

Family history research

by Andrew Matheson

Genealogy programs

So — you're making good inroads into tracing your family connections. Direct ancestors, their siblings, the siblings' descendants and random in-laws. But it's getting harder to keep track of who they are and how they're connected to each other.

Hopefully you didn't go too far before realising that card indexes and large sheets of paper with family trees sketched out have real limitations.

Specialist genealogy computer programs have made life a lot easier for family historians. They can do a lot for you, starting with recording information on each individual and going on to build a family tree. You can document your research sources, make notes and identify areas for further work.

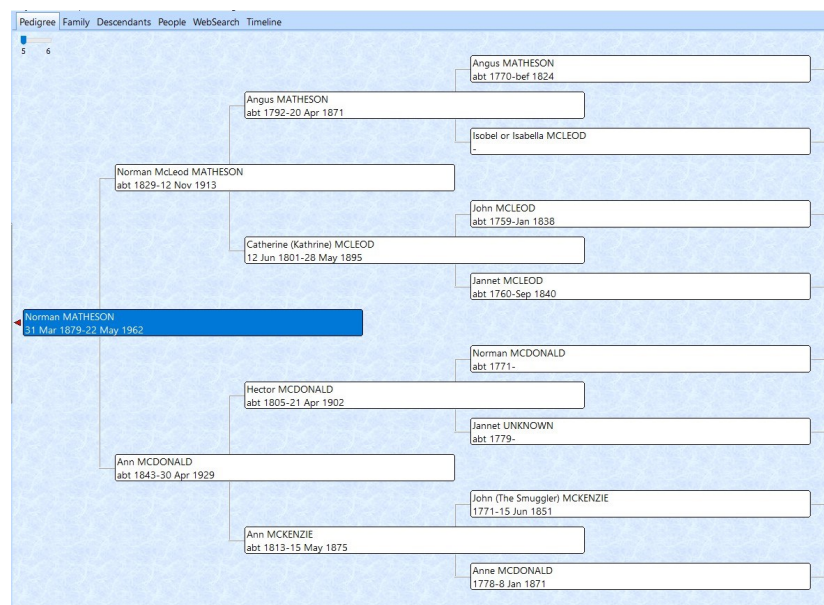
You can print ancestral charts and descendant charts starting with any individual (including yourself!) and illustrate them with photos and audio or video recordings. You can export family trees to share with others. Some will let you export content as a book.

There are many programs on the market. How do you decide which one is best for you? First think about what you want to do with the program, both now and in the future. Different products have different capabilities or strengths, so this is an essential step.

Then look at reviews — a quick search will show plenty of review sites. The best reviews will assess the strengths and weaknesses of each program, which will help you choose the most appropriate product for you if you've done that initial thinking. What's best for you might not be best for someone who has different interests or aims.

If you know someone who uses a program, ask them about their experience and have a look at it. Or try it yourself — many companies offer free trial periods or demonstration versions of their products.

In the end, don't agonise too much about picking the wrong product. Any of the major ones will do a good job for you. You can switch to another program even after you've entered a lot of data, because all the major programs allow you to export data in 'vanilla' format (called a GEDCOM file) that can be imported into another program.



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In one way the best program is the one you're using. I use RootsMagic — after considering my options I started out with it years ago. It works well for me so I've never contemplated making the effort of changing to another system. I'm still on version 6 even though 8 is the latest, again because it does what I want and I don't see the value in upgrading at the moment.

These are some of the most popular genealogy software products:

- Family Historian
- Family Tree Builder
- Family Tree Maker
- Legacy
- Reunion
- RootsMagic.

But wait. Isn't buying a program and downloading it to your computer a bit old school? What about online family trees? You could upload all your information to the cloud, or even work collaboratively with people around the world.

This is another option. More about that in the next issue.

Do you have any tips to share on family history programs?

Make a comment in the Clan Matheson family history forum or Facebook group.

