

DIANE L. RICHARD EXPLAINS WHY WIKIS ARE VITAL TO YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

What's With All the Fuss About Wikis?

BY NOW, MANY OF you are probably familiar with Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org. As stated on their website, "Wikipedia is a multilingual, web-based, free content encyclopedia project. The name Wikipedia is a portmanteau of the words *wiki* (a type of collaborative website) and *encyclopedia*. Wikipedia's articles provide links to guide the user to related pages with additional information." This means that if you have visited Wikipedia, you are already familiar with a wiki.

You might be asking yourself, what is so special about wikis and why should someone doing genealogy or family history care?

First, if you are anything like me, you might find that when you start an Internet search on a new idea, place or event, you frequently end up at Wikipedia or on another wiki. While I'm there, I will often find either some information about my topic or links to where I will learn more, or realize that I might have to work harder to find the desired information.

Second, I typically like to learn a little bit about a topic as I am doing genealogy research. I find it hard to work on a project and come across an unfamiliar reference without digging deeper, such as a recently examined deed that says something like "Water Melon Run, part of the Welsh Tract" (New Hanover County, North Carolina).

(Unfortunately, this is a topic where I had to go offline to really learn more on the subject.) On the otherhand, a related search for Cape Fear (the North Carolina location where many Scotch-Irish and Scots settled) was successful.

Next, the collaborative element of wikis can be a real bonus. Instead of relying on one supposed expert on a topic, or having to run to the local library for a

book, you are often "hearing" from many interested parties, sometimes with dissimilar information. Often, they provide enough information that you can then validate what you have read/learned.

Better yet, they have become another outlet (in addition to places like Ancestry.com/One Family Tree, FamilySearch.org, etc.) for individuals to post family tree information in a fully viewable format (in contrast to a GEDCOM, which typically needs to be downloaded and viewed via software on your computer). This has encouraged more "publishing" of family trees, thereby creating more opportunities for connections to be made.

Last, most of the wikis are multilingual; this can be a tremendous benefit when trying to cross borders or oceans to research your ancestry.

Let's briefly explore a few different types of wikis; some big and some small, to give you a sense of the breadth of what is available online.

Wikia

<http://www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikia>

According to its website, "Wikia is a community destination supporting the creation and development of wiki communities on any topic people are passionate about. We currently support over 4,700 communities in more than 70 languages. Part of the free culture movement, Wikia content is released under a free content license and operates on the Open Source MediaWiki software."

Of special interest to Internet genealogists will be FamilyPedia, http://genealogy.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page. At the beginning of this year, this particular wiki had more than 19,000 articles!

However, many of the entries are actually digital documents for family trees — newspaper clippings, census records, photos, vital record registers and documents, etc. You will find entries with titles like "Family History of the Matthias Brimberry and Mary Anderson Families" which is actually a narrative about a family or individual, and then these



What's With All the Fuss About Wikis?

associated pieces: A Brief History of New Sweden, The Brimberry Surname, Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church, The Brimberry DNA Project, Swedish Naming Practices, Ancestry of Mathias Brimberry, 17th Century Sweden, Ancestry of Mary Anderson, Geography of New Sweden and Lineages of Mathias & Mary Brimberry's Seven Sons.

Remember that a wiki is global. A search on "history" revealed versions also in Polish, Russian, Spanish and Korean!

I strongly suggest reading the supporting information on the Wikia site. I struggled with navigating around it — the wikis are organized under categories (e.g., genealogy is under hobbies), though you can "search Wikia" and that is probably the fastest way to get around. It is interesting and fun to browse new, active and the largest wikis just to get a sense of what people are interested in.

WeRelate

http://www.werelate.org/wiki/Main_Page

Claiming to be the world's largest, this genealogy wiki is in partnership with the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana and contains pages for more than 1.5 million people/families and is still growing. Its goal is to become the top community website for genealogy. As you may know, the Allen County Public Library houses a renowned genealogy collection which includes more than 350,000 printed volumes and 513,000 items on microfilm and microfiche.

By participating in this wiki, one can upload GEDCOM files, upload and annotate scanned documents and photos, include family stories and biographies, and generate maps of your ancestor's life events. In order to do any of the above, you will need to register. Browsing the wiki and examining the content can be done by anyone.

You can easily search wiki-wide. Though a search for John Morris of Wake County, North

Carolina was not successful, a switch to "John Morris AND Raleigh" gave four results. In this case they were an unrelated mix of entries that had the words John, Morris and Raleigh which were not interrelated.

Additionally, you can narrow your focus to: articles, people and families, images, places, sources, surnames, given names and user pages. This means there are lots of ways to navigate.

You can also watch a "10-minute helicopter tour" about the

have over 4,500 articles and hundreds of contributors."

Though you can search wiki wide, there are six main categories of content: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts, Applied Arts and Sciences, and Recreation. There is no subcategory for genealogy, though a search on genealogy brought up about 50 pages that include that term.

