Getting Started in Genealogy

By Robert L Bowling, Jr for the Martin County, NC Historical Society

So, you want to create a family tree and explore the mysteries of your ancestors…great! There has been an explosion of genealogy related information on the internet in recent years. A lot of it is available free and you have the option to subscribe, for a fee, to several popular world-wide genealogy sites. Many counties have recently placed digitized copies of their archival documents on their web sites for free viewing and downloads. This is wonderful, but where do you begin? This article will help you get started.

Organize Your Information

Start with a family pedigree chart, like the one illustrated below, and fill in what information you know about your family including siblings. Free chart templates are available for download if you Google "free pedigree templates for genealogy."

If you are computer savvy, it is highly recommended that you skip the paper chart and start by entering the information directly into a family tree software package or online genealogy web site. You can purchase a software package, such as *Family Tree Maker*[1] by MacKiew Company, or download the free

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[1] Download for $79.95 from MacKiew Company website. Will automatically sync your Family Tree Maker tree with your tree in Ancestry.com subscription account with changes made to either location.
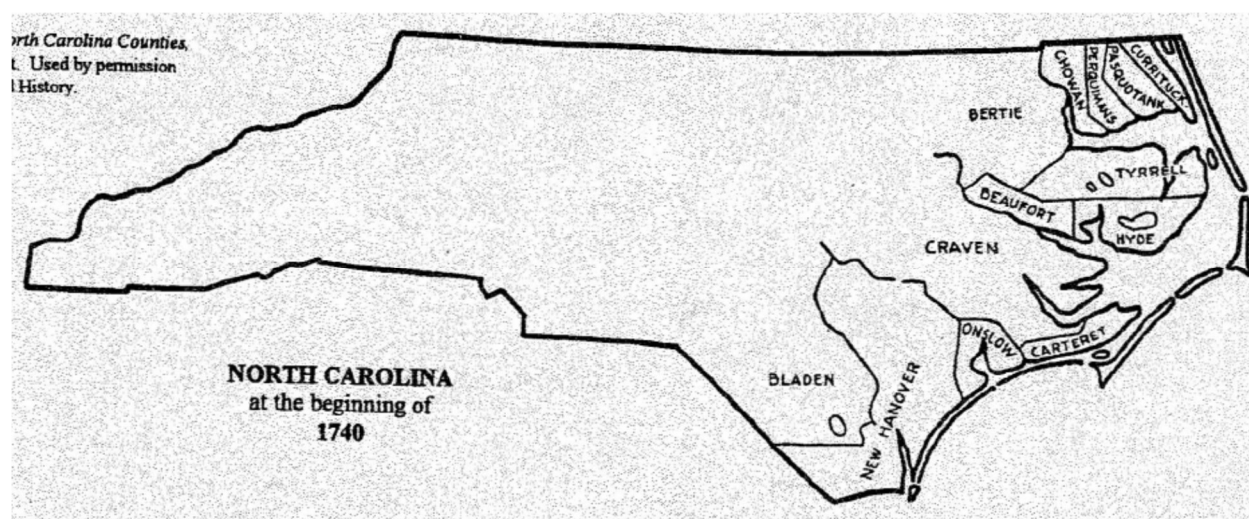
Family Tree Builder[2] software from MyHeritage.com. Most tree making software will allow you to link pictures, documents, and write family stories associated with each individual in your tree, create genealogy reports and charts, provide research "hints," etc. Family Tree Maker is designed to work closely with Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. Family Tree Builder is designed to work closely with MyHeritage.com, which itself is closely linked with FamilySearch.

You can use a genealogy site, such as FamilySearch.org, and start building your tree online. Many common genealogy research sites also allow you to upload pictures, documents, and write information about each person. More about genealogy sites in a minute.
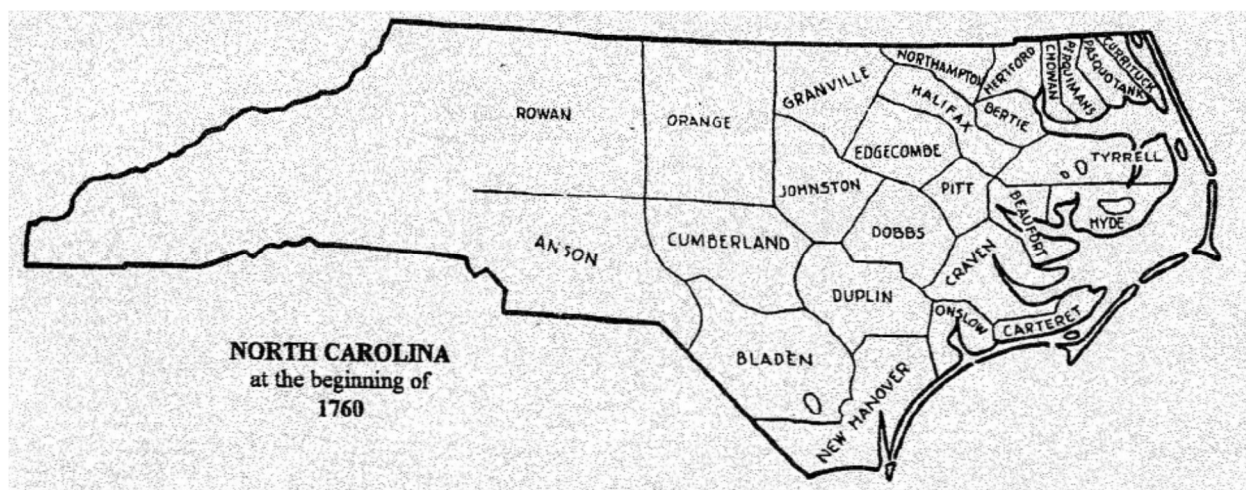
Preparing to Do Research

