

Genealogy Basics - Using Ancestry Public Trees as a Resource

By Joe Petrie

Background: Despite Ancestry's advice that the Public Trees can contain errors, I have used the Ancestry Public Trees files (aka Family Trees) for genealogy research for family and friends, especially research for cousins. Their focus is on getting the latest records. I have used Ancestry Public Tree files to update and validate my records. Also, I have used the files as a second source or as another source. In addition, I have identified information on individuals and families that should have been in my databases – but were not. Finally, I have used files to identify my and others information that needed correction. The latter includes Ancestry Public Tree records that are incorrect or have incorrect information. Ancestry admits that there are lots of errors.

Why use Ancestry Public Trees? First, I try always to start my research with Census records. Sometimes, they are unavailable. For example Canada's last published Census is 1921. The last published US Census is 1940. Census records can contain errors. For example, in the 1911 Census of Canada, my father's record states that he was " ? Peterie." Imagine having errors in both the Given Name and the Surname. Worse still, it looks as if that one Census-taker recorded all Petries as Peterie. Finally, sometimes there are omissions. Often whole families are omitted.

Recently, a Boutillier cousin asked me to research our Beatty relatives in Canton MA. One Beatty cousin married a Blye of Stoughton MA. The Blye parents and most of their 14 children were enumerated in the 1930 and 1940 US Censuses.. The Census records only contain approximate Birth year. On-line Massachusetts Vital records stop at 1915. Index records are available through 1950 but only contain the actual Birth year. I used 3 Blye Ancestry Public Trees to fill-in blanks in vitals and to generate a Register Report for my cousin.

Last October and November, I researched Cape Breton probate records for the Estate of Richard Casey of Lingan for an article requested by Norm MacDonald. My great, great, great grandfather Richard Casey was born in 1784 and died in 1827. His son Michael and two daughters, Margaret (Mrs. Edmund Petrie) and Mary (Mrs. Alexander Lee) were the principal heirs.

The article is in cbgen.org/Records/Research and in friendsodirishresearch.org/publications. As I wrote the article, I was reminded that I hardly had any records for Mary Casey and Alex Lee's descendants. Specifically, I had gathered records for Alex and Casey Mary Lee about 20 years ago. I'll admit that I did not have a lot of records for Mary and Alex's family because I failed to follow-up on that family. In the 1980s, for Mary and Alexander Lee's family, there was a paucity of on-line official information. Until I wrote the article on Probate records, I simply forgot the family and descendants. To research Alex and Mary's family quickly, I began with the Ancestry Public Trees. I gathered a lot of records. As I add the records to my database, I validate the records that I collected from Ancestry Public Trees using Census records in Ancestry, using Family Search records (especially from the RC Diocese of Antigonish), using records in NovaScotiaGenealogy.com, and using records in cbgen.org.

Goals of Genealogists who are members of the Association of Professional Genealogists: We strive to have at least two sources for each person's record. We also strive to gather all vital information for each person's:

- Date and Place of Birth
- Date and Place of Marriage(s)
- Date and Place of Death

Sometimes, vital information is not available, For example. I have never been unable to determine my Uncle Roy Petrie's exact date of death. I only have the Year from the cbgen.org inventory of St. Eugene Cemetery in Dominion.

My Methodology: I usually start collecting vital information from Nominal Census records. For example, Canada's nominal censuses began in 1871. Sometimes, I start with other's research and try to fill-in missing vitals.

As I stated earlier, I have used Ancestry Public Trees to add, to update and to validate hundreds of my records. The last two pages of this article identifies 20 Ancestry Public Trees that resulted from a Search for my Petrie Grandfather, Edmund Ernest Petrie (1872 – 1948). A few files had records that I gathered and added to my database. Many of the 20 files have records for my Petrie grandfather where I provided information to correct their errors. (I'll cover this in more detail at the end of this article.) Most errors were errors in grandfather's dates of birth and death. Many records had errors in grandmother's given name. Esther. She preferred to be called Hester and the records had Hester as her given name. I take the blame because earlier Register reports had incorrect information. I plan to update the Petrie Register Report next month.

