African American Genealogical Society - Cleveland, Ohio

NEWSLETTER

Black History Month

On February 11, 2026, AAGS President Joseph Houser Sr. was contacted by Noelle Williams, a reporter from 19 NEWS, who expressed interest in featuring the African-American Genealogical Society of Cleveland in a *Black History Month* segment. Joe arranged for the interview to take place at the Shaker Heights Public Library.

Dr. Deborah Abbott led the interview on behalf of our organization.

"Whether it's following a paper trail hidden in archives or connecting details found online, the African-American Genealogical Society of Cleveland empowers individuals to uncover and reconnect with their family histories."

"Exploring Black ancestry is a rewarding journey, though it can come with its own unique challenges."

Noelle Williams did an outstanding job highlighting the mission of AAGS in her feature.

To view the video, visit: https://www.cleveland19.com/video/2026/02/20/african-american-genealogy-society-cleveland-helps-trace-family-history/

AAGS MEETINGS

• Held on **4th Saturday** (exc. December)
(In-person and Zoom)

Shaker Heights Library
16500 Van Aken Blvd.
Shaker Hts., OH 44120

• 10:00-10:15 a.m. – socialization
10:15-10:30 a.m. – info/announcements
10:30 a.m. – presentations/discussions

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ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

Per calendar year
Fees due by Jan. 31st

Students (to age 21) $15 • Individual $30
Couple $40 • Family $45 • Organization $50

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly
(March, June, September, December)

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AAGS • PO Box 201476 • Cleveland, OH 44120-1476 • **aagsclev.org**

To Discover Your Ancestors Is to Discover a Part of You!

GENEALOGY NEWS

- Article, ***"Home renovation reveals a surprising photo under the floor – 'Hey, that's my mom'"*** https://www.**yahoo.com**/lifestyle/articles/home-renovation-reveals-surprising-photo-162126016.html

- ***Associated Press*** article, ***"Tribal citizens descended from slaves face disparate treatment"*** - https://**apnews**.com/article/freedmen-slavery-cherokee-muscogee-seminole-choctaw-chickasaw-adc518e2cf7a1cd544527a50bcf1f61f

- **Fold3** wants to expand its digital collection by directly obtaining personal veteran records such as unit histories, military yearbooks and Navy cruise books. The process: (1) *Send* - You provide the book; (2) *Digitize* - They scan the pages; (3) *Return* - They ship your book back; (4) *Share* - They make the digital record available online for free - https://blog.fold3.com/**dust-off-the-memories-help-us-preserve-a-legacy-of-service/**

2026-2027 AAGS Officers

President..... Joseph Houser Sr.
1st Vice President..... Deborah Abbott
2nd Vice President..... Joseph Jordan

Treasurer..... Ellecia Gant
Financial Secretary..... Adrienne Waugh
Corresponding Sec'y... Maxine Hairston
Recording Sec'y.....Moneak Jones
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A Whole Lot of Learning Going On

Did you miss RootsTech 2026?

rootstech by FamilySearch

You *can still view* sessions:

Search the On-Demand Library: More than 1,500 sessions on 185 topics in over 30 languages

https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/search?f.language=en-US&f.conferenceYear=2026&p.index=0

GRIP Genealogy Institute

Virtual Courses
over Zoom
June 22-26, 2026

(Coordinators below)

- Advanced DNA - Blaine Bettinger
- Practical AI - J. Stephen Little, Jr.
- Revolutionary War Ancestors - Cheri Daniels
- Not "Just" Farmers - Cari Taplin
- Records, Tools & Skills - Paula Stuart-Warren
- Researching Women & Children -Judy Russell
- Reformers, Crises & Movements in 19th & 20th Century America - Katherine Willson
- Intentional Genealogist - Kelli Bergheimer
- Ontario & Quebec Research - Kathryn Lake Hogan

In-person Courses
University of Pittsburgh, **July 12-17, 2026**

(Coordinators below)