Before diving into researching your ancestors, you need to know some things about North Carolina. North Carolina was formed by Charter by the Virginia colonist under the Lords Proprietors in 1653. Originally, most of North Carolina was known as Albemarle County or Precinct that was formed in 1664. There was actually a second, short-lived county called Clarendon around the Cape Fear River that only existed for three years.

In 1668, Chowan, Currituck, Pasquotank, and Perquimans Counties were formed from Albemarle. From that day forward, these counties split many times until we have the 100 counties today. You may know where your ancestors lived in today's terms, but the county configurations when your ancestors were born, could have been quite different. The North Carolina family of counties evolved over time. The following maps are by L. Polk Denmark from *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663-1943*, by David L. Corbitt, obtained from the Genealogical Services, Government & Heritage Library, State Library of NC.

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[2] Will automatically sync your Family Tree Builder tree with your tree in MyHeritage.com subscription account with changes made in either location.

NORTH CAROLINA at the beginning of 1760

The table below shows when and how the current counties were formed.

Date County Formed, County/Counties from Which it was Formed (Bold selections are Martin County Ancestors)	
1664 Albemarle, Original County: Extinct 1689	1779 Lincoln, Tryon
1664 Clarendon, Original County: Extinct by 1667	1785 Rockingham, Guilford
1668 Chowan, Albemarle [Shaftesbury, 1670-82]	1787 Robeson, Bladen
1668 Currituck, Albemarle [Carteret, 1670-82]	1788 Iredell, Rowan
1668 Pasquotank, Albemarle [Carteret, 1670-82]	1789 Stokes, Surry
1668 Perquimans, Albemarle [Berkeley, 1670-82]	1791 Buncombe, Burke, Rutherford
1696 Bath, Original County (extinct after 1724)	1791 Glasgow, Dobbs
1705 Beaufort, Bath [Pamlico, 1705-1712]	1791 Lenoir, Dobbs
1705 Craven, Bath [Archdale, 1705-1712]	1792 Cabarrus, Mecklenburg
1705 Hyde, Bath [Wickham, 1705-1712]	1792 Person, Caswell
1722 Bertie, Chowan	1799 Ashe, Wilkes
1722 Carteret, Craven	1799 Greene, Glasgow
1729 New Hanover, Craven	1799 Washington, Tyrrell
1729 Tyrrell, Chowan, Bertie, Currituck, Pasquotank	1808 Columbus, Brunswick, Bladen
1734 Bladen, New Hanover	1808 Haywood, Buncombe
1734 Onslow, New Hanover	1822 Davidson, Rowan
1741 Edgecombe, Bertie	1828 Macon, Haywood
1741 Northampton, Bertie	1833 Yancey, Burke, Buncombe
1746 Granville, Edgecombe	1836 Davie, Rowan
1746 Johnston, Craven	1838 Henderson, Buncombe
1750 Anson, Bladen	1839 Cherokee, Macon
1750 Duplin, New Hanover	1841 Caldwell, Burke, Wilkes
1752 Orange, Johnston, Bladen, Granville	1841 Cleveland, Rutherford, Lincoln
1753 Rowan, Anson	1841 Stanly, Montgomery
1754 Cumberland, Bladen	1842 Catawba, Lincoln
1759 Dobbs, Johnston	1842 McDowell, Rutherford, Burke
1759 Halifax, Edgecombe	1842 Union, Anson, Mecklenburg
1760 Hertford, Chowan, Bertie, Northampton	1846 Gaston, Lincoln
1761 Pitt, Beaufort	1847 Alexander, Iredell, Caldwell, Wilkes
1763 Mecklenburg, Anson	1849 Alamance, Orange
1764 Brunswick, New Hanover, Bladen	1849 Forsyth, Stokes
1764 Bute, Granville	1849 Watauga, Ashe, Wilkes, Caldwell, Yancey
1768 Tryon, Mecklenburg	1850 Yadkin, Surry
1771 Chatham, Orange	1851 Jackson, Haywood, Macon
1771 Guilford, Rowan, Orange	1851 Madison, Buncombe, Yancey
1771 Surry, Rowan	1855 Harnett, Cumberland
1771 Wake, Johnston, Cumberland, Orange	1855 Polk, Rutherford, Henderson
1774 Martin, Halifax, Tyrrell	1855 Wilson, Edgecombe, Nash, Johnston, Wayne
1777 Burke, Rowan	1859 Alleghany, Ashe
1777 Camden, Pasquotank	1861 Clay, Cherokee
1777 Caswell, Orange	1861 Mitchell, Yancey, Watauga, Caldwell, Burke, McDowell
1777 Nash, Edgecombe	1861 Transylvania, Henderson, Jackson
1778 Wilkes, Surry, District of Washington	1870 Dare, Currituck, Tyrrell, Hyde