About Clues: Four of the 20 Ancestry Public Trees files had Petrie records that contained verifiable information that I did not have. The Malone and Warburton files had more complete information for two of Edmund's sisters. The Brake and Ogle files had Petrie families (cousins) that I did not have in my database.

The Ogle Ancestry Public Tree file contained a marriage record for George Petrie, the first Petrie settler in Cape Breton. J.A. Ogle believes that George married Isobelle Fraser in Scotland. His proof is a single George Petrie marriage record in a country that hundreds of single Georges at the time. (My source is correspondence with Norma Thain, a Petrie genealogist in Scotland, who has thousands of George Petries in her database.) Others have harvested the marriage record in J.A. Ogle's record and added it to their Ancestry Public Tree file without attribution.

After I could not find a marriage record, I guess that I always assumed that George and Isobelle Petrie were married in Halifax or in Nova Scotia. I also assumed the he was a British officer in both Halifax and Sydney. I have never proved both assumptions. Also, I can't prove that the Ogle marriage record is correct or incorrect for my ancestors. In the 1780s, supposedly there were three Fraser families in Nova Scotia. I promise to research them.

I'll conclude with the following advice. Please remember that Ancestry emphatically points out that the Public Tree files may contain errors. Also, Ancestry indicates that records in files may be incomplete. Finally, Ancestry cautions us that there may be other Ancestry Public Tree files that have better information.

Finding Ancestry Public Tree Files: Start by entering the information in the four fields on the Ancestry Home page. For my grandfather, I entered

- First and Middle Name(s): Edmund Ernest
- Last Name: Petrie
- Name a place where your ancestor might have lived: Cape Breton County, Nova Scotia, Canada (He was born and died in Glace Bay. He lived in Bridgeport, in Gardiner Mines and in Dominion)
- Estimated Birth: 1872 (He was born on 22 June 1872.)

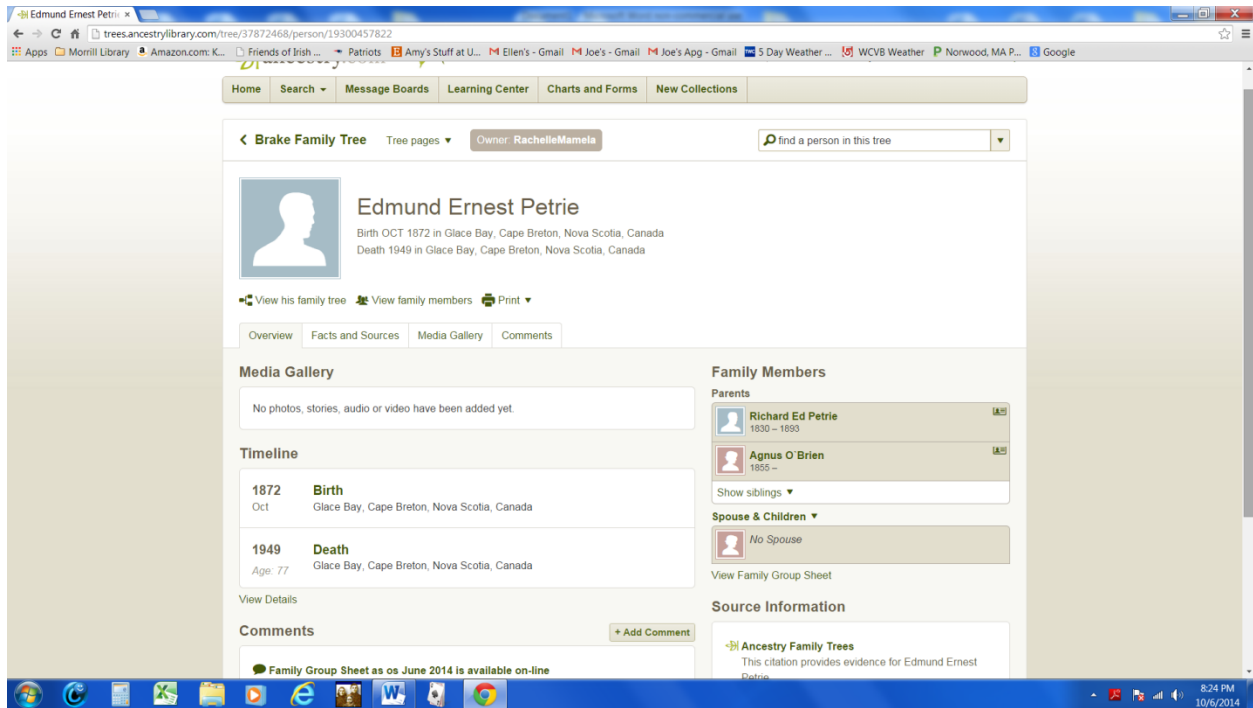
I searched by clicking the Orange SEARCH button on the Ancestry Home page.

