

# Sign of the Times: Using Timelines in Genealogy

WHEN I WORK on complex research problems, or receive a thick packet of research from a client, one of my first steps is to create a timeline for the project. I find that the visual aspect of a timeline helps me focus on missing gaps, seemingly contradictory information, previously invisible relationships and so much more. If you use color-coding to highlight locale or surname overlaps, connections sometimes just jump out at you. Sometimes, I footnote my references in a timeline. This way, I have an immediate grasp of the nature of the source data and it's relevance to the research objective.

Recently, I learned about two resources that can help you easily create a timeline. One is a book which provides a great collection of timelines that you can refer to, and the other is software that can take your existing family tree and produce a variety of timeline-based charts.

## HISTORY FOR GENEALOGISTS

Given my affinity for timelines, a new book available from Genealogical.com really caught my eye — *History for Genealogists, Using Chronological Time Lines to Find and Understand Your Ancestor*, by Judy Jacobson.

In the preface, she makes several points that I emphatically agree with. "Fortunately, genealogists are beginning to recognize the importance of history when researching their families and using it to interpret the past. Likewise, historians are beginning to explore genealogies for social data in their attempt to understand changes, explain traditions and provide insights into civilizations as a whole."

The book includes a chapter on "why" and "how" one creates a timeline, and provides two case studies illustrating their use. The rest of the book is a collection of timelines related to different topics to help you incorporate historical context into any timeline you create. Chapter titles include: Why Did They Leave?; How Did They Go?; Coming to America; Myths, Confusions, Secrets and Lies; Even Harder to Find Missing Persons; Social History

may also explain why an ancestor suddenly disappeared. Were they killed in a riot? Did they die during an epidemic?

Though we are familiar with the Irish and the potato famine, there are many other causes that contributed to immigration to the US and Canada. For example, my Finnish ancestors came to the US in 1900. There were probably three factors that played into why the Kujanpää family emigrated: several sons and only one

1830	Pacific Northwest	Malaria
1830's	Western Indians	Smallpox
1831-32	United States	Asiatic Cholera
1832	Major cities	Cholera
1833	Kentucky & Ohio	Cholera & Diphtheria
1834	New York	Cholera
1837	Philadelphia	Typhus
1837	Alaska	Smallpox
1837	Northern Plains	Smallpox
1839	Central Plains	Smallpox
1840	Kodiak Island, Alaska	Smallpox
1841	United States, particularly in the South	Yellow Fever
1845	St. Louis, Missouri	Diphtheria
1847	New Orleans	Yellow Fever

A selection from the *Epidemics in America* timeline on page 39 of *History for Genealogists*.

and Community Genealogy; State by State; And Region by Region.

The chapter titled "Why Did They Leave?" gives an excellent overview of what motivated some individuals to leave their homeland. Some of the topics discussed are military, racism, religion, disease, economics and natural and unnatural disasters. Odds are that the reason your ancestor left somewhere is one of these. Many of those same factors

farm, the widespread American demand for labor which attracted many from the province of Vaasa and the russification policy, which Russia began to enforce around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. When they emigrated, their passports were in Russian and the head of the family was declared a "landless peasant".

Another interesting chapter is "Even Harder to Find Missing

## Sign of the Times: Using Timelines in Genealogy

Persons". Though this chapter has only a few timelines, it provides a great overview of the things that may make tracking certain individuals or populations harder, such as name changes, being female, having been a slave, a member of an isolated society or shipment on an orphan train.

Don't forget that sometimes place names change or a boundary may have changed. An ancestor may not have moved, and yet will be found in records for a different community, county or even country.

This all suggests that knowing the historical context of our ancestor's world can be invaluable in determining why they moved, and can even provide clues to where they came from.

The book is available for purchase for \$29.95 US at [Genealogical.com](http://Genealogical.com), [www.genealogical.com/products/History%20for%20Genealogists/9956.html](http://www.genealogical.com/products/History%20for%20Genealogists/9956.html).