By the time you read this article, the site will have had its "Write-a-thon". I anticipate that



WeRelate's wiki contains pages for more than 1.5 million people and counting. Better yet, it's free!

website. I found it annoying that it doesn't run continuously; at the end of each piece you essentially have to click to continue or to go back. This is great when you are treating it as a tutorial but a little harder when you just want a quick overview.

Citizendium

http://en.citizendium.org/wiki/Main_Page

Another entry in the field of wikis is this one started by Larry Sanger, who was a co-founder of Wikipedia, and now on his own. It describes itself as a "citizens' compendium of everything and is an open wiki project aimed at creating an enormous, free, and reliable encyclopedia. The project aims to improve on the Wikipedia model by adding "gentle expert oversight" and requiring contributors to use their real names. "We

there is now a lot more content than when I previewed it.

OTHER WIKIS

The list for genealogy and family history-oriented wikis goes on. Here are a couple of other wikis, with a genealogy focus, that deserve a brief mention and that you might find interesting.

- WikiTree http://www.wikitree.org/index.php?title=Main_Page

One of the main aims of the WikiTree Project is to provide a central place on the Internet for kin information about all people who have ever lived, automatically construct bloodline trees, and watch the gradual emergence of the global family forest of humanity. This project has a very international flavor and was started by Tomáš J. Fülöpp, aka Vacilando from Slovakia.

What's With All the Fuss About Wikis?

- Rodovid, http://en.rodovid.org/wk/Free_family_tree_portal
Rodovid is a free multilingual family tree portal. Anyone can access, edit and add to it. Rodovid uses its own family tree software to create cohesive family trees. Rodovid's database of genealogical records exceeded 100,000 on 3 December 2007 and has entries in 17 different languages.

- Encyclopedia of Genealogy, <http://www.eogen.com>
This wiki was started by Dick Eastman of Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter fame. "A free-content encyclopedia created by its readers, people like you." The Encyclopedia of Genealogy is available to everyone, free of charge. Everyone can also contribute information, again free of charge. If I have a question about a genealogy term, this is the place I go to first. The source of the information is listed and frequently there are links

to more detailed information.

And, similar to how blogs have become more popular, wikis, because of their relative ease to set up, are now proliferating. Every day sees new wikis for a particular surname, technology-



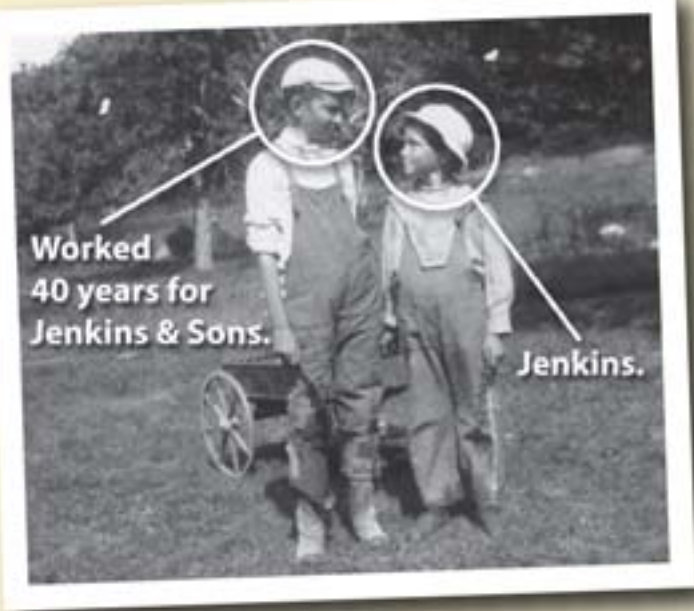
focused wikis (e.g., genetic genealogy) and wikis that serve as a help area, like the new "FamilySearch Wiki", <http://www.familysearchwiki.org>. This wiki, still in beta testing, brings you research help from the experts at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City with plans that soon anyone will be able to contribute.

We continue to see an explosion of what is available to assist the Internet genealogist in their quest.

Wikis typically can aid your research in two major ways — wikis serve as an online encyclopedia to inform you of historical events or places important to your ancestors, or wikis allow you to collaborate with other researchers who have posted family information and/or trees. And, a nice element of many of the wikis listed here is that they are for genealogists; this saves you from trying to determine the relevancy of the information!



Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for 20+ years. These days, instead of running to her bookshelf and grabbing an encyclopedia, Diane checks out the online wikis to get a quick overview about new topics! She currently does professional research in NC and can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy.



Every family's story is unique. Find yours.

Each of us has a remarkable family story waiting to be uncovered. And whether your ancestors arrived in the 17th century or the 20th century, New England Historic Genealogical Society can help.

Since 1845, NEHGS has been helping people explore and connect with their own family history. Our staff of experts is available to help you unravel the unique story of your family. To learn more, visit our web site at www.NewEnglandAncestors.org or call 1-888-296-3447.

FamilyHistoryExperts



NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

www.NewEnglandAncestors.org

