



Reboot your family history

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SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

PastFinder

By Janet Brigham

We call it the three-finger salute: enter control/alt/delete. If a PC isn't behaving and can't be persuaded by conventional means, we do the three-finger salute and reboot.

Sometimes our genealogy research resembles what PC users call the "blue screen of death." A Unix term for the same sort of unrecoverable error is "kernal panic." (I wonder if the PC's General Protection Error secretly wages virtual war with Colonel Panic.) In any event, stuck is stuck, and we reboot.

When our genealogy research becomes similarly stuck, it may seem tempting to just walk away and hope the problems fix themselves. A more effective approach is to troubleshoot any current activities that aren't working. Some useful approaches can include these:

Manage the mountains. Even in a digital age, genealogy lends itself to the accumulation of piles of information. Accumulation is due partly to not deciding what to keep and what to toss.

One approach to this is to digitize and set aside anything worth keeping as an original (handwritten or one-of-a-kind documents, photos, and photocopies you use for reference) and then to scan and discard replaceable items. Be sure each scanned image is adequate and is saved where you can find it and where it will be backed up frequently.

Those materials that you keep can be stored in file boxes even if you don't have time immediately to label and file them. Once I used a rough-



Rebooting with the infamous three-finger salute (control-alt-delete)—a nearly instinctive behavior among earlier PC users.

sort process in which I sat in the middle of a fan of file boxes, each labeled with a major family surname and subsets to that surname. The first sorting involved merely putting an item from my pile in the box associated with the family name. The boxes then could be safely stored; sorting each one was less daunting than sorting everything all at once.

Don't be surprised if your sifting and sorting result in discovering bits of information that you now recognize as useful, even if that wasn't obvious when you first collected the information.

Think horizontally. Occasionally we collect similar items all at once, such as a cluster of military pension files, a group of homestead records, or a collec-

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tion of deeds. If you have not yet taken an all-at-once approach to finding records, it's worth trying. Rather than searching linearly for everything about one ancestor, search for all possible ancestors in one place or type of record.

Rather than sorting these findings into family-related boxes and files, place each pension or land file in an archival-quality sheet protector and put all the records of one type in separate binders. (You can put a note in family files or boxes to remind yourself that these documents exist.)

I've been surprised how much I've learned about various types of records by having them all in one place. Information that seemed anomalous in isolation makes more sense when compared to similar documents. And the truly anomalous parts of documents stand out.

A case in point is a pension file about a Civil War ancestor who was injured as he cleared trees for a Union troop encampment. His pension file is thick with repeated requests for pension support and demands that he undergo medical examinations—frustrating for him and his widow, but a goldmine for their descendants. By placing his file alongside much thinner files regarding other ancestors, I gained an understanding of the family's tenacity in petitioning the federal government. (And, I should add, the government's tenacity in denying claims.)

Be available. Be sure you can be found by other descendants. Post to online trees. Post queries and answer others' queries. Reach out. Publish. Don't become so paranoid about privacy that you provide no way for people to find you for legitimate reasons.