Date County Formed, County/Counties from Which it was Formed (Bold selections are Martin County Ancestors)	
1779 Franklin, Bute	1871 Swain, Jackson, Macon
1779 Gates, Chowan, Hertford, Perquimans	1872 Graham, Cherokee
1779 Montgomery, Anson	1872 Pamlico, Craven, Beaufort
1779 Randolph, Guilford	1875 Pender, New Hanover
1779 Richmond, Anson	1881 Durham, Orange, Wake
1779 Rutherford, Tryon	1881 Vance, Granville, Warren, Franklin
1779 Warren, Bute	1899 Scotland, Richmond
1779 Wayne, Dobbs	1907 Lee, Moore, Chatham
1784 Moore, Cumberland	1911 Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Caldwell
1784 Sampson, Duplin	1911 Hoke, Cumberland, Robeson
1779 Jones, Craven	

Know Where to Look for Your Ancestors

Deeds, marriage bonds, birth certificates, death certificates, Wills, and other ancestorial documents are usually kept in the Register of Deeds office in the county seat of the county in which these documents were generated or the state archive. Using Martin County as an example, you might think your ancestors were born in Martin County back in 1770; however, if you go to Williamston and search for their birth records, you are going to come away empty-handed. Martin County did not exist until 1774! Martin was formed from Halifax and Tyrrell in 1774, so you need to determine geographically where your ancestors lived in the time before 1774 to figure out which county seat has your ancestor birth records. But it is not that simple! This is North Carolina after all.

Martin was formed from Halifax and Tyrrell; however, Halifax was formed from Edgecombe in 1759 and Tyrrell was formed from Chowan, Bertie, Currituck, and Pasquotank in 1729. Bertie was formed in 1722 from Chowan. Chowan, Currituck, and Pasquotank were formed in 1668 from Albemarle County. Before 1653, your ancestor's records may even be located in Virginia. Although your ancestors lived in the same place their whole lives, they may have lived first in Chowan, then Bertie, then Edgecombe or Tyrrell, then finally in Martin…and, they never moved from their farm! I had an ancestor who said he lived in the same house for 60 years and his address changed 20 times.

You need to apply the above logic to determine where to look for documents and these records may be in multiple counties. Be aware that just because you have geographically and timewise figured out where your ancestors lived, this does not mean that they were born, married, or died in the same area. Think about where people would go to a hospital to give birth or die or nursing homes. Those locations may be in another county and that county is where you will find their records. Most people get married in their home town, but not always. If they had a beach wedding at Nags Head, you will need to search Dare County to find their marriage license.

Where Can You Do Your Research Online?

First, a word of caution. Information found researching any internet genealogy web site is a very good start, but be aware that much of what you find in someone else's tree may be completely wrong! You need to do your own research from that starting point to prove the information. Use historical documents, such as Wills, Census records, birth and death certificates, et al. to prove the relationships of people in your tree. However, sometimes you may just have to include someone because you "know" they are your ancestor, but cannot prove it. In those cases, flag the person in comments as speculation and not proven.

There are a number of free research sites. One popular free site is FamilySearch.org. You can build a tree, do research, add people to your tree, upload pictures and documents, and share family stories. FamilySearch has access to millions of documents across the world. If you only used one site, this is the one.

