

# *Beware of the Pitfalls of Online Genealogy*

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The internet has revolutionized how we conduct genealogical research. In the old days, researching your family's history involved sending written requests to—and traveling to—historical societies, municipal archives and libraries. Today, information is often only a mouse click away. However, internet researchers should beware of the pitfalls of relying too heavily on information gleaned from the World Wide Web.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has modernized its website, [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org), bringing many of its paper and microfilmed records to a much wider audience. However, many websites, including the popular [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com), also rely heavily on user-generated information that sometimes turns out to be incorrect. As many seasoned genealogists will attest, one mistake can ruin an entire branch of your family tree.

Ancestry.com and other similar websites provide access to thousands of original documents, including birth, death and census records from around the world. They also allow users to create family trees. A revolutionary feature enables users to discover—and then tap into—family trees of your fellow genealogy-loving relatives. This is where trouble can start. Tapping into your third cousin's [ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) family tree can save you a lot of time and effort, but your third cousin's one misstep could translate into an entire branch of your tree including folks from the wrong family. Worse yet, if the information isn't verified, the person you thought was your third cousin might not even be a relative at all!

The moral of the story: Verify your facts with as much original documentation as possible.

Sometimes mistakes result simply from clicking your mouse on a person with the exact same (or very similar) name as a genuine ancestor. Before clicking and adding a bunch of people to your online family tree, make sure there is research to back it up.

From writing history papers in elementary school, most of us remember the difference between primary and secondary sources. The same rules apply to genealogy. Original newspaper obituaries, and birth, death and marriage certificates are primary sources that hold more historical credibility than family trees put together by previous researchers, which are more likely to contain mistakes.

Even with the help of the internet, genealogical research is a time-consuming adventure that often requires hunting down information from a variety of places.

In New York State, each town is required to appoint an official historian. In the Town of Aurora, the Town Historian's Office has several hundred family files, which include photographs, newspaper clippings, diaries and other documents. The office also has cemetery listings, digitized and searchable versions of the *East Aurora Advertiser*, as well as alphabetized obituary clippings. The Town Historian's Office is open each Wednesday and Thursday, except holidays, from 1-4 p.m. No appointment is necessary, but calling (652-7944) or e-mailing (historian@townofaurora.com) ahead with the names of the families you are researching is helpful so the related files can be ready when you arrive.

Official Vital Statistics records, including death, marriage and birth certificates, are maintained by individual town and village clerks' offices and the State Health Department. Researching these documents can be tricky, because they are often subject to Health Department guidelines and time restrictions. Also, sometimes it is difficult to determine where an official record is located. For instance, marriage licenses are maintained in the town or village in which the license was issued, not necessarily where the marriage ceremony occurred; and death and birth certificates are recorded where the event occurred, not where the person was living at the time. In New York State, Vital Statistics records only date back to 1881, when registration started in areas outside of New York City. Even still, records in some jurisdictions don't go back that far. The Town of Aurora's Vital Statistics date back to 1893. Contact the appropriate town or village clerk's office or visit their website for more information; or visit the New York State Health Department at [www.health.ny.gov/vital\\_records/genealogy](http://www.health.ny.gov/vital_records/genealogy).

Though it would be nice to be able to conduct all our genealogical research with the click of a mouse, due to the sheer volume of records, most historical and government agencies simply don't have the ability to place each and every document online.

Although websites such as [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) are making huge strides to get more and more primary sources digitized and placed online, many records are still only in paper form in libraries and archives. At the Aurora Town Historian's Office, records are being digitized and will be more easily searchable. But it's a slow process. Digitization has drastically changed how we access historical files, but a computer cannot replace the hundreds of human hours required to prepare, scan and catalogue the documents.

Even with so many advances in technology, sometimes research requires physically sifting through folders of papers in order to discover the proof necessary to validate your family tree. Of course, this requires traveling to the location of the documents. And because some agencies—especially the smaller ones—are only open a few hours per week, it can get frustrating. Researchers should remember, however, that many archive repositories are operated by small historical agencies that have small budgets and rely heavily on volunteers. Patience is appreciated. However, the upside to spending time sifting through folders is that you might just find something not yet seen on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com). To be done correctly, sometimes genealogy has to be done the old-fashioned way.

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*Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created in 1919. The Historian's Office is open for research Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1-4 p.m., and by appointment. Visit [www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian](http://www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian) for more information. The Office of the Historian can also be found on Facebook at "Aurora Town Historian" and on Instagram at "auroratownhistorian."*