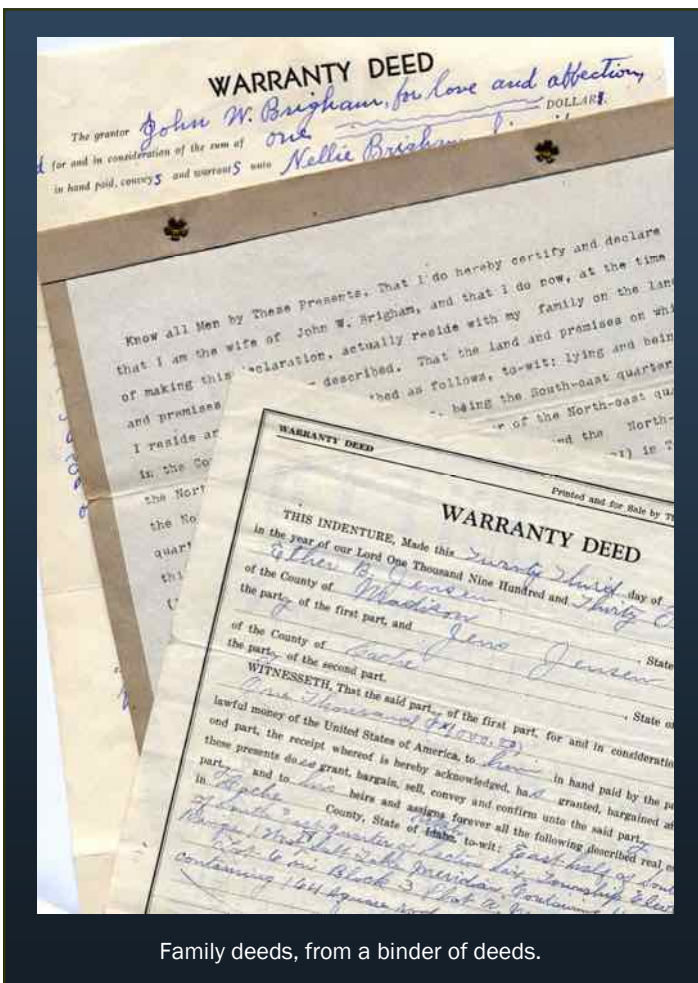
Recently a distant cousin I'd never met left a message on our home phone answering machine. While searching for a common ancestor through Google, he ran across an article I'd written for this newsletter in which I mentioned the ancestor. The article had been archived on a university library website. This distant cousin has information I do not have; he is looking forward to sharing. He also has put me in touch with another distant cousin who has original documents. All three of us have information the others do not have. We have barely begun to network.

I concede that this contact occurred because of my involvement with the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group newsletter, but I could as easily have shown up in a web search from other online postings.

Do a chunk at a time. You do not have to conquer the genealogical world today. At least not all at once. You can set an expansive goal, even if it's "get this mess cleaned up" or "build a well-documented database." Then the best way to fulfill it is to break it down into manageable segments, and to do those one chunk at a time.

Imagine. Imagine how fun it would be if we finished the model train we want the grandchildren to see during the holidays. We started on it years ago but have yet to finish it so that it can create family memories. (At present, the only memory is the perpetual question "Is it done yet?") The first grandson we started it for is now 13. The youngest grandson is just turning 1. Imagining his eyes widening as he sees it running is an incentive to do it before he, too, is 13.

Imagine. 



Family deeds, from a binder of deeds.

Fresh ideas for an old problem

By Richard Rands

In genealogy we live by the attitude to never give up, no matter what. This month's column—following accounts of successes by our members (*PastFinder*, November 2012)—is an example of that principle.

Every year for many decades, I have set a New Year's resolution to redouble my efforts to solve a family history question that has bedeviled all of the family historians in my family. It is that there appears to be a distinct place of origin for two divergent lines of families with the surname Rands in England. We have yet to discover whether or not the two lines have a common origin somewhere back in time.

My side of the Rands line can be traced back to Suffolk County, England, with well documented parish records going back to Jonas Rannde, who was married in 1614 at Stratford, Suffolk. Secondary sources suggest that we can trace that line back several more generations to George Rannde, born about 1530, also in Suffolk County.

Although not every child in each descendant family has been followed down to the present, we have no evidence that any of them wandered far from Suffolk, except for my third-great-grandfather, who traveled across England to Bristol, married there, and then moved to the London area. There he remained, but two of his sons emigrated to Capetown, South Africa. One son left Capetown for gold fields in Australia, while the other joined the Mormon Church and came to Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1868.