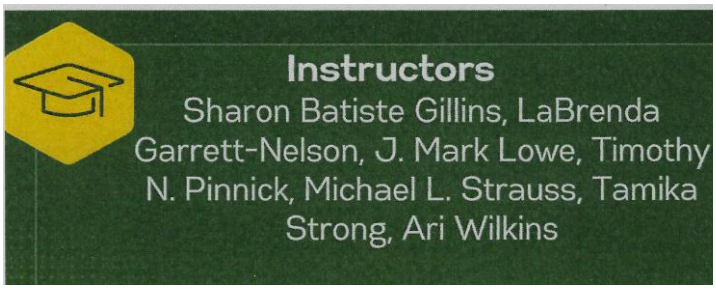
- Genetic Networks - Kelli Bergheimer
- Interdisciplinary Civil War Research, 1820–1877 - Michael Strauss
- Overcoming Destroyed, Missing or Non-Extant Records - Kelvin Meyers
- Surrogates & Substitutes – The 1890 US Census Exemplar - Cecelia McFadden
- Penn's Colony - Sandra Rumble
- Skill-Building for Genealogical Research Success - Sunny Jane Morton
- Advanced AI Techniques - Mark Thompson
- Metes & Bounds: Land Platting – Gerald Smith

IGHR
Empowering Genealogical Researchers Since 1962

July 27-31, 2026
(Virtual)

Deborah A. Abbott,
Coordinator & Instructor

Building African American Families: Records, Resources & Documentation



Topics include:

Methodology/Strategies | Genealogical Standards | Timelines | Slavery Laws | Reconstruction Records | Newspapers | Reconstructing Communities | Maps & Geographic Information Systems (GIS) | Archives & Libraries | Manuscript Collections in Historical Black Colleges & Universities | Military Service/Research | Migrations | Probate Records | Tax & Court Records | Rural Ancestors | Periodicals | Case Studies

ighr.gagensociety.org/african-american/

***Frazine Taylor scholarship is available--deadline Apr. 15**

Charting Church History

Emmanuel Baptist Church, in the Fairfax neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio, celebrated its 110th anniversary on February 8th of this year.

This milestone was reached along with another—being nominated, approved and officially recognized in the **National Register of Historic Places**. To be designated as a historical African American church, the appropriate criteria and documentation has to be supported (such as church history, architectural significance, civil rights connections and community-focused ministries).

AAGS-Cleveland member Frances Kelley played a role in chronicling the history of the church and some of its activities. During 2024-2025, the church was tasked with collecting archival material (anniversary books, photos, members' personal items, etc.), which included items that Fran had already obtained through research she conducted over past years. In this case, the **Cleveland Restoration Society** requested material from the time period 1916-1976 (involving the original church structure) to conduct its review. Fran utilized a range of resources during her research.

- She actually first stumbled upon Emmanuel Baptist history by accident. When researching her father Martin C. Kelley, she already had a 1945 ***Call & Post*** newspaper article about Mt. Haven Baptist Church, of which her father was a member. The article gave the history of Mt. Haven (formed from Shiloh Baptist in 1905) and went on to explain that Rev. Charles R. Jones and some Mt. Haven members left and founded Emmanuel Baptist in 1916. The church met from home to home and later in a store front on Central Avenue until moving to its present site on 79th & Quincy Avenue in 1917.

- She looked for **property deeds**.

- From ***Call & Post*** articles, she discovered names of various church members who owned businesses, (e.g., Cummings & Davis Funeral Home), were educators (e.g., Dr. Wanda Jean Green) and were civic leaders. Green & Ollie Scott started the SOS ("Strengthening Our Students") program.

- On the **Cleveland State University** site, the Michael Swartz Collection of prominent African Americans in Cleveland yielded church members such as James Haynes (real estate) and Rev. Sterling Glover.

- In a 1939 fire, the original wooden structure was destroyed. When Fran joined the church in 2000 and asked about the fire, no one elaborated—so she researched it herself. **From local newspapers**, she learned one firefighter was injured after falling in a window well and 15 firefighters narrowly escaped as the roof fell in. Organ, drapes, hymnals—everything burned.

