Organizing Your Family Tree
(One Branch at a Time!)
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You have a pile of papers that you've gathered from a variety of sources: Letters from Aunt Ruth, a birth certificate from Mom, notes about a long lost cousin, etc. Now what do you do with them? There are so many apples on the family tree, that it's hard to know where to begin and how to proceed. So, first things first!

Start by pulling together everything that you already have or can get your hands on. Send emails to relatives asking for a list of types of information you are looking for. Make copies of family bible genealogy pages, gather birth and death and marriage certificates, etc. Put them all in together in a box.

I.   Get a 3 generation pedigree chart and fill in as much as you possibly can with what you already have. Start with YOU. (Your parents are Gen. 1, grandparents are Gen. 2, and great-grandparents are Gen. 3.) Even if you have some blank branches, you can begin to organize. Get a box of colored pencils that has at least 12 colors in it. Now, color code each of your great grandparents (8 total lines). Those are your sort and research categories even if some of them don't have names yet. If you are starting from absolute scratch, start with 4 categories/lines and your 4 grandparents until you have enough information to use the 3rd generation names (your 8 great-grandparents). If you already have all you need to get on your grandparents, then just use the eight 3rd generation names for your research lines.

II.   Create folders for each of your 8 branches or lines, using the same color on the tab that you used on your pedigree chart. These folders should have enclosed sides so that papers and notes will not accidently slip out of them. Label each of these folders with the name on the pedigree chart. If you are using genealogy software, also include the ID# for that person assigned by your software (will save you time later).

III.   Create a working notebook. Use 8 index tabs, label them with the same 8 branch lines, and color code those tabs, too. Put blank research logs behind each of those tabs, and write the name of the branch/line on top of the log page, color code it. Put your color coded Pedigree Chart in the front of your working notebook. (if you use a view notebook with the clear slip in front, you can put it on the outside of your binder.)

IV.   Now create a pedigree chart for each of those 8 lines, and put the head of the branch/line (your great-grandparent) in the #1 position on the new pedigree charts (where YOU are on your original chart). Be sure to color code them. Put the pedigree charts behind the tab in your working binder.

V.   Now, go back to your box of collected information, and put each piece of paper or bit of info into the folder that is most directly associated with the information. Which line does it relate to?

That's really all there is to it. You are now organized and ready to methodically begin researching your family - one branch at a time. Go through each of the folders and see if you have more information that can be added to your pedigree chart for that line. As you begin researching in libraries, online, and with relatives, you can journal information on your research logs until you gather enough information to make another entry onto your pedigree charts or the family group sheet for that person (that will include spouse and children information). Eventually, you'll have enough info to create family group sheets for each person on the pedigree chart, This is when you need to invest in some computer software that will help you keep track of everything, or use the online familysearch.org. Each time you come across a new piece of information, you have a folder ready to receive it for safe keeping.

RESEARCH LOGS. As you start researching names and families, you will sometimes come across pieces of information that you know will be needed later, but you don't know where it fits into your family tree yet (or you don't want to get distracted from your current search). WRITE THAT DOWN on your research log under the correct line/branch, and write enough information so that you know where you saw it and can come back to it once it becomes clear where that piece of information fits in. If you aren't sure you'll be able to find it again, make a copy or print it out, and drop it into the file folder for later reference. Rather than getting sidetracked onto a completely different line because you've come across a piece of info, just write down the information on the research log for that line, and you'll know it's there waiting for you where you can find it when you are ready to research that line.