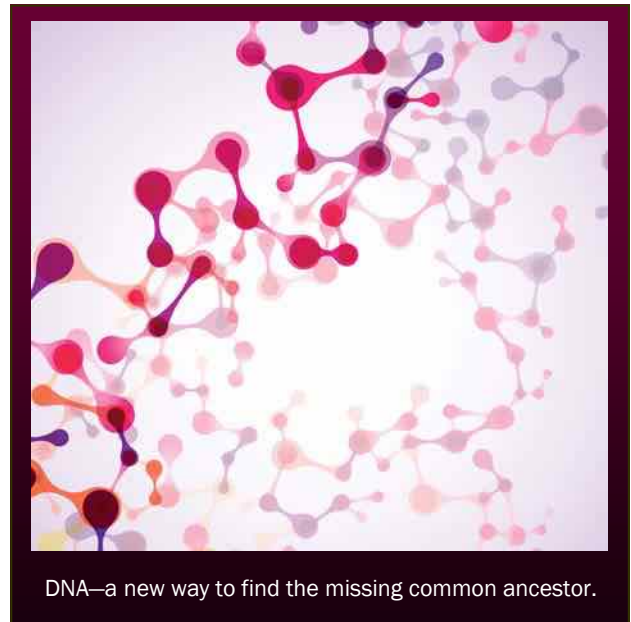
Needless to say, my database is brimming with Randses who were born in England (usually Suffolk or Middlesex), Australia (usually Victoria), and the United States (most often the Western states).

But over the years, we have continued to discover other Rands families, both in England and the United States, who originated or had ties to regions other than Suffolk, England. They came from counties including Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, Norfolk, and Huntingdon. Uncovering a link between any of them and our line of Suffolk Rands families has been an elusive goal. Because the name is relatively uncommon, reason tells me that we may well have a common ancestor, most likely in England.

Virtually all the places that offer the etymology of the Rand/s surname and its variations suggest that it

originates from the Germanic word for *shield* or the Anglo-Saxon term for *river bank*. I have never encountered a Rand/s family from Germany. Furthermore, a recent autosomal DNA test shows my ethnicity is 51% Great Britain and 49% Scandinavia, leaving no room for Germanic ancestry and giving me sufficient justification to spend some of my personal research time chasing down the missing common ancestor.

Up to this point I have kept my eyes open for several telltale signs among Rands families that are not part of my Suffolk lineage—for example, families with frequent use of the same given names used often in the Suffolk families, families with ancestors who appeared in counties other than places their ancestors



originated (i.e., not rooted in a specific place), families in coastal areas where they could have moved to or from coastal towns in Suffolk, or those whose given names match individuals in Suffolk families that I cannot trace in Suffolk records.

As DNA testing became more affordable, I began to look for living male descendants from non-Suffolk Rands ancestors who would be willing to do a Y-chromosome DNA test. I have traced family after family down from census to census, only to discover that the males are not interested, are not in records of living people, or are gone. World wars and modern

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How I hope to find it (continued)

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wars took many of them. But I still remain convinced that linking the Suffolk Rands with the others will be a significant discovery, well worth the perseverance.

This year my resolution is to use a two-pronged approach. First, I am going to reverse the direction of my tracing. I'll start with a sample of living males whose surname is Rands, whom I already have convinced to allow their Y chromosome to be tested.

Then I will trace their lineage back to England to establish that their ancestry *does not* come from Suffolk. Finding a sample of willing subjects will be a challenge because I have already discovered that some, DNA testing is still highly suspect; also some Rands family members might not understand my motive. I already have been waiting for weeks without responses to a number of calls and emails.

A second approach has been considerably more fruitful for me. About 25 years ago, my family came in contact with a descendant of the son of my third-great-grandfather, mentioned above, who remained in England when his two younger brothers went to South Africa. This individual and his wife were already interested in genealogy, and we exchanged family history occasionally over years. Since his Rands ancestor was a Suffolk Rands, he is not useful as a candidate for a DNA test.

A recent look at his Rands family website revealed that he and his wife have been collecting names of individuals with the Rands surname who have been born, have married, have died, or otherwise have lived in English counties, both Suffolk and elsewhere. This distant relative has collected several thousand such names, each of which has been tentatively linked into family groups based on source details and geographic locations. Plus, he and his wife have created a spreadsheet of another 5,300 names of Rands individuals who have not yet been added to the database.

I know the couple to be reliable researchers, conscientious about seeking good sources, although none of their source documentation has been entered into their database. They unabashedly concede that some of their assumptions may not be valid, but that "something is better than nothing."