Ancestry found 8500 Ancestry Public Tree files. (That scared me!) It displayed one on the first Result screen. If one or more Public Tree file(s) exists, one Public Tree record will always be displayed as the first record. If more than one Public Tree file exists a link named "To see more records" appears on the same line in the right side.

What follows is the result of not clicking on the link to see more records. Please see the screen print for Edmund Ernest Petrie from the Brake Family Tree on the next page. I suspect that the software displayed the Brake Ancestry Public Tree file because it was the biggest file.

The screenshot shows the Ancestry.com search results for Edmund Ernest Petrie. The page displays 8,500 results. On the left, there are search filters for Name (Edmund Ernest, Petrie), Birth (1872), and Location (ANY: Cape Breton, ...). Below the filters is a list of categories with counts: Census & Voter Lists (1,597), Birth, Marriage & Death (1,043), Military (489), Immigration & Travel (102), Newspapers & Publications (13), Pictures (17), Stories, Memories & Histories (22), Maps, Atlases & Gazetteers (29), Schools, Directories & Church Histories (+5,000), Tax, Criminal, Land & Wills (76), Reference, Dictionaries & Almanacs (9), and Family Trees (1,268). The main results area shows a matching person from the Brake Family Tree, with a profile picture and a list of matching records. The first record is from the Canadian Genealogy Index, 1600s-1900s, with the name Edmund Petrie, born 1896 in Cape Breton County, Nova Scotia, Canada. The second record is also from the Canadian Genealogy Index, 1600s-1900s, with the name Edmund P. Petrie, born 1896 in Cape Breton County, Nova Scotia, Canada. The page also features a banner for a family story and a "Start a FREE Trial" button.

Examine the Brake Ancestry Public Tree file by clicking on the photo! The resulting Brake family screen is shown below.

