

Parent Search

Parent search is a very useful tool that will bring together potential family groups. The temptation is always to fill in too much data. In this instance, you may enter information into the search fields for the names of the parents and include the surname of the mother, or leave it blank. For example:

The screenshot shows the 'Search Historical Records' interface. At the top, it says 'Search for a deceased ancestor in historical records to uncover vital information from their life.' Below this is a section for 'Deceased Ancestor's Name' with input fields for 'First Names' and 'Last Names'. A white callout box with a black border is positioned over these fields, containing the text 'Leave Blank' in bold. Below the name section are options for 'Search with a life event:' including 'Birth', 'Marriage', 'Residence', 'Death', and 'Any'. There are also fields for 'Birthplace' and 'Birth Year (Range)' with 'From' and 'To' sub-fields. The next section is 'Search with a relationship:' with options for 'Spouse', 'Parents', and 'Other Person'. At the bottom, there are input fields for 'Father's First Names' (containing 'Peter'), 'Father's Last Names' (containing 'Keesler'), 'Mother's First Names' (containing 'Ann'), and 'Mother's Last Names' (which is empty). A small 'x' icon is visible in the top right corner of the form area.

When FamilySearch has imaged the “collection” of a noted genealogist, then the collection will be cataloged under the name of the compiler and placed in the Family History Library Catalog under the subject heading “Genealogy,” then alphabetically by the name of the person who created the collection. For example:

- Florida Genealogy
- Ireland Genealogy
- Germany Genealogy
- Alabama Genealogy

Under “Florida Genealogy,” the following collection is found:

The Edith Starling Wall collection, 1800-1990

Statement of Responsibility:	Edith Starling Wall
Authors:	Wall, Edith Starling (Main Author)
Format:	Manuscript/Manuscript on Film
Language:	English
Publication:	Salt Lake City, Utah : Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1993
Physical:	on 10 microfilm reels ; 16 mm.

At the end of the catalog record, you will see the other areas where the record is cataloged:

Subjects

Locality Subjects

[United States, Florida - Genealogy](#)

[United States, Georgia - Genealogy](#)

GENEALOGIES

Under the Search tab in FamilySearch, you will also find a collection of previous lineage-linked genealogies that have been researched by individuals and organizations. These collections are locked to further changes, but may be compared to the Family Tree. Searches in the Family Tree do not include searches in the “Genealogies” section, so both must be searched to see the full range of lineage-linked data on FamilySearch.

BOOK COLLECTION

The FamilySearch book collection allows you to search millions of entries in a qualified collection of genealogically relevant materials. The collection is primarily made from compiled genealogies and county histories. This allows you to search across millions of pages of compiled research of accumulated genealogies. FamilySearch works with other partners in the library community to scan and index these volumes for free research and download.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous collections in the holdings of FamilySearch. Many are still to be digitized and indexed. Watch for additions to the Historical Records collection and be sure to click on the date to see the most recent updated collections. Also search the “Genealogy” subject heading in your research area of interest to see what major genealogical collections may be available.

Use the search strategies to identify variants in spelling and to pull potential family groups together with the parent search. Compare the search results in FamilySearch with the same search in the other major online companies to see the differences in the way the search engines are returning the same query.