Through them I have access to a collection of




nearly ten thousand Rands names (and families) that can form the starting point of some exciting explorations. Recently I spoke with them about this collection. They graciously offered to share their information. I promised to be careful about not sharing confidential information in their database and to work closely with them, always sharing my discoveries and reviewing their discoveries.

I will be able to use the Internet to apply research skills that have not been applied to these records. I will be able to access record collections recently posted online that will shed new light on these names.

I am more excited than ever that this may be the year that the Common Rands Ancestor (the CRA) will be identified. Who knows? He may have been an ancient Viking who terrorized the coast of Somerset, leaving the Rands DNA behind. Or he may have been a Crusader, a member of the upper crust, or a prolific peasant farmer.

Whatever and whoever he was, his descendants now can exercise dogged perseverance, obtain help from living relatives, and explore newly digitized records.

This is what I hope to find this year. Wish me luck. 



Ask the doctor Expecting too much from searches?

Q I've noticed wrinkles in the search engine's algorithm on FamilySearch.org. For example, when I search for a supposed cousin named Vincent Cucito in the Social Security Death Index [SSDI], or in the 1940 U.S. Census, I receive one hit that is not even close. When I change the search criteria to Vincent Cocito, he appears at the top of the list (with the *Cocito* spelling). I would have expected the *Cocito* hit to be returned when *Cucito* was requested. Am I asking too much?

Yes and no. The same search for Vincent Cucito in the SSDI database on Ancestry.com produces 539 hits that include the results for your supposed cousin as the 61st entry. The search engines for both Google and Bing get zero hits. I have tried many searches at familysearch.org in the 1940 U.S. Census that have failed to return a single hit, when the exact same search at Ancestry.com has been successful. Knowing that the family can be found in the census, I have broadened the FamilySearch.org search criteria to include everyone in a county with the same surname, with the desired family appearing as a hit. I have even spoken to the person in charge of the 1940 Census project at FamilySearch, who was hard pressed to take me seriously. The onus was put on me to prove my case. Furthermore, users are rarely, if ever, allowed to talk directly to the programmers who write the search algorithms.

Building algorithms is not an exact science. I can say that with certainty because at one point in The Doctor's career as a programmer (more than 30 years ago), he was head of a project to develop just such a beast. Programming technology has come a long way, but the problems are still the same.

One of the first criteria for a good search algorithm is speed. It wasn't too long ago that the results of a Google search would proudly announce at the top of the list how many milliseconds it took to give you the millions of hits it found. Never mind that it would be more effective to take 10 seconds to give you 50 hits that were closer to what you wanted. The bottom line here is that programmers spend as much time trying to write highly efficient code as they do writing effective code.

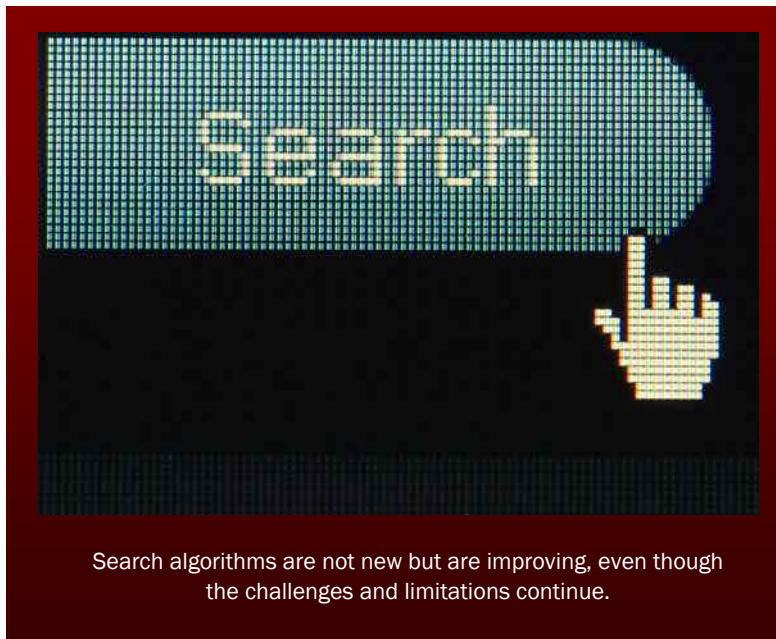
The next challenge for a good algorithm is that usually it is working from an index built from the original data collections, either by humans or by another computer program that tries to interpret the key elements of the information being searched. It is

a fact that an index will never be free of inconsistencies, missing elements, exceptions, errors, or unexpected information, defying the best of programmers.

