

Genealogy Basics – Tips on Gathering “Official” Genealogy Records from Internet Databases

By Joe Petrie

Background: The Internet has become a very important tool for genealogy research. To some genealogy researchers, it has become one of the most important tools in their tool box. I believe that it is the most important.

When wisely used to gather vitals (dates and places of birth, christening, marriage, death, and burial), the resulting documents (like Register Reports, Pedigree Charts, Family Group Sheets and reports from genealogists) are more complete, more credible and more useful to both to clients and fellow genealogists.

Please note that as a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), I adhere to the APG goal of trying to gather official records from at least two official sources. It does not always work – but I try! In addition, in my own way, over the past 30+ years, I have tried to identify every source for my records. (Attribution was always important – I attributed even before I joined APG.) One exception is when a contributor has asked to remain anonymous.

Also, please note that in this article, I'll cover principally web sites with Official records. I will conclude with notes on a few secondary sources and a preview of some of my articles in process.

Gathering Official Records from Internet Sources:

Most genealogists consider the following to be official records: (1) Censuses; (2) Military; (3) State /Province/County and local communities Vital records (birth, marriage and death); (4) Massachusetts Vital records; (5) Immigration; (6) Naturalization; (7) Land; (8) Passenger Lists; (9) Border Crossing Lists; and (10) records from Courts including Probate.

- 1. Census records:* I usually start with Censuses when I am gathering information. Sometimes it simply takes finding family records across 2 or 3 censuses.

Be aware that sometimes a census or censuses contain errors. For example, in the [Canadian Census of 1911](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1911), (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1911>) my Petrie grandfather's family surname was incorrectly enumerated as Peterie (not Petrie) and my father was enumerated as “? Peterie “ (not Leo Petrie). Grandfather's given name and his eldest son's given name were incorrectly enumerated as Edward. Grandfather's age was incorrect. In the [Automated Census of Canada](http://automatedgenealogy.com/census/) (<http://automatedgenealogy.com/census/>) for 1911, I was able to get Dad's Given Name changed to Leo. But he'll always be “? Peterie” on the official Census record. Uncle Eddie's Given Name was Charles and his Middle Name was Edward. He did use his middle Name as his Given Name. As a genealogist, I always point out that families using the Middle Name in place of the Given Name require additional time to research.

2. *Military records*: I wrote four Genealogy Basic articles focusing on Nova Scotians in US Military records specifically: US Draft Registrations for WWI and WWII; US Army WWII Enlistment Records; Canadian Forces WWI records and Wayne Macvicar's Cape Breton WWI soldiers' database. In Canada, there are a few databases containing military records back to the 18th Century (like Muster records etc.)
3. *Vital Records (Births, Marriages, Deaths, and Burial)*: Records for many locales are the responsibilities of the Province or State. Individuals researching ancestors from Nova Scotia can gather records from the [Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics](http://www.novascotiagenealogy.com) web site (www.novascotiagenealogy.com) where one can view and print images of the original documents. Often researchers can get the same birth information from birth and death records. (Sometimes there are differences.) Please be aware that the NS Vital Statistics web site is really a work in progress. Records are gradually being added – some may never be added.

When I am searching for other Provinces' Vital records, I usually start with [FamilySearch Collections List](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list) (www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list) and in the Filter by Collections Block to enter a term like Alberta. Please note that some Provinces' collections are not as far along as Nova Scotia. Also note that I use the site for US, States, Ireland etc.

When searching Massachusetts records, I wonder why on-line Official Massachusetts Vitals stop at 1915 when 90 years is the standard. In an article published by CBGHA, I indicated that on-going work at the Massachusetts Archives was available on FamilySearch.org and provided the URLs. Recently, for a Friend of Irish Research client, I found a 1922 marriage record for an ancestor in a URL cited in the Massachusetts Archives article.

Please note that all my articles are also available in the [Friends of Irish Research](http://www.friendsofirishresearch.org) web site (www.friendsofirishresearch.org) in the Publications and in Joe's Free Web Sites Tabs.

4. *Massachusetts Vital Records*: Ordinarily, the New England Historic Genealogy Society (NEHGS) is considered a secondary source. Their official databases are for Massachusetts Births, Marriages and Deaths. Coverage on NEHGS's [American Ancestors](http://www.americanancestors.org) web site (www.americanancestors.org) is through 1915.

