Making the Most of *FamilySearch* for New York Research

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Overview

FamilySearch is one of the most widely used genealogical platforms, yet its full potential for New York research is often underutilized. While many researchers rely on the basic search interface, *FamilySearch* offers a far broader ecosystem that includes digitized image collections, a powerful catalog, full-text search capabilities, and collaborative tools. When using *FamilySearch* for New York research, it can be helpful to begin by learning how to effectively navigate *FamilySearch*, identify key collections, and leverage the catalog (and other tools) when needed.

Understanding *FamilySearch*'s Navigation

FamilySearch is not a single database but a layered environment. Researchers should move intentionally between indexed records, image collections, and catalog entries. Take time to understand what the contents of a specific collection might be *before* initiating a search.

Core Tools:

- Family Tree: https://www.familysearch.org/tree/
- Search Historical Records: https://www.familysearch.org/search/
- Images: https://www.familysearch.org/en/records/images/
- Catalog: https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog
- Full-Text: https://www.familysearch.org/search/full-text

FamilySearch is a starting point. It is not a substitute for a full records survey or on-site research. Indexed collections represent only a portion of available materials. Image collections and catalog entries often contain the most valuable New York records.

Using the Family Tree

The Family Tree can reveal migration patterns, associates, and relationships that are not easily discovered elsewhere. However, it is user-generated and must be treated as such (a resource for clues rather than defined conclusions). Researchers should also be aware of trees that were created from records rather than by individuals (especially those referencing only a single source). Consider searching the tree for elements other than just an individual's name, such as those with a similar surname who were born and died in the same location.

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Key New York Collections

Researchers might want to begin at the *FamilySearch* Wiki page for New York (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/New_York,_United_States_Genealogy) before examining key collections. Key collections for New York research on *FamilySearch* include:

- Vital record indexes (e.g., the New York, State Death Index, 1880–1956 https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2803479)
- Church Records: (e.g., https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2787817)
- Probate Records (e.g., https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1920234)
- Land Records (e.g., https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2078654)

Understanding Artificial Collections

Many *FamilySearch* databases are compiled from multiple sources. These 'artificial collections' provide convenience but may obscure provenance. Always review descriptions and seek original records. Examples of these collections include:

- New York, Births and Christenings, 1640–1962, https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1680842
- New York, Deaths and Burials, 1795–1952, https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1680846
- New York, Church and Civil Deaths, 1797–1963, https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2373798

Working with Image Collections

FamilySearch offers millions of images from a variety of New York records that are not (yet) fully indexed. However, their descriptions can be misleading. When using these materials, pay close attention to jurisdiction (e.g., New York County vs. Manhattan) and historical boundaries. Search broadly and browse systematically.

Combine indexed searching with image browsing. Use the catalog as part of a records survey. Verify all findings. Be flexible with place-based searching due to New York's complex jurisdictional history.

FamilySearch Catalog

An important gateway to locating New York records on *FamilySearch* is the *FamilySearch* Catalog. When working in the catalog, conduct an intentional search (often as part of a records survey) for materials. Take time to understand potential inconsistencies between subject or keyword headings, collection titles, and geographic distinctions. Use the "Place Information" option for specific locations to learn more about a particular location (and to find related materials).

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Using the *FamilySearch* Catalog Step-by-Step (A Suggestion)

1. Begin with a place search in the catalog.
2. Review all record categories (probate, land, church, court).
3. Identify relevant record groups.
4. Note film/DGS numbers.
5. Access linked images when available.
6. Correlate findings with indexed results.

FamilySearch Full-Text Search

FamilySearch's full-text search feature allows users to search through digitized records more effectively by indexing the full text of available documents. This advancement provides researchers with a faster and more thorough method for locating relevant information, particularly in handwritten or printed documents where keywords might previously have been missed. In addition to using the "fact view" option, consider using these options when in the full-text tool:

- Phrase searching ["New York"]
- Specific word or phrase [+Nathaniel]
- Exclude a word or phrase [-Nathaniel]
- Spelling variants [Eli?abeth] or [Thorn*]

The tool offers several advantages:

Speed and Accessibility
Full-text search increases efficiency by narrowing down relevant documents in large datasets more quickly than by manual search methods.

Broader Search Results
It captures a wider array of information from documents, including less-obvious data that might be missed in traditional indexed searches.

In Practice
Suppose you are looking for a specific ancestor's name, but only know the town they lived in. Full-text search allows you to locate documents from that town that mention the family, even if the name was miswritten or not indexed traditionally.

However, researchers need to be aware of potential pitfalls:

Inaccurate Optical Character Recognition (OCR)
OCR technology, especially with older or poorly preserved documents, can misread handwriting or faded text, leading to errors or missed information.

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Over-reliance on Search Terms

The system relies on the accuracy of the search terms you input. Misspellings, alternate spellings, or name variations in historical documents may cause relevant records to be overlooked.

Digitization Gaps

Not all records have been digitized or indexed. The full-text search only covers documents that have been processed, meaning large portions of available historical records may still reside in archives, libraries, or local repositories that are not accessible online. Therefore, the tool is a component of, but not a substitute for, a reasonably exhaustive search.

False Positives

The search may return results containing the right keywords but lacking relevance to your specific research, requiring additional time to sift through unrelated data.

FamilySearch Labs

Researchers should watch developments at *FamilySearch* Labs (https://www.familysearch.org/en/labs/) for new tools. Recent tools available include:

- Search All Family Trees on *FamilySearch*
- Chat with AI About Your Ancestors
- Review a person's details alongside their sources

Final Words of Advice

- Keep an eye on descriptions and locations (especially when dealing with New York City).
- Remember, there are more records on-site.
- Begin implementing full-text search in your standard research methods.

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