- She contacted the **City of Cleveland Department of Building and Housing**, whose staff said their old files were thrown away. She then contacted the **Cuyahoga County Archives** and had a building card pulled. A white architect redesigned the church and an African American member who had built homes in the Lee-Seville area led the hands-on construction. By 1940, male members of the congregation who were in the construction trade had rebuilt the church.

- When later building renovations were made, she saw that the kitchen was designed by one of the first African American architects in the area.

- From the **Cleveland Public Library** map collection holdings, she obtained a plat map of the area with the original developer's name, as well as various street photos of the neighborhood in earlier times.

- She also routinely reviewed the **Cuyahoga County Auditor** Property Search site for property data.

After all necessary information was provided for the time period requested, Margaret Lann, Director of **Preservation Services at the Cleveland Restoration Society** submitted a report to the State of Ohio for approval. Though the October 2025 federal government shutdown delayed the approval process, by December 2025 Emmanuel Baptist Church was listed on the **National Park Service** registry.

Director Lann also developed a historical video and Fran was part of a panel with other knowledgeable church members to discuss the results. The video (which opens with an aerial view of Downtown Cleveland) was provided to the church and will be available on the National Park Service website.

Emmanuel Baptist Church has had only four ministers in 110 years (as of 2026). This place of worship (along with other cultural gems in the area) has had a rich, detailed past--which historians like Fran take pleasure in uncovering.

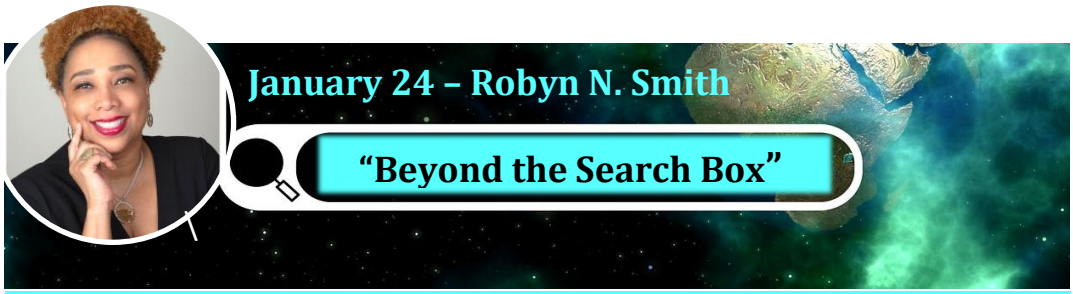
Whether collecting the story of a family, residence, building, group or community, research efforts like this ensure that valuable legacies are carried forward to the generations ahead.

[Photo from the Emmanuel Baptist Church website]

AAGS ACTIVITIES

Supporting Genealogy In-House & In the Community

AAGS General Meetings



Question: What's a great way to start the genealogy year?

Answer: With a Robyn Smith presentation!

For AAGS's 2026 kick-off meeting, Robyn presented "Beyond the Search Box: Finding Family Relationships" and explained how to grow your research skills and analyze sources vs. heavily relying on search boxes from online websites.

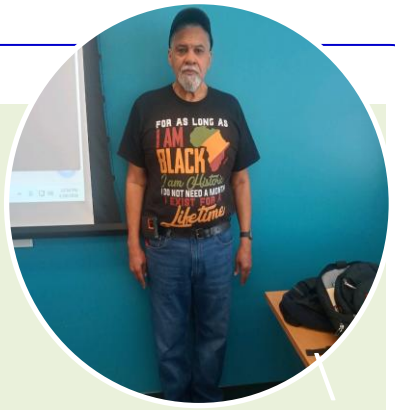
It may be easier to access material online, yet info can be misunderstood or missing. She challenged the group to develop a different mindset. Instead of endlessly clicking until there are no more surnames to type in--stop searching, analyze what you already have and proceed from there.

She referenced Elizabeth Shown Mills while outlining key ways in which to analyze sources. Sources can be original, derivative or authored; info can be primary, secondary or unknown; evidence can be direct, indirect or negative. Naturally, primary information and original sources are the most reliable. High-value tips:

- Track your research
- Compare documents; evaluate conflicting data
- Keep local libraries, courthouses & state archives on your radar
- Maintain historical context
- Logically determine the story the documents are conveying

Her handout further outlined the research process and listed specific references for further learning, online posts & articles, videos and journal articles.