Indexes also are made more complicated by the fact that the original data can be full of errors. Think of a census data collection: The informant may not know or may not intend to provide the correct information; the enumerator may transcribe it incorrectly or

record it in atrocious handwriting; the statistician may obscure the data with infuriating tally marks; the image may be barely readable; and, finally, the indexer may extract the data in any number of erroneous ways.

Next, remember that the typical search engine must be able to handle an ever growing set of widely varying types of indexes, each with its own set of rules and exceptions. That means that the programmers' job is never done. Just when the computer code seems to have a reasonable success rate, along



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Ask the doctor *(Continued)*

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comes a new data collection that fails to cough up the minimum acceptable hit rate. So they go back to work trying to tweak the code to work with the new data. In the process, they invariably foul up some of the old code so that searches on old data collections don't work as well as they did before.

Another aspect of the problem is that more often than not a search algorithm is part of a company's intellectual property, and thus it is guarded with secrecy and legal protections. We now live in the Era of the Search Engine. Companies with effective search engines are worth billions. Only recently has an open forum on the Internet existed for programmers to look for programming code for limited searching.

Ironically, The Doctor did a Google search for *free search engine code* and at the top of the list it noted, "about 351,000,000 results (0.24 seconds)." Unfortunately, many programmers suffer from the "only if invented here" syndrome.)

The Doctor is not an apologist for search engine programmers at FamilySearch.org or any other genealogy repository. However, highly effective quality control techniques exist to ensure that programming code always improves over time.

For example, suppose we as users had a quick and easy mechanism for reporting undesirable results, such as the one reported above, which could be accumulated into a test database, and then used to test every new tweaking of the algorithm. Then assume that unless the search produced the desired results for every previously known wrong or unacceptable results, the algorithm would not be released to the

public. These efforts require fresh eyes and fresh approaches. Every programming effort must employ quality control methods run by people who are *not* part of the programming staff.


After this long-winded response, what can The Doctor say at this time to search engine users?

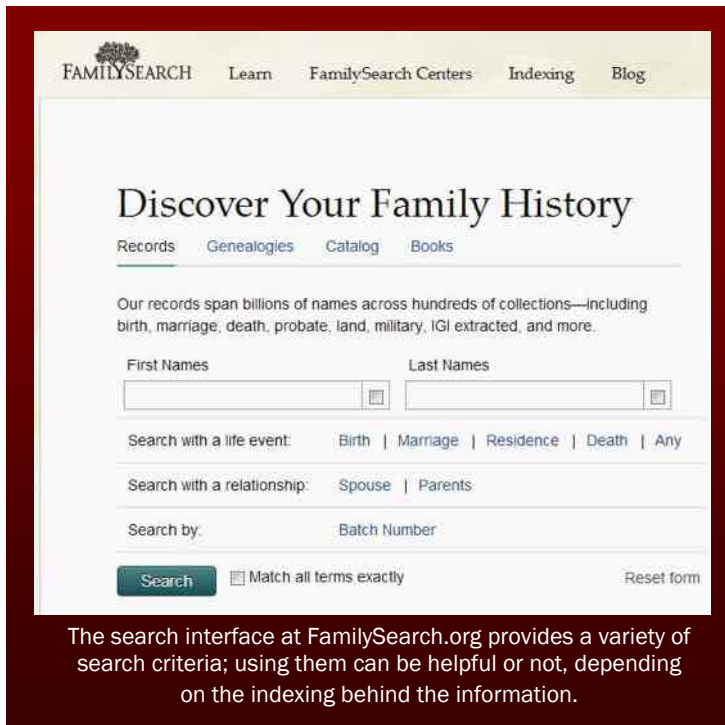
You did the correct thing to try a variation of the surname. We need to be aware of as many alternative spellings as possible. Whenever the number of hits is too high, use more specific criteria, such as a narrower age range or a more specific place name. If your desired entry cannot be found among the results, broaden the search criteria.

