

# THE GEOGRAPHY OF GENEALOGY

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It is impossible to do effective family history research without understanding geography. Geography will often help you determine where to find records, it can help confirm family connections, and might even help you make calculated guesses about how your ancestors lived.

Geographic information comes in two basic forms: Maps and gazetteers. Maps are visual representations of areas, while gazetteers provide, in text form, details about communities, often including features such as railways, roads, churches and government offices. Think of them as geographic dictionaries.

Both resources can help you to find your city, town or village or help you determine the name of the relevant county or district. They are essential when dealing with census returns or old church records, which could list a variety of different small villages. They can help a researcher determine other resources to check, including voters lists, land records and newspapers, and where those resources might be located.

Clues to locations will be found in a wide variety of sources, including civil registration certificates, local histories, census returns, old directories, county atlases and newspapers.

Maps on the Internet have considerable differences in quality. They will help a researcher a bit, but a printed map is still often the best choice. Quality maps, both historic and modern, are available for most of the world.

There are many reprints of maps originally printed at various times over the past 300 years. Most of these maps covered full countries, or even larger areas. They showed major cities, and the names of regions. They did not show small villages. These old maps are usually not indexed; if you are trying to find a location for the first time, your best bet is often a modern atlas.

If your map of interest does not have an index, look for a modern map or atlas to get you into the right area, or check a gazetteer. There are many on the Internet (the Canadian federal site is one example) and in print form (such as the *Genealogical Gazetteer of England*).

High-quality maps have generally been available for only the past 150 years. Maps before that period were generally produced by private enterprise, and vary considerably in quality. Maps after about 1850 were done by armies, which had a vested interest in producing accurate cartographic data.

Maps might provide clues to where your ancestors would have attended school or church. They might also show the proximity of employment and shopping areas. Transportation routes might help you determine settlement patterns, or even give you a sense of the social circles of the day.

Look for rivers, lakes, hills, mountains and other physical features that could have had an influence on the lives of your ancestors. Were there forests nearby? Or was the ocean close to where they lived?

Since maps come in different scales, it's important to know which ones are best for which purpose.

- A map with a scale of 1:5,000 to 1:10,000 will usually show street names and major buildings. One of 1:25,000 scale will show neighborhoods, and one inch on the map will translate into about two-fifths of a mile on the ground. In other words, these maps will show in great detail your area of interest. In some cases, maps will show the outline of a house.

- A map of 1:100,000 to 1:200,000 scale will show regions, and is ideal for taking along on a research trip into the area. It will show your town or city in relation to its surroundings. There is not enough detail to show neighborhoods, and not enough room to show wide areas.

- Maps with a scale of 1:500,000, 1:1,000,000 or similar will cover a large area, but that coverage comes at a cost. They will miss the regional detail. These maps can still be of value, because they show the relationship of different cities and regions, and offer clues to migration routes.

You should never be satisfied with just one map. It is possible that you will need a half-dozen of them, of different scales and from different time periods, to get the best sense of an area. Sometimes, place names have changed over the years, so an old map will be needed to confirm a location. Remember, however, that to get the feel of an area, the precise date of a map is not as important as the detail and scale. Many rural areas had little evolution over the years. The time frame is most important if you are dealing with an area that has been completely changed, or if the place names have been changed.

Bear in mind that no map is a perfect representation of an area. Information had to be left out, and not every map has the same purpose. The topographical information on a mass-market map would not be good enough for a road builder; a road map would help anyone identify pipelines or power lines; a map of an electoral area might not have street names. Always try to determine the purpose of the map.

Maps drawn specifically for genealogical and local history research might show specific communities, or villages populated by certain ethnic groups. These maps can quickly help point researchers in the right direction, but usually miss topographical features and many communities. You must use these maps in conjunction with regular topographical maps.

## **Canada**

The best map series was produced by the federal government. There is also a federal series of gazetteers, with one for each province.

The government also has a gazetteer online, under Natural Resources Canada. It is found at <http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/geography/place-names/10786>

As the site explains: "Place names, also called geographical names, or toponyms, are the names we use to refer to the places and geographical features around us. They appear on maps and road signs, and we use them every day to give directions or describe where we are. Canada's naming authority is the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC). The GNBC Secretariat is located at Natural Resources Canada."

Canada's official names are stored in the Canadian Geographical Names Data Base. The online query tool provides many ways to search for current or former official

names. Query by name or by geographical coordinates; by a name's unique five-letter alphabetical code, or by rectangular area (bounding box). It is also possible to select a name from an alphabetical list of all the available names.