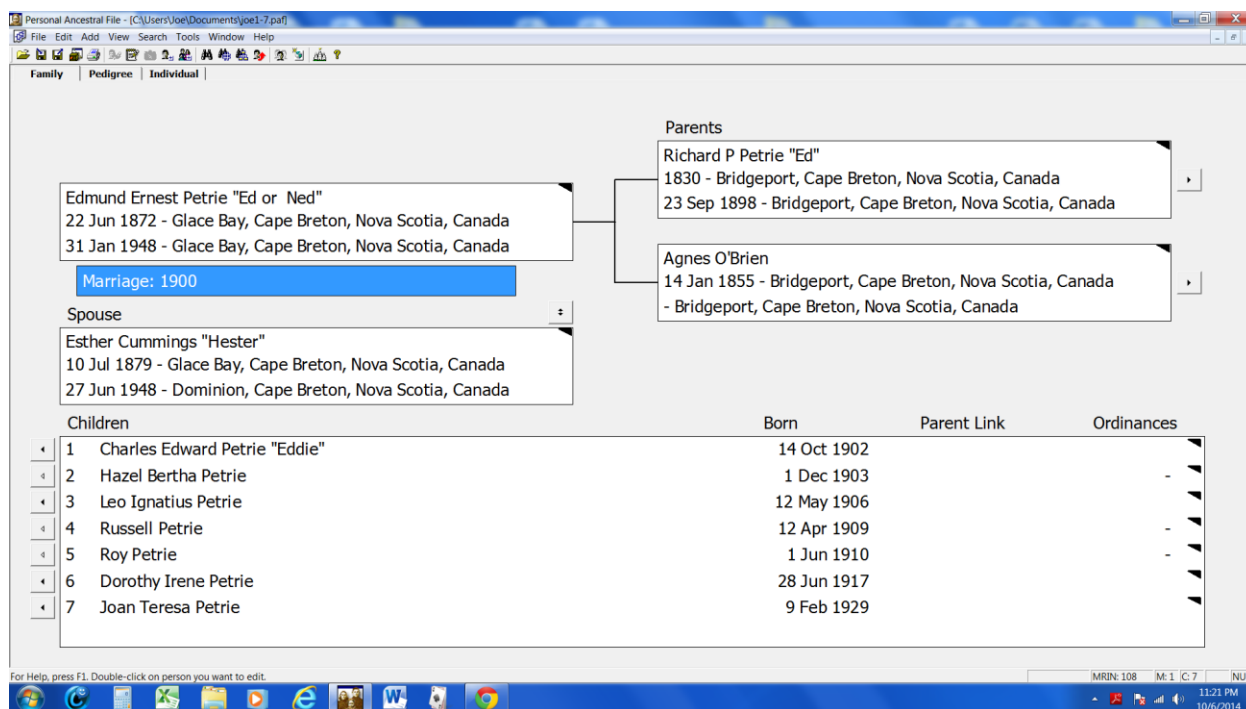


Most of the information that I gathered was from the two links below the picture. I have used the View of the Family Tree link and the Print button link. Both links facilitated my gathering information from the 4 Petrie Ancestry Public Tree files.

In two of the Ancestry Public Tree files the common thread was a Petrie female that was married where my record indicated that she was not married.

Please note that in the Brake Family Ancestry Public Trees file's records for Edmund, there is no spouse and no children.

The following is a screen print of Ned Petrie's family from my database.



The vitals in my record for my Petrie grandfather are more complete. Edmund “Ned” was born on 22 June 1872 in Glace Bay, NS. He married Esther “Hester” Cummings in 1900 probably in St Joseph’s Church in Lingan, NS (her parish – a mission parish church where I attended mass in the 1980s when I was visiting first cousins). Ned died on 31 January 1948 in St. Joseph’s Hospital, Glace Bay, NS. Two of many sources that I used for Ned were the Automated Censuses for 1901 and 1911; and novascotiagenealogy.org. Ned’s Death Certificate in the latter was surprising. The Informant on the Ned’s Death Certificate was my father. That was a surprise because my Dad had moved to the United States in 1925 at age 19. He had very limited contact with his parents after his marriage in 1931. When his sister Hazel was dying of Cancer in Massachusetts, my parents moved her into their apartment where she stayed until she died. They took her to Dominion to bury her. They buried her outside of the family plot in Immaculate Conception Parish Cemetery on Ocean Av. A photo of her grave stone is in cbgen.org.