February 28 – Open Forum



AAGS President Joseph Houser Sr.

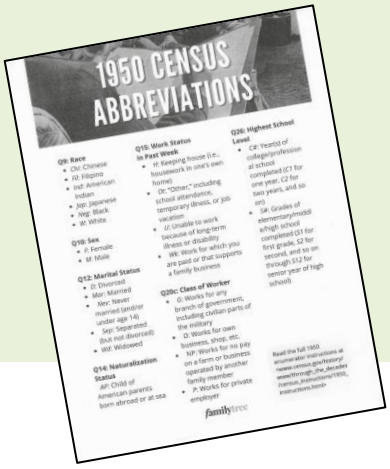
Members were encouraged to bring genealogy research that they were having trouble with, along with supporting documents.
Per **Dr. Deborah Abbott**, many people feel they have brick walls when, from her view, "you just haven't found it yet" due to self-inflicted barriers. She provided insight and commentary on ways to widen research opportunities.

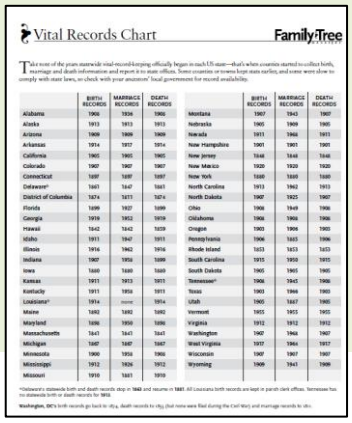
She guided the group through Q&A discussion on topics such as:

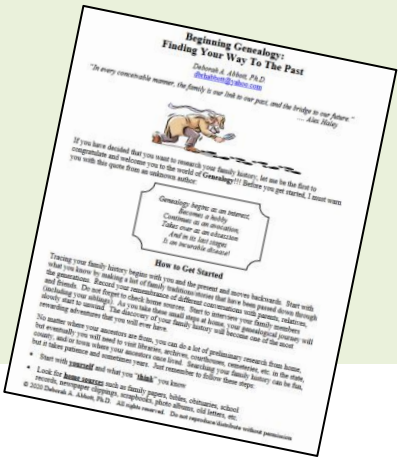
- Ancestry, FamilySearch and Family History Library accessibility (what's free online, through personal subscription or available through library affiliates)
- Online family trees (pros & cons) – Consensus was that trees can help find some ancestors or connect with current relatives *when sources are checked for accuracy*; indiscriminate trees are not suggested for newcomers who have not developed a concrete paper trail
- The merits of Family Tree Magazine, learning to use online databases efficiently, becoming familiar with state laws, beginning census research with the most recent year available (1950), and studying censuses and documents thoroughly

Dr. Abbott has recorded several free African American research-related videos on "Ancestry Academy" which are accessible online and by app.

The group split up into hands-on sessions, with **Joseph Jordan** introducing new researchers to census guides, vital records info and beginner strategies.







Emma Hamilton

transitioned to ancestor on January 26, 2026 in Decatur, Georgia. She was a member of AAGS, among other groups.

Her love of community and passion for family history culminated in a prominent genealogical presence in her later years. She was President of the Atlanta chapter of Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society and a board member of the Georgia Genealogical Society. She lived life with tenacity, purpose, strength and laughter.
Her vital spirit will be missed.