From 1901 until 1960, NEHGS published 5 year indices of Births, Marriages and Deaths for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. There is a break from 1961 – 1966; The three Indices' records are available in [Ancestry](http://www.ancestry.org) (www.ancestry.org). The birth index database is named Massachusetts, Birth Index, 1901-1960 and 1967-1970. My brothers' and my record are in the Birth Index. The records are arranged alphabetically and identify the year and the city or town.

My parents were married in 1931. Their marriage records are in the Marriage Index. The Marriage Index database is named Massachusetts Marriage Index, 1901-1960 and 1967-1970.

Mom's record was for Loretta E Tobin in Boston. In the US Census of 1930, Mom was living in Boston and is listed as Ethel Tobin, the head of household. She had a Boarder, Miss Helen Casey (also from Glace Bay, NS) who a year later was Mom's maid of honor.

My Dad's Marriage records are for Leo I in Boston and Leo Ignatius in Brookline. Please note that because my father lived in the town of Brookline, there is also a marriage record for him in Brookline. Because my parents were married in my mother's Boston RC parish, the Boston record identified him as Petrie, Leo I.

The following page is from the Marriage Index for 1931 – 1935. The individuals with Petrie Surnames are listed about halfway down the page, four surnames from the bottom.

INDEX TO MARRIAGES IN MASSACHUSETTS 1931-1935

	NAME	TOWN	YEAR	VOL.	PAGE
	Petracca	Anthony	Chelsea	1932	22 394
		"	Norwood	1932	45 409
	Petrain	Alida A (Hudon)	Lowell	1935	43 397
		Eugene	Boston	1931	9 47
	Petrattis	Mary (Devonauskas)	Brookton	1934	22 331
	Petrakis	Constance	Lynn	1935	46 368
	Petralia	Azatha	Lawrence	1933	36 233
		Albert	"	1935	42 153
		Antonino	"	1931	37 474
		Antonio	Lowell	1931	39 539
		James Sebastian	Watertown	1935	75 284
		Paul	Boston	1931	17 101
		"	Winthrop	1931	69 226
	Petralian	James Sebastian	Cambridge	1935	26 112
	Petralias	Alexander N	Worcester	1935	82 229
		Harry	"	1934	82 112
	Petralis	Anna Marcella	"	1932	63 372
	Petrasch	Carl S Jr	Southborough	1933	59 391
	Petrauskas	Amelia (Kanaupas)	Athol	1934	3 164
		Emily (Kaunopa)	Lawrence	1934	42 295
	Petre	Josephine	Boston	1934	9 379
		"	Hingham	1934	39 350
		Lillian	Watertown	1934	76 175
		" May	Braintree	1931	19 211
	Petrecca	Delores	Lynn	1932	36 45
	Petrell	Francis Phillip	Rockland	1933	55 228
		Frank Phillip	Hanover	1933	32 550
	Petrella	Alexander	Lawrence	1935	41 467
		Americo	"	1932	33 179
	Petrelli	Anthony A	Wilmington	1934	79 445
	Petren	Albert J	Lowell	1931	39 486
		Obeline	"	1931	39 485
		William J	"	1931	39 355
	Petrianos	Demetrios	Haverhill	1934	38 475
	Petricca	James	Clinton	1932	23 348
		"	Leominster	1932	33 480
	Petrich	Rosamond M	Holyoke	1933	34 464
		" M	South Hadley	1933	59 356
	Petrick	M	"	1933	59 356
	Petricone	Civita	Boston	1935	12 104
		Romilda	Somerville	1935	67 58
		Alena Marie	Taunton	1935	72 95
	Petrie	Alena Marie	Douglas	1933	26 259
		Althea Blanche (Card)	Raynham	1931	55 273
		"	Taunton	1931	64 85
		Charlotte M	Boston	1934	11 90
		" M	Framingham	1934	36 281
		Edward E	Boston	1933	7 216
		" Ellis	Cambridge	1933	21 59
		Eleanor E	Boston	1933	13 393
		" Lovett	Wilton	1933	45 367
		Elizabeth	Ludlow	1935	45 9
		" Irene	Northbridge	1935	58 158
		" Neish	Springfield	1935	69 22
		Elsie May	Newton	1935	55 372
		Hezal M	Boston	1932	9 300
		" Marion	Waltham	1932	57 110
		Irene E	Douglas	1935	30 308
		John Alexander	Needham	1933	46 164
		Leo	Douglas	1931	27 445
		"	Norbridge	1931	51 542
		" I	Boston	1931	12 347
		" Ignatius	Brookline	1931	21 181
		Lillian	Waltham	1934	75 108
		Margaret Neave	Andover	1934	2 95
		Mary Ann Priscilla	Medford	1935	49 130
		"	Reading	1935	62 267
		" Edna	Concord	1933	25 182
		"	Somerville	1933	58 113
		Mattie (Belle)	Boston	1931	5 432
		"	Medford	1931	44 74
		Muriel C	Lynn	1935	46 251
		Patrick	Boston	1933	15 164
	Petrikas	George A	"	1931	17 492
	Petrilli	Louis	Hingham	1931	35 116
		"	Quincy	1931	54 101
		" Edward	Medway	1931	45 173
		"	Milford	1931	46 289
		Lucy	Quincy	1935	61 80
	Petrillo	Albert	Haverhill	1932	30 287