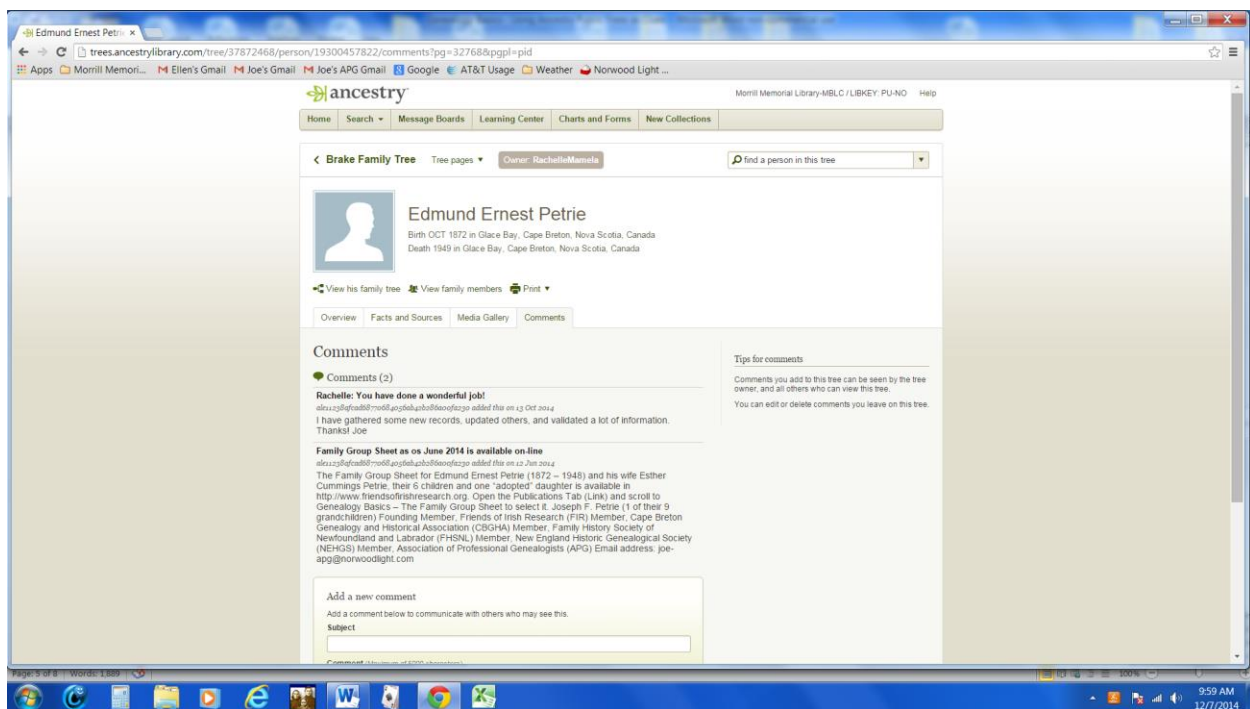
Dad never spoke to me of his January 1948 drive to Cape Breton to visit his dying father, of the death, of the wake, of the funeral and of the burial. One time that he mentioned his parents was when I asked Dad why he said so many rosaries. He answered: for my parents.

Ned and Hester had 6 children. After the death of their eldest daughter in Massachusetts, they adopted another daughter, Joan (MacNeil?). Joan was a child in an orphanage in Dominion who was about age 6 when she came to live with my grandparents. I have never found adoption papers. I think that she was a Petrie cousin but can’t prove it. One important thing was she was raised as a Petrie. Another was that my parents and family treated her as one Dad’s sisters.

Correcting Errors in the Ancestry Public Trees files: My article entitled **Be Cautious when using Ancestry's Public Member Trees** may be interpreted that I will not use the files because it is difficult to determine what is really fact or fiction. Some peers at the Friends of Irish Research assume that I will never use the Ancestry Public Trees database. I hope that this article changes people's perception.

The Ancestry Public Trees software does not allow users to correct errors. Only the contributor can change the file. I use the Comment software in the file to notify the author that there is an error that should be fixed. Ancestry notifies the contributor that there is a Comment.

The following print screen shows two of my comments on the Brake Ancestry Public Tree file in the lower left corner. Any user can read the comments by clicking on the Comments frame.



The comments are arranged by date. The oldest comment is at the bottom. Many contributors received that comment. Some but not all have made corrections. I suspect that the ones that have not made the corrections have not received the correspondence because of Email address changes.