Tech and You

Six Months In:

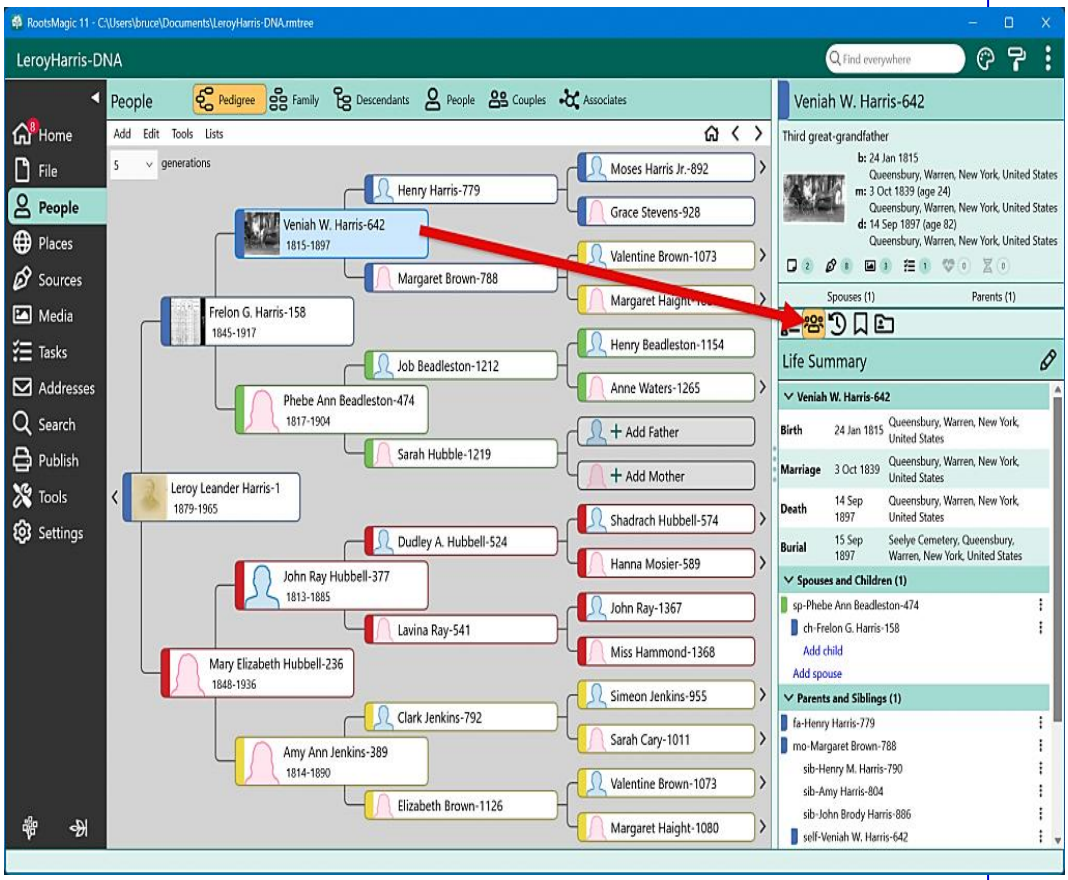
RootsMagic 11 Still a Genealogy Favorite

By Cecelia McFadden

Can you believe it's already been six months since RootsMagic launched its newest version? As family historians and genealogists, we constantly look for tools that streamline our research and help us tell our ancestors' stories more effectively. The product blog calls this release a "labor of love," and it shows. RootsMagic 11 introduces features users have long requested, delivering updates that improve usability, efficiency and modern research workflows. A seasoned genealogist or beginner can capitalize on the RootsMagic 11 features that make organizing and analyzing your family tree more intuitive than ever. You can even explore a full trial version before committing to the purchase.