I have not determined whether any of the other Petries are related to my Petries.

Years ago, using the Index, I helped a Petrie cousin with his family. He asked me to help him with his late sister's first marriage to a man named "Fitzy". I had no trouble identifying his sister's Marriage record but finding Fitzy was a tremendous chore. I finally found him by looking at every record for a Fitz surname. Fitzy was Lawrence Edmund Fitzpatrick from Brockton MA who was married in North Easton. Fitzy's brother-in-law hardly knew Fitzy both because Fitzy passed away soon after Fitzy married and because of his career her brother was hardly ever home.

My parents and my brother Leo are in the [Ancestry](http://www.Ancestry.org) (www.Ancestry.org) Massachusetts Death Index because the coverage is through 2003. My brother William Edmund (born and died in 1935) is not in Death Index. I suspect that his death was not reported by the Medical Examiner because he died in the same month that he was born.

For Massachusetts Deaths, my common practice is to use [Ancestry](http://www.Ancestry.org) (www.Ancestry.org). Social Security Death Index because usually at least the month and year of death is available. The database is fairly current. But the deceased individual had to be collecting Social Security. Accordingly, my brothers Leo I Petrie, Jr. and William Edmund Petrie are not listed. They died too young.

5. *Immigration Records:* I always wondered what happened to my mother's record when she came in 1926. Recently, I discovered that there was another immigration/Border Crossing database in [Ancestry](http://www.Ancestry.org) (www.Ancestry.org) that had mother's record. On October 2, 1926, she was pre-examined in Halifax for her return by ship to Boston. She was listed as an Alien Student. Her pre-examination record was filed in the US Records Office under the name of Elizabeth Loretta Tobin.

There was no official birth record for Mom until she began the Petition for Naturalization. Her sister went to Glace Bay to get an official Birth Certificate. Since there was none, Aunt May went to St Anne's RC Parish and got a Baptismal Certificate for my mother and herself. Mother's Baptismal Record listed her as Lorretta Elizabeth Tobin. (Note the misspelled Loretta with 2 letters R.). My aunt filed the Affidavit to have their Baptismal Certificates recorded as Birth Certificates. Mother was naturalized as Lorretta Elizabeth Petrie and legally changed her name to Ethel Tobin Petrie soon after. (Remember that in the 1930 US Census she is identified as Ethel Tobin.)

In the [FamilySearch Collection List](http://www.familysearch.org/collection/list) (www.familysearch.org/collection/list)), there are also databases where the user can only view images. The records are not indexed. For example, Cape Breton Probate records are not indexed. Also, the records for an Anglican Church in Sydney are not indexed.

Finally, please remember that not all immigrants become naturalized. My wife's mother from Youghal, County Cork, Ireland, passed away before she was naturalized. She was married 6 years and left 3 children ages 5, 4 and 2.

6. Naturalization Records: Index records are in Ancestry. Currently, Index records are the most available records. The Index record for my father's Naturalization follows:

No.	5181590
Name	PETRIE Leo Ignatius
residing at	299 Colburn St., E. Dedham
Age	May 12 1906 34 years.
Date of order of admission	March 10 1941
Date certificate issued	March 10 1941
by the	U. S. District Court at Boston, Massachusetts
Petition No.	18883
Alien Reg.	3614593
<i>Leo Ignatius Petrie</i> (Complete and true signature of holder)	

Ancestry has been releasing the Petition records. The following is from Ancestry:

"U.S. Naturalization Records Indexes, 1794-1995"

This collection ... covers some different states ...: Alaska, California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania.

"U.S. Naturalization Records—Original Documents, 1795-1972"

This collection contains mostly Declarations of Intent or Petitions for Naturalization for the following states: Alaska, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia (years vary by state). Declarations of Intent and Petitions for Naturalization had to be filed before an immigrant could naturalize. Although the time period differed during different eras, citizens generally had to wait five years after submitting this paperwork to become officially naturalized.