I even wrote Ancestry and offered to fix a record for someone that I suspected had passed on. Ancestry would not allow it. That record will never be fixed.

The “To see more records” Results: The first time that looked at the Listing of Ancestry Public Trees for grandfather, the software displayed 813 records found. Only the first 20 of the 813 Ancestry Public Trees were for grandfather. I suspect that there is a software bug. It appears that the software retrieved all records for all Edmund Petries. Only the first 20 were for my grandfather. (Please note that by clicking on the “To see more records” link today on Dec 7, 2014, the software retrieved 1398 Ancestry Public Trees and 21 were for grandfather. I have not updated the following list to add the new record.

- 1 Doran1_2012-04-06 (Cheryls-Photo-MacBook-Pro's conflicted copy 2012-05-08)
- 2 The Ogle Family Tree
- 3 Descendants of Andrew Park and Agnes Irvin
- 4 MacInnis Family Tree
- 5 Boutilier Family
- 6 Updated Dec. 2011 Sullivan Ley Petrie Bowser Fader Eldershaw Dewolfe and Haugen Family
- 7 This Is My Family
- 8 Doran1_2012-04-06 (Cheryls-Photo-MacBook-Pro's conflicted copy 2012-05-08)
- 9 Descendants of Michael C. O'Brien
- 10 WILLIAM MALONE FAMILY - VENTRY COUNTY KERRY IRE
- 11 Karyn Zielasko
- 12 Haley Family Tree
- 13 Derek Anderson Family Tree
- 14 Warburton Family Tree
- 15 Brake Family Tree
- 16 Douglas Tree
- 17 Park and Mark Family Tree I
- 18 c.2013-Ancestral Main Tree--Family Tree Maker Ancestry Tree_AutoBacku(1)
- 19 Petrie Family Tree
- 20 Walsh Family Tree

Notes:

Many of the records contained errors for Ned's Birth year and Death year. Grandmother's given name is Esther – she preferred to be called Hester. (My dad called them Father and Mother – French tradition probably traced back to his Boutilier grandmother.)

I have gathered information from:# 2 Ogle, #10, William Malone, on our common Calevro family (Grandfather's niece's family);#14 Warburton and #15, Rachelle Mamela's Brake family.

Breakout of the 20 files by Surname;

Petrie Family: 2, 4, 6, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20

Park Family (Ned's mother Agnes O'Brien Petrie was a Park): 1, 3, 8, 17, 18

O'Brien Family (Ned's mother was Agnes O'Brien Petrie): 9

Other: Haley 7, Boutilier 5; Malone 10; Cummings 12, Douglas 16.

Please note:

For Haley #7. Hester Cummings Petrie's sister Johannah (Hannah) married into the Tracey branch of the Haley family

For Malone #10, Ned's sister Ann's daughter (my father's first cousin) married into Malone's Calevro family.

For Boutilier #5 and Cummings #12, Esther Cummings Petrie's mother was a Boutilier.

For Douglas #16, it appears that one of my Park relatives decided that Park or Irving families were in the Douglas Clan (If so, Agnes O'Brien Petrie's Park grandparents were part of that Clan. I can't find proof that Park or Irving is part of Clan Douglas.) Petrie is a Sept in Clan MacGregor.

Acknowledgement: This document was based on a one hour Seminar that I conducted at the Friends of Irish Research in Brockton MA in November 2014. The seminar was entitled: Using Ancestry Public Trees as Clues. I volunteered because I believed that Richard Reid who organized the seminars for that day wanted a seminar that was related to his 2 hour seminar on using the new FamilySearch.org software. I am grateful to Richard because due to the preparation of the seminar I became even more appreciative of the Ancestry Public Trees software.

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Joseph F. Petrie (Comments and suggestions are appreciated. Please Email me at Joe-APG@Norwoodlight.com.)

Founding Member, Friends of Irish Research (FIR)

Member, Cape Breton Genealogy and Historical Association (CBGHA)

Member, Family History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador (FHSNL)

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