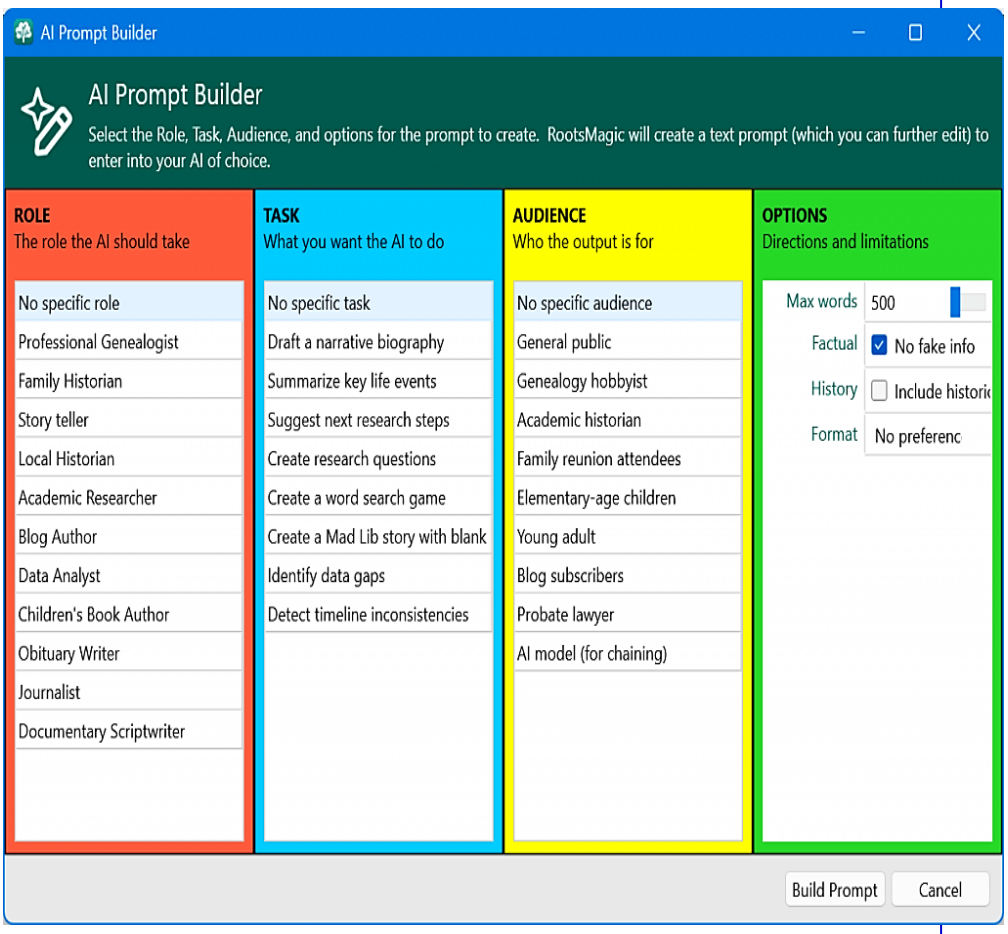
New Interface

RootsMagic 11 debuts a redesigned landing page anchored by the new **Life Summary Panel**. This layout improves everyday navigation and gives you a clear snapshot of an ancestor's life at a glance. The Life Summary Panel organizes vital events—birth, marriage, death, and burial—alongside collapsible sections for spouses, children, parents and siblings. With fewer clicks and cleaner structure, you can focus more on relationships and timelines, the heart of genealogical research.



Artificial Intelligence (AI)

One of the most innovative additions is the AI Prompt Builder. As AI becomes more common in genealogy, this software provides a built-in tool that helps you incorporate it into your research. The AI Prompt Builder lets you create prompts for your preferred AI by selecting a "Role" such as Professional Genealogist, Family Historian or Storyteller. You then choose a "Task," from drafting a narrative biography to identifying data gaps or spotting timeline inconsistencies. You can refine the output further by selecting an "Audience" and setting limits like word count or factual-only responses.



Other Features

RootsMagic 11 strengthens editing and workflow tools. Streamlined edit screens give you faster access to sources, notes and tasks. You can now view all citations for a person on a single screen, use a redesigned Advanced Search with flexible logic rules and navigate window views with clearer labels such as "Pedigree" and "Family."

Continuing Strengths

Beyond the new features, RootsMagic continues to offer the advantages genealogists rely on. The software runs on both Mac (OS 12–15) and Windows (10 or 11) as a one-time purchase, allowing you to keep sensitive family data private and secure on your own computer—no subscription required. At the same time, it maintains strong integrations with FamilySearch, Ancestry, MyHeritage and Findmypast, making it easy to pull in records, hints and collaborative tree data.