Sometimes I have discovered that during a session of searching, the search engine stops working, giving me spurious results, or none at all. When I restart the program or the browser, or even reboot my computer, it will return to normalcy.

Alternatively, be inventive with a different approach. For example, leave the name details out altogether, and only enter age and place details. The idiosyncrasy of the search engine that is missing your person may be a screwy, unpredictable entry in the name fields of the index; using peripheral elements may capture the results you are seeking. This also can be true the other way around—

enter name info without age and place. Another suggestion is to try a different search engine, including those of Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, Google.com, Bing.com, and many others.

Above all, remember that the genealogical adage that the absence of evidence is NOT evidence of absence also applies to searching. And keep in mind that algorithms are constantly being tweaked, so try your search again, and again, and again. 



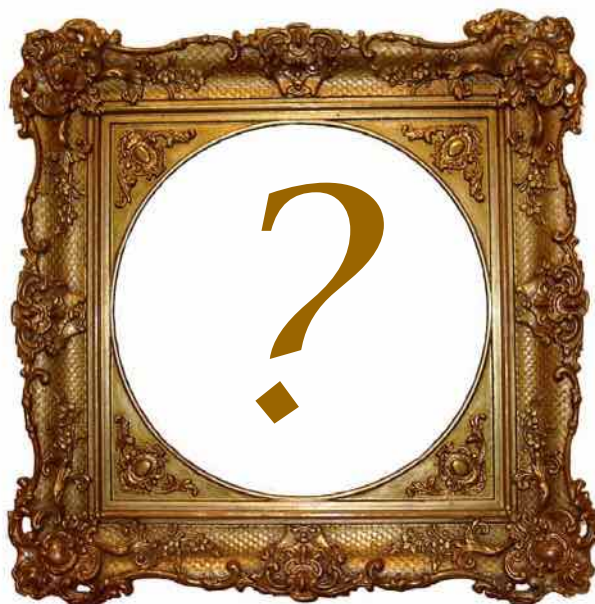
The search interface at FamilySearch.org provides a variety of search criteria; using them can be helpful or not, depending on the indexing behind the information.

How to be an excellent ancestor

The late Gayle Simons (see below) took a long-range point of view when it came to genealogy. She wasn't content just to find ancestors; she wanted her students to become the kind of ancestor whose trail descendants would be delighted to follow.

How to do this? These were some of Gayle's suggestions, passed along to SVCGG nearly three years ago. Start by writing out this information about yourself:

- Legal/birth name and nicknames
- Birth date/birth place
- Parents' full legal names, birth date, and birth place
- If born in another country, immigration date and (if applicable) naturalization date and location
- Names, birth dates, birth places, and genders of siblings, including any who have died
- Locations where you've lived, including addresses, years there, city/county/state/country, and reason for living there
- Names and locations of schools you attended, including elementary, middle, high school, college, or other education, including degrees and honors
- Military service, with dates and locations, branch of service, and awards



- Religious affiliation and details about participation
- Political affiliation and activities
- Marital status, including history of marriage, divorce, other partners, death of spouse or partner
- Full legal name of spouses and partners
- Full names, nicknames, birth dates, birth places, gender and other information about children, including adopted children; if you've had more than one spouse or partner, indicate which children came from which union
- Full names, birth dates, birth places, and gender of additional step-children and foster children, with notation about their parentage
- Occupational and employment history, including years, positions, locations, and employers
- Health history, including major illnesses, dates, and treatments
- Your physical description, including height, build, and hair and eye colors
- Favorite foods and drinks
- Hobbies and interests
- Volunteer activities and memberships
- Historical events that impacted your life
- What you would like ancestors to know about you
- What you have learned in your life that could help others

Gayle Simons, Bay Area genealogy teacher, is memorialized

Gayle Simons, 63, a popular genealogy teacher and volunteer for the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group, died 23 December 2012. Although her first career was nursing, she later expanded her skills into genealogy and taught in local adult school programs. A number of SVCGG members attended her genealogy classes in the Bay Area.