### GENELINES

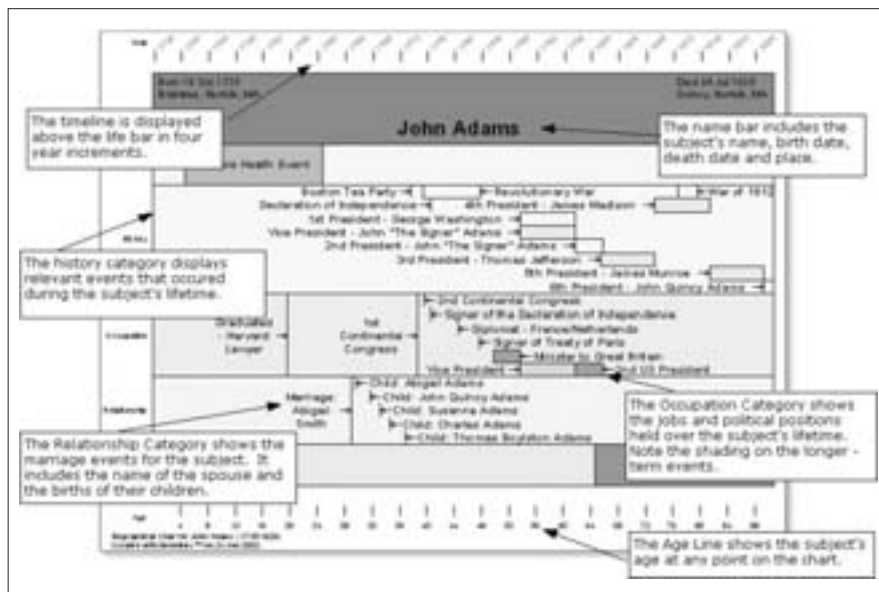
The GeneLines software is published by Progeny Genealogy, [www.progenygenealogy.com](http://www.progenygenealogy.com). There are seven fully customizable timeline charts based on two sources — your genealogy database and an extensive library of history files. This allows you to illustrate your family lines with any fascinating facts and interesting events you've found in the course of your research.

You can look at just one person, or compare two or more people (great if you are trying to separate out two like-named individuals). You can also create ancestral pedigree or direct line charts, a descendant chart, family group chart or a fan chart. Additionally, you can generate a full text version of any of the timelines.

Since some of my older research is in Family Tree Maker (FTM) version 5 files, I was able to easily upload some data into GeneLines. I was immediately able to select what timeline I would like to create for an individual or family element. It's that easy.

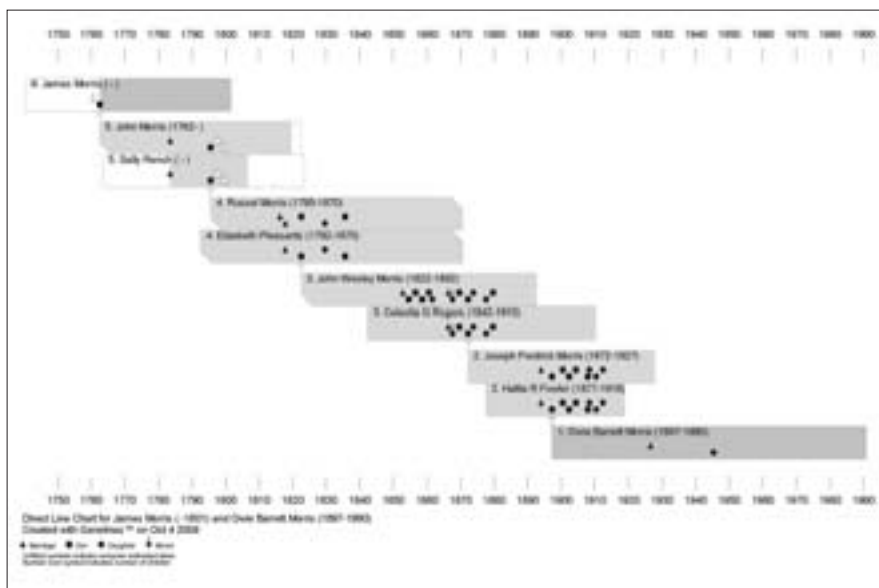
I created a timeline for the Morris family using a step-wise chronology. In this example, the initial information made a jump from Joseph Frederick to Russel — which was not plausible since Joseph wasn't born until two

I currently have a complicated project involving a late 18th century Randolph County, North Carolina family. At least three families with the same surname and some overlapping forenames live within a few miles of one



Above: An example of a GeneLines Individual Bio Chart for John Adams.