Other popular free genealogy research sites are:

1. **General Access:**
    a. **Build a tree and research:** WikiTree.com
    b. **County Records:** genealogyinc.com
2. **Military Records**: Fold3.com
3. **Cemetery Records:**
    a. Findagrave.com
    b. cemeterycensus.com/nc
4. **North Carolina State Archives and Other State Sites:**
    a. digital.ncdcr.gov
    b. statelibrary.ncdcr.libguides.com
    c. archives.ncdcr.gov/doc
    d. docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/volumes
    e. ncgenweb.us
    f. nclandgrants.com
5. **Abstract of NC Wills:** archive.org/details/abstractofnorthc01nort
6. **Library of Congress**: ChroniclingAmerica.loc.gov
7. **National Archives:**
    a. **Catalog of Documents:** catalog.archives.gov
    b. **Normal Research:** archives.gov/research
    c. **Naturalization Records**: archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization
8. **Free Newspapers:** Fulton History.com
9. **England Research**: nationalarchives.gov.uk
10. **Monthly Fee Sites:**
    a. Ancestry.com
    b. MyHeritage.com (Note: newspaper access comes with the subscription)
    c. Newspapers.com

Counties also have web sites that give you access to their digitized documents and are a very good research source.   You can also visit the County Register of Deeds office and view the actual documents in their archive. Most now allow use of cell phones to photograph documents for loading into your tree.

Visit Cemeteries

One fun activity is to search cemeteries for family graves to gather birth, death, and often, family member information. Start with organized and maintained church and municipal graveyards in the counties that you identified as the place of death. Expand your search from there to those family cemeteries often found in the middle of fields and back in the woods. It is best to search for these family cemeteries in the fall and winter when the leaves are off the trees and the snakes are not around. Use the sites listed above to locate cemeteries.

Old tombstones are often aged and covered with growths that make them hard to read. Please, do not scrub them with cleaning agents that are caustic and can damage the tombstone. There are cleaning agents that will not damage the tombstone, but the method found best is using a heavy foaming shaving cream. Smear the shaving cream across the information engraved into the tombstone, then use a cardboard straightedge to scrap across the wording to remove the excess shaving cream. The rest of the shaving cream will remain in the engravings making them easier to read.

Other Sources of Research

A wealth of knowledge can be obtained from books written by local authors. Unfortunately, these books do not have a national audience and are in limited edition. The best place to search is the local historical society. A good online source for purchasing old books is AbeBooks.com.

The local library is another good source for historical books. Do not overlook the libraries of local colleges and universities. Most libraries have a genealogy section containing books specifically for genealogy research. A good internet source for locating books is WorldCat.org. North Carolina has a web site NCLive.com that allows you to find and read books online.

History books about counties or locations within counties are great sources to find family information. But, be cautious that some "history" may not be entirely true. The author has seen references to his ancestors in several history books that referred to people who were not alive at the time of reference!

Local Historical Society members can often point you in the right direction for finding your ancestors. A lot of these members belong to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) or the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) and have researched many of the local families.   The Order of First Families of North Carolina has genealogy books available for purchase that provide family information proven by their genealogists for ancestors who are proven to have lived in North Carolina before it became a state on 12 July 1929.

Facebook has groups for genealogy by county or county groups. Some families have Facebook pages. You can glean a lot of information from these groups and members are generally willing to share information that will help you find ancestors.

DNA Research

Having your DNA done has become very popular recently. There are numerous sites that help you link yourself to others who share DNA. One of the earliest DNA sites is 23andme.com. 23andme also provides you with genetic medical information that none of the other sites provide. For instance, your DNA has genes and markers that are associated with different medical conditions. 23andme will provide you with this information, such has your tendency to get certain cancers or your tendency to come down with certain ailments. They will also show you a list of people who are kin to you through your shared DNA. One drawback with 23andme is that there are no family trees. You can export your raw DNA file

and transfer it to other DNA sites, such as FamilyTreeDNA.com[3] and GEDMATCH.com[4]. If you only picked one DNA site for analyzing your DNA, 23andme would be the one.

However, for performing family tree research, Ancestry.com is the best that the author has found so far. Taking their DNA test and setting up an account with Ancestry is the best approach. Ancestry has a tool called ThruLines® that suggests where people with your shared DNA fit into your family tree. MyHeritage also provides information about people who share DNA with you, but does not have tool like ThruLines®.

Transferring Your Tree

Family trees can be exported to what is called a GEDCOM file. GEDCOM is the standard file format for exchanging genealogical data between different systems. Export your tree into a generic GEDCOM file and import the GEDCOM file into another software package or internet genealogical site, such as FamilySearch[5]. Your tree will be automatically processed back into your family tree at its new location.

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[3] This site is for men since it is based on Y DNA and building research groups based on family surnames. Although you can transfer your raw DNA data from another site into FamilyTreeDNA, it is highly recommended that you men take one of their YDNA tests…the 37-marker test is a good starting point. The site itself is free.

[4] GEDMATCH allows uploading your tree via the GEDCOM file and your raw DNA. Be aware that law enforcement use this site to search for criminals.

[5] You cannot export a GEDCOM file from FamilySearch.