“New York Petitions for Naturalization, 1792-1989

The majority of immigrants who came to the United States came through New York—whether at Ellis Island or some other port. And, many immigrants submitted their Petitions for Naturalization at the place where they arrived (Petitions for Naturalization had to be submitted multiple years in advance of actually becoming naturalized). So, even if your ancestor did not settle in New York, there is a good possibility he began the naturalization process in New York and completed it in another state.”

Ancestry plans to release the petitions gradually. Based on my wife’s mother’s petition (remember that she passed away before she was naturalized), I agree that the petition is the most informative document. The petitions currently are available from the National Archives and Records Administration district that serves the Court where the Naturalization Certificate was issued. For my parents’ documentation, the Waltham MA office should be able to provide a copy or image – but I never requested their petitions.

Individuals searching for Canadian Naturalization documents should be aware that the collection starts in the mid-1960s.

7. *Land Records:* In the US, land records are the responsibility of county government. In Massachusetts, the counties are gradually producing databases. It is a work in progress. For this document, I tried to retrieve my deed record from the Norfolk County database. No record was found. I plan to try again in April when I return from Florida. I’ll try retrieve using information from my original deed which is in a secure safety deposit box in a local bank.

A dear friend from Halifax NS with roots in Cape Breton periodically visits Sydney to research land records. She has been successful. We celebrated one night over dinner on our way back to her home in Halifax.

8. *Passenger Lists:* The principal databases include [Castle Garden](http://www.castlegarden.org) (<http://www.castlegarden.org>), [Ellis Ireland](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org) (<http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>) and [Massachusetts Passenger Manifests](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ArchivesSearch/Passengermanifest.aspx) (<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ArchivesSearch/Passengermanifest.aspx>). Remember that Castle Garden records are earlier than Ellis Island. When using Ancestry, a user can utilize [Steven P Morse’s](http://www.stevemorse.org) software (<http://www.stevemorse.org>) to retrieve from Ancestry’s immigration records. Personally, I use Steven’s methodology in my free 1-on-1 consults and free remote consults when the clients want research covering other ports like: Baltimore, Boston, Galveston; New Orleans; Philadelphia and San Francisco. I also use Steve’s software for situations where the Surname can be misspelled by the ship’s Crew or at the US Port of Entry.

9. *Border Crossing Records:* [Ancestry \(www.Ancestry.org\)](http://www.Ancestry.org) has Border Crossing Records including from US to Canada.

One day, I downloaded 90 Border Crossing Records for my grandfather's Petrie family, his siblings' families, and many Petrie cousins. My late aunt Dorothy Petrie Donovan told me that my father often visited Boston (and even worked and went to school in Boston) before 1925 – when he officially immigrated. I did find one other record.

10. *Court Records:* My experience with Court records is described in an article for [CBGHA](http://www.cbgha.org) (<http://www.cbgen.org>) entitled: Probate File of Richard Casey, Review of the FamilySearch.org Cape Breton Probate Database. The file is in Records/Research.

[CBGHA](http://www.cbgha.org) (<http://www.cbgen.org>) has a great collection of Court records especially Probate records. To see the various collections in [cbgen.org](http://www.cbgen.org), search Probate. Please remember that [cbgen.org](http://www.cbgen.org) records are technically records from a Secondary source.

Gathering from Other Internet Sources:

I gather Family Research records, Funeral Home records, Cemetery records and Obituaries from the [Cape Breton Genealogy and Historical Association](http://www.cbgen.org) (www.cbgen.org). I also gather Obituary records from the web site of the [Cape Breton GenWeb Project](http://www.capebretongenweb.com) (www.capebretongenweb.com). Please note that the Census Transcriptions in the [Cape Breton GenWeb Project](http://www.capebretongenweb.com) web site includes an amazing translation of a 1752 Acadian Census for Cape Breton Island.

Future Articles:

Please note that I have started writing a complementary article on the gathering of information to add, to update, to correct and to validate records from non-official sources.

In addition, I have started a document on attribution, i.e. identifying sources – and giving credit to contributors like Kim Stevens, Bob Hegerich, Carol MacLean etc. Essentially, I'll explain and document why many of my attributions are not exactly standard. Attributions are both nice and necessary. Standard attributions are nicer.

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Comments and suggestions are appreciated. Please Email me at joe-apg@norwoodlight.com .

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