Conclusion

With so many tools packed into one program, RootsMagic 11 offers tremendous value for AAGS members. Its modern interface, innovative AI features and commitment to offline privacy—paired with robust online connectivity—make it a powerful tool for today's family historian. What are you waiting for? Share your upgrade experience! Email us at **newslchair@aagsclev.org**.

9 Essential Strategies for Writing and Telling Great Family History Stories

*"**From Lisa Louise Cooke's Genealogy Gems** at https://lisalouisecooke.com home of the free Genealogy Gems Podcast and Genealogy Gems YouTube channel"*

Do you want to write or tell more compelling family history stories?
Author Sunny Morton (*Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy*) *[…]* shares nine techniques you can use to tell a better story that will grab your reader's or listener's interest.

1. Tell the stories you're passionate about Choose stories that resonate deeply with you, as your enthusiasm will engage your audience. For example, a story about a relative who left their job to volunteer during the Johnstown flood can create a personal connection, making the story memorable and impactful.	**2. Find the story arc** Lives don't follow a neat narrative, but you can shape historical events into compelling stories. Identify a beginning, middle, and end to create a cohesive arc, even if the story spans just a few minutes or years, to make it relatable and engaging.	**3. Identify the story elements** Craft stories with clear characters, meaningful themes, and a defined plot. Ensure the story has a satisfying conclusion or, if unresolved, a compelling cliffhanger that sparks curiosity, such as planning further research to uncover missing details.
4. Find the story hook Start with an exciting or intriguing moment to grab attention, then provide necessary backstory. Draw inspiration from novels that begin with pivotal moments rather than chronological details, prompting listeners to want to know more.	**5. Practice telling the story** Condense extensive research into a 30-second to 3-minute story and practice delivering it to family or friends. Observe their reactions to refine your storytelling, ensuring it holds attention and avoids unnecessary details.	**6. Use writing to flesh out the story** Writing helps organize your research into a coherent narrative. Create a timeline to identify gaps or inconsistencies, using the process to discover the story's core elements before sharing it with others.
7. Make story notes in your genealogy database Record key insights about ancestors in your database's notes section, summarizing what stands out in one sentence. This practice helps identify compelling stories, prompts further research, and supports creating short narratives or videos.	**8. Use YouTube for background research** Explore YouTube for historical context, such as training videos or documentaries, to enrich your stories. For example, 1940s telephone operator training videos revealed their critical role as emergency responders, adding depth.	**9. Using AI for Genealogy Writing** AI tools like those on Ancestry or FamilySearch can generate skeletal biographies, serving as a starting point or a tool to spot inaccuracies. Use AI as a collaborative assistant, fact-checking its output and refining it to match your audience's tone, whether casual or scholarly. Be cautious of AI's tendency to fill gaps with fiction, and focus on ethical use, such as citing AI contributions appropriately if needed.

Full video at https://lisalouisecooke.com/2025/07/23/9-storytelling-strategies/

GENEALOGY WORD LINK

ONE-CLUE-LEADS-TO-THE-NEXT

In genealogy, some words just go together.

Example:	*(Completed Word Link)*
Federal	Federal
⇩	⇩
C_____	C**ensus**
⇩	⇩
R_____	R**ecord**
⇩	⇩
Collection	Collection

To complete the links below, figure out a word that comes next:

Link #1	Link #2	Link #3	Link #4	Link #5
Allen	Civil	Military	Family	Freedman's
C_____	W__	D_____	L_____	B____
C_____	P_____	R_____	T____	R_____
R_____	F____	C____	R_____	G_____
Type	Folder	File	Tech	Sheet

Okay, one more, *for the bonus:*

Family
A_____
D___
E_____
Explained

How did you do?

(Answers on page 12)

P.O. Box 201476
Cleveland, Ohio 44120-1476
aagsclev.org

Answers for page 11 – Genealogy Word Link:

Link #1	Link #2	Link #3	Link #4	Link #5	Bonus
Allen	Civil	Military	Family	Freedman's	Family
County	War	Draft	Legacy	Bank	Ancestry
Courthouse	Pension	Registration	Tree	Record	DNA
Record	File	Card	Roots	Group	Evidence
Type	Folder	File	Tech	Sheet	Explained