## United Kingdom

Researchers dealing with the United Kingdom will be able to use some of the best maps in the world. Remember that every area has evolved over the years, so names might have changed, or formerly rural communities might have disappeared under cities.

Most of the best maps for England and Wales are based on Ordnance Survey maps, which were started for military reasons in 1791. The Ordnance Survey is now a private company, but remains the valuable geographic resource it has been for more than two centuries. They were originally drawn at two and three inches to the mile, but the one-inch-to-one-mile series – at 1:63360 scale – is popular.

One of the best map websites is at the National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/>. It is possible to search for every community in the British Isles.

There are two specialty printed map series of note. The Alan Godfrey collection is made up of highly detailed reproductions maps from about 1890 to 1920. These maps show streets and the location of buildings, such as churches and industrial locations, as well as transportation systems. There are also Cassini maps, which also provide reprints of old maps. A large part of England is covered in a series with four maps, all of the same area but from different time periods.

Several different atlas series are in print, covering the entire country, regions, or counties. Note the variety of geographic districts in England and Wales. There are counties or shires, parishes, and hundreds, which were usually groups of parishes. Hundreds could be split between counties, and parishes could be split between hundreds.

Two reference works should be at the heart of any genealogical library.

One is the Phillimore *Atlas and Index of Parish Registers*, now in its third edition. It has a map of the entire United Kingdom with county boundaries before 1830. It contains topographical maps along with parish maps for each of the counties of England and Wales. The parish maps show the probate jurisdictions and date of commencement of the parish registers. The index shows the location and dates of coverage of parish registers and of various indexes.

The other is Frank Smith's *A Genealogical Gazetteer of England*, published in 1969, and based on the Samuel Lewis *A Topographical Dictionary of England* from 1831. Smith's work adds the date of commencement of registers for each parish and the name of the parish for all other entries.

Lewis's work is an excellent gazetteer that gives locations and descriptions of English places. Published in 1831, this gazetteer is available from Family History Library branches. Lewis also produced a topographical dictionary for Wales, and an atlas to accompany these gazetteers. The atlas has been reprinted as *A Genealogical Atlas of England and Wales*.

Look for these works on the Internet. Google Books, for example, has the 1831 edition of Lewis's *A Topographical Dictionary of England*, while British History Online has the 1848 edition. Both are free to use.

## Europe

Comprehensive maps are available for all countries in Europe, often through government mapping departments. There are also commercial road maps. On the Internet, consider Viamichelin as an alternative to Google Maps.

The basic rules for finding places are the same no matter what area you are dealing with. And despite what some may think, virtually every city, town and village in Europe can be found on a map or in a gazetteer. It's just a matter of sorting out where the place is, then finding the document that proves its existence.

The most common problem? Researchers don't have the correct place name. So gather as much information as possible, using every source at your disposal. Double-check. Don't rely on printed transcripts – for example, on the Ellis Island web site, always check the handwritten name. And while you are there, check for other people from the same village.

Remember that many place names have changed over the years, so determine the time frame of your source document. Some places have disappeared entirely, either swallowed up by larger communities nearby, or simply gone. Sometimes, records indicate a province, or an area, or a village name – and it's hard to determine which is which. It's possible that five different names all refer to the same place – but every different one can be a clue to help you find the correct location. The more names you find, the easier the search will be.

If you know the name of the neighbouring villages, it will be easier to pinpoint the village you're after. A cluster of villages can be like a fingerprint, creating a unique map reference. (Remember that many names were used many times, in many areas. The record is likely held by Alexandrowka; there are at least 800 places with that name in the former Soviet Union.)

Try to use the local language as much as possible, which means understanding the way each letter sounds. That can be a key to sorting out how a town name might have been spelled in an old record. Cyrillic is easy, when you set your mind to it. If you learn the sounds of 20 Russian letters, you will be able to find villages on most Russian maps. For starters: P sounds like R, C sounds like S, H sounds like N, and B sounds like V.

Be careful! Not every mapmaker followed the same rules! On many European maps, Greenwich was not zero degrees. There is also Ferro, 17 minutes and 40 seconds west of Greenwich; Pulkowo, with zero near St. Petersburg, Russia, and many more.

Gazetteers for virtually every area are available through the Family History Library and its branches. Gazetteers could have key information about administrative districts, churches, populations, proximity to railways, telegraph offices, post offices and more.

In European research, the most well-known gazetteer is Meyers Orts- und Verkehrslexikon des Deutschen Reich. It is available on microfiche at all Family History Centers, but is also available in a searchable website, <http://www.meyersgaz.org/>.