Below: This Direct Line Chart from Owie Barrett Morris to James Morris uses color coding to depict male and female ancestors and symbols to designate marriage(s) and the births of children.



years after Russel and Elizabeth died. We did eventually discover that we were missing a generation (e.g., John Wesley). This missing generation would have been obvious upon entering the basic data and generating a timeline.

another, and each family has sons with the same forename as contemporaries. We have a lot of data and are still struggling to separate the various families. Though I have constructed two different timelines, one with just the similarly named sons and

## Sign of the Times: Using Timelines in Genealogy

others showing generations on either side of those sons, exactly who is related to who eludes me. I think that comparing the biographical data that I have for both using the GeneLines format will help clarify who each one is a son of.

A nice feature is that, in addition to reading genealogy files, Genelines reads history files. These can be combined with your family history data to show what was happening when your ancestors were alive. You can include history information in three ways: enter it directly into GeneLines, build a history file or upload pre-made history files from the GeneLines website.

If you want to build your own history file, download this little utility. You can copy/paste your historical data into the program, and save it in Genelines format, [www.progenygenealogy.com/supportftp/HistoryFileMaker.exe](http://www.progenygenealogy.com/supportftp/HistoryFileMaker.exe).

There is also a library of free history files on the website, [www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines\\_file\\_exchange.html](http://www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines_file_exchange.html), including one for each state as well as dozens of topics (e.g., World Disasters, World History).

Speaking from experience, don't load too many historical events into the program at one time. They can create a lot of clutter fast. I found that when I overlaid historical events on the life of John Morris the result was 47 data points! This was too much information and much of it was not directly relevant. I went back and imported North Carolina History and US History 1620-2000, without editing what was included, and this inserted 60 data points. I found that it's best to choose which historical events you want to import and be selective about these. Another suggestion — remember to select "replace" instead of "merge" when you start up a new history

file collection so that you are starting fresh for each application.

The software is available in three different versions and can be purchased as a download or on CD for \$19.95-\$34.95 US at [www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines.html](http://www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines.html).

It's important to know that currently Genelines is only able to directly read files from Family

focusing your research and more.

Timelines are not limited to genealogy. Progeny also has timeline products for use in other domains, which you can see at [www.timelinemaker.com](http://www.timelinemaker.com).

### CONCLUSION

If you have been struggling with your family research, have seemingly contradictory data, need to plan what to do next or are just a



Above: From Progeny Genealogy, GeneLines is available in three different versions.

Left: This timeline shows John Morris, along with select bits of North Carolina and US history that might have impacted him during his lifetime.

Tree Maker 2007 or earlier, as Ancestry changed the file format starting with FTM 2008. For FTM 2008 and later, it is suggested that you do a GEDCOM export from FTM, which Genelines will be able to read. The company is planning on upgrading Genelines to read directly from FTM 2008 and later, but a definite date for this has not been released.

If you are still not convinced that timelines may help your ancestor hunt, check out this page, [www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines\\_research.html](http://www.progenygenealogy.com/genelines_research.html), where a series of examples illustrate how Genelines can help with many issues, such as identifying missing information, highlighting illogical and contradictory data, exposing duplicate persons,

visual person, consider creating timelines to help you visualize and analyze your ancestors. Making a timeline to facilitate your ancestral research is not something that you will regret.



*Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for more than 22 years. She currently does professional research in North Carolina, and can be found online at [www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy](http://www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy).*