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Find your roots

Unexpected connections: Michelle Obama, John Dillinger, Catholic saints. Stories and surprises await those who trace their family history. By Peter Barnes

Since the 1980s, Allen McClain has followed a paper trail back in time, as his family's narrative unwinds and connects him to people on both sides of the Civil War and across the Atlantic. "As a kid, I was just fascinated with some old photographs my mother had in the living room," McClain

says. Soon, a trip to the library to hunt down the census records of his ancestors who appeared in the pictures evolved into a lifelong curiosity about his heritage.

Charting a family tree and gathering bits of family lore and history along the way has never been easier, as a wealth of online resources have made genealogy a very

popular and accessible pastime. “Just start with known information and then go to the unknown,” explains McClain. In his case, this method eventually led him to a widow’s pension from the National Archives that told the story of an ancestor who escaped slavery during the Civil War, then fought for the North. His widow, denied her pension while proving she was married before emancipation, received help from a land owner whose family history McClain also has been able to unearth. “He actually was a Confederate soldier at one time,” McClain says, adding that he even used genetic tests to link his family to earlier ancestors in Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Europe.

“A lot of us are sitting on a lot of family history without realizing it,” says Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, a professional genealogist who recently reconstructed Michelle Obama’s family tree and, a few years earlier, found a link between the families of Al Sharpton and Strom Thurmond.

Want to get in touch with your family’s past or simply see if you’re related to anyone interesting? Smolenyak suggests digging into old photos, diplomas, family Bibles and other documents. Then “get on the phone with any relatives who are even 20 minutes older than you, because they are living libraries,” she says.

From there, a number of computer programs and websites can help you build a family tree. A good starting point for finding the location of census, military and naturalization records is archives.gov/genealogy. FamilySearch.org, maintained by the Mormon Church, offers free access to records from sources such as the Social Security Death Index, and popular sites such as Ancestry.com offer access to millions of records for a fee.

“What used to take me months would take a new person maybe an hour or so to find,” Smolenyak says, but she’s quick to note that online records represent only a fraction of what’s still on paper.

Mitchell Goozé, the former president of

Teledyne Components, who now heads Santa Clara, Calif.–based Customer Manufacturing Group, first dabbled in genealogy by building a database to help reconstruct his family’s Jewish, Eastern European lineage. “It’s been very enlightening, and I’m doing it virtually all online,” he says. In addition to using the message boards where genealogists often connect with others working on the same pedigree, Goozé has been able to track down ancestors by sending messages to people on Facebook who have the same rare last names as his family.

Over the years, he has also found a trove of interesting people and places connected to his wife. Among the branches of her family tree is one leading to John Dillinger’s relatives, and another directed them on a trip to the upstate New York home of a small Native American tribe. Yet another family name connected Goozé’s



wife with scads of European royalty and even a couple dozen Catholic saints.

“We can pretty much go to any country now in Europe and easily find places she’s tied to,” Goozé says. This hobby connects people not just to their relatives, but also to a world of fascinating history and geography to explore—and that’s a priceless reward. **E**

Houston freelance writer PETER BARNES’ lineage includes eloping grandparents, failed Irish farmers and a rumored blues musician named Boo Boo Barnes.

Genealogy resources

Ancestry.com

While it provides access to millions of records and easy-to-use tools, Ancestry.com requires a fee (six levels, from \$12.95 to \$29.95 per month).

Archives.gov/genealogy

This is a helpful starting point for finding the location of census, military and naturalization records.

Familysearch.org

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