She is survived by her husband of 40 years, Jerry; their children, Blythe and Jerrod; and a sister, Natalie Ingram. Family and friends honored her at memorial and burial services in December 2012. Speakers at the memorial service recalled the enthusiasm and energy Gayle brought to her own research and her teaching.

Online military pension files grow

It is frustrating to discover that the only online record of an ancestor who fought in a U.S. war is an index entry. Most widely used record collections give you access to an index, but you do not know that an entry refers to your ancestor.

The only way to verify that you have the correct person is to take a chance and order the file from the National Archives (NARA). On top of that, when you note that the index is for a pension file, you know that it is likely to brim with priceless details about your ancestor's service and family. But what if it isn't the right person?

Fold3.com, the online home of U.S.



military records, is making huge strides in digitizing contents of the pension files at NARA and making them accessible online. At the end of 2012, they posted the following image counts and percentage complete for four pension file collections:

Revolutionary War, 2,445,854 (99%)


War of 1812, (free) 450,522 (6%)

Civil War Widows, 3,640,072 (4%)

Mormon Battalion, 27,041 (100%)

Much work remains for records of both the War of 1812 and the Civil War. In fact, the Civil War pension files currently being digitized

are only those of widows who applied for a pension. Still to be worked on are pension records for soldiers who were wounded, and dependents of soldiers who were wounded.

If you are anxiously waiting for a pension file to be posted at Fold3.com, click the Watch button on the web page for each of the unfinished collections to trigger an email notification when new images have been added to the collection. 


Upcoming meetings

The group meets monthly except December, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 A.M. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right). The group is not affiliated with any church or other group.

12 January 2013, 9–11 A.M.

- U. S. Colonial research (Lesly Klippel)
- Managing computer files (Richard Rands)
- Reunion for the Mac basics (Patricia Burrow)
- Reunion 10 for the Mac (Pat Solomon)
- Getting started in genealogy, Q&A (Carleen Foster)

9 February 2013, 9–11 A.M.

- Obituaries (Allin Kingsbury)
- Making Sense of FamilySearch Family Tree (Richard Rands)
- Reunion for the Mac basics
- Reunion 10 for the Mac
- Getting started in genealogy 

PastFinder

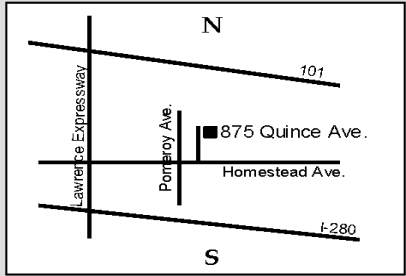
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Website: www.svcgg.org
Email: siliconvalleygroup@earthlink.net
Postal mail: P.O. Box 23670, San Jose, CA 95153-3670

Officers and staff

Richard Rands	President rrands@earthlink.net 650-969-6567
Janet Brigham	Vice-president Newsletter editor jzbrands@earthlink.net
Wanda Levy	Secretary
Carleen Foster	Treasurer
Lesly Klippel	Membership director leslyk@comcast.net
Brian Smith	Program chair bsmith4gen@yahoo.com
Pat Burrow	Board member at-large
Bill Weller	Webmaster
Leland Osburn	Education administrator
Pamela Erickson	Assistant editor
Betsy Shafer	Assistant editor
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Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance at the front.

About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVCGG is the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, a nonprofit group of some 600 genealogy enthusiasts. The group is based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California, but members live all over the world.

SVCGG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family historians improve their skills in using

technology for genealogy research.

PastFinder, the official publication of the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group, is published monthly except December. *PastFinder* is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter electronically by emailed download link. 