

BEWARE! The Enchanted Forest: Perils & Pitfalls of Online Trees

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QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED HERE

- What are online trees?
- Where are the trees found?
- Are all trees created equal?
- How can a tree be assessed for quality?
- Should we even look at online trees?
- Should you put YOUR tree online?



WHAT ARE ONLINE TREES? THEY . . .

- Are posted online by a person or family
- Require Internet access to view
- Are not supposed to have any living people listed (with the possible exception of those who have given permission for that listing)
- Usually cannot be altered by anyone but those authorized (with the exception of wikis)
- Can be viewed by anyone (if made public)
- Can have data “lifted” and placed on others’ webpages or their genealogy software (if public)

WHERE ARE THE TREES FOUND?

MOST POPULAR SITES . . .

Ancestry.com

MyHeritage

FindMyPast

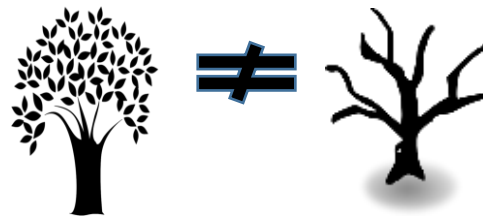
AND WIKI SITES . . .

WikiTree

GeniTree (world tree)

FamilySearch

ALL TREES ARE *NOT* CREATED EQUAL



Note: Information provided here was accurate as of March 2022

AND PRIVATELY POSTED TREES

Public

Private, by registration (and sometimes fee) only

Some, though not all, created with genealogy software

WHEN CAN ONLINE TREES BE USED AS SOURCES?

- When you have carefully assessed them
- When citations and other obvious indications (attached documents) are included
- When you can contact the tree's owner
- Best course of action: Check the links and attached documents for yourself

AVOID USING TREES THAT . . .

- Use only other trees as sources
- Have no credible sources
- Provide inconsistent, contradictory, or obviously incorrect information (e.g., birth occurring after the person's death, etc.)
- Are posted by someone you cannot contact
- Have non-verified citations or don't suggest references to be checked

HOW CAN A TREE BE TESTED FOR QUALITY?

- Compare it to information you already know
- Investigate the sources provided (sometimes people use incorrect sources or make errors; sometimes links to evidence are "broken")
- Make certain that the tree owner is someone who can be contacted

WIKI TREES

- Can be added to or deleted from by anyone (though some require "membership")
- Can foster an interaction with a family member
- Should include clear source information to clarify your accuracy
- Might not even be recognizable when others are done grafting on branches to your family

FamilySearch World Tree Wiki

- Is open to the public as a Wiki (positive and negative)
- Permits open dialog with others working on same line
- Provides hints for records at FamilySearch and other locations
- If alerted, fixes errors
- Optional opportunities to email contributors
- Adds computer-generated claims independent of an individual (positive and negative)
- Electronically monitors a family name or tree; sends you notification if someone alters the data (this, if you request that communication)
- Only the people who put up the information can see themselves (privacy for the living)

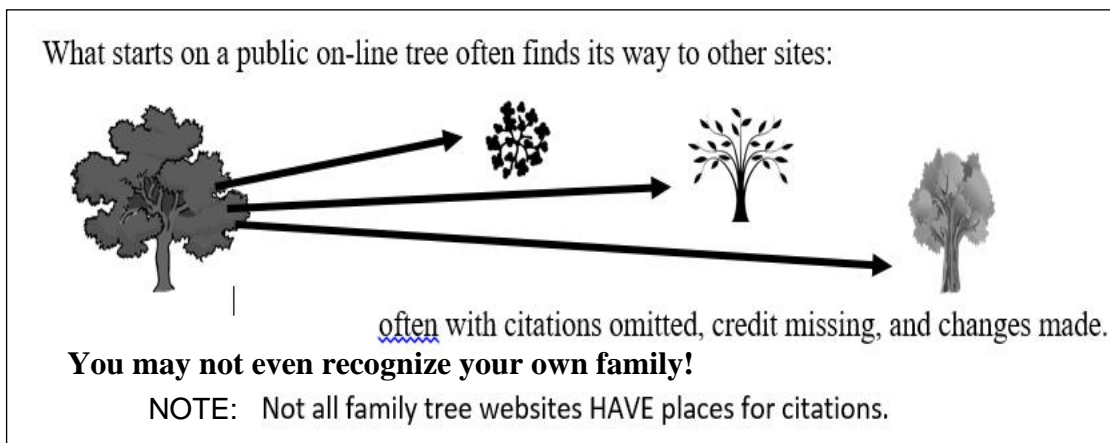


HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE CAN TRUST AN ONLINE TREE?

1. Assess the sources that are provided
 - Check them for yourself! – Are they credible?
 - Cite the sources that YOU have viewed
2. Make certain that there is some way to contact the tree-owner
 - Understand that quoting someone else's tree is even more uncertain if you don't know who created it

THERE ARE LOTS OF ONLINE OPTIONS FOR PLACING YOUR TREE

- It is up to you to make certain all the data is included and accurate
- Check the online locations before choosing where to post your tree



WHEN CITING AN ONLINE TREE, INCLUDE

- Title of the tree
- Author of the tree (include contact info, but in a “private” notation)
- Date tree was created (if available)
- Where it is found online (Ancestry, FamilySearch, etc.); recognize that URLs often change
- Date you accessed the tree
- Reason to use the tree (“Smith family”)
- Clarify if the tree is “documented” or “undocumented” and, in the comments section, identify why you believe the tree is credible

IF YOUR ONLY TREE IS ONLINE, WHAT IF

- You need/want backup copies?
- The Internet is “down” or not available?
- The host company/platform goes out of business?
- You want privacy to list all the children/grandchildren?
- Your WIKI tree is hijacked & your data is altered or gone?
- You want to show it to someone where there is no online option?

Don't let an online tree be your **ONLY** tree; be sure to use non-Internet-dependent genealogy software to secure your data & list living family members.

A not-so-obvious advantage of having an online tree is that, with certain directives and “passwords,” constructing the data as a collaborative tree – with children, cousins, or others – is fairly easy to enable.

A (Very) Few Online Resources for Additional Opinions and Thoughts

- Crume, Rick, "8 Tips for Better Privacy Online," *Family Tree Magazine*, online, reprinted from March 2011 issue. Retrieved 10 March 2022 from <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/strategies/better-privacy-online/>.
- The Find my Past Team, "Should you Build your Family Tree Online or Offline?" On *Find My Past* Blog, 1 April 2020. Retrieved 10 March 2022 from <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/blog/family-tree/offline-family-tree-genealogy-history-physical>.
- Genealogy Computer Society of Georgia. "Put Your Family Tree on the Web (and Visit Sites Where Others Have Published Theirs)." Retrieved 27 November 2015 from http://gencomputer.org/put_web.html.
- Lee, Devon Noel, "3 Reasons Not to Use the FamilySearch Family Tree," *Family History Fanatics* Blog, undated. Retrieve 10 March 2022 from <https://www.familyhistoryfanatics.com/3-reasons-not-to-use-the-familysearch-family-tree>.
- Morton, Sunny. "Family Tree Etiquette: Online Private v. Public Trees." On Lisa Louise Cooke's *Genealogy Gems*, 26 September 2014. Retrieved 27 November 2015 from <http://lisalouisecooke.com/2014/09/family-tree-etiquette/>.
- O'Neal, Elizabeth Swanay, "1 Thing You Should Fix Now on Your Ancestry Family Tree," *Heart of the Family* website, undated. Retrieved 10 March 2022 from <https://www.thefamilyheart.com/fix-ancestry-family-tree/>.
- Palermo, Lynn, "Create a Family Tree Online – The Pros and Cons," *The Armchair Genealogist*, January 2010. Retrieved 5 January 2018 from <http://www.thearmchairgenealogist.com/2010/01/create-family-tree-online-pros-and-cons.html>
- Powell, Kimberly. "Top 8 Places to Put Your Family History Online." *About Parenting*. Retrieved 5 January 2018 from <https://www.thoughtco.com/places-to-put-family-tree-online-1422318> (outdated info on the locations, but potentially helpful, general, info).
- Searchforancestors.com. "Use Family Tree Databases to Find Your Family." *Ancestor Search . . . Find Your Family History: Getting Started in Family History*, 2015. Retrieved 27 November 2015 from <http://www.searchforancestors.com/gettingstarted/familytrees.html>.
- Stack Exchange. "How Should I Publish My Family Tree Online?" *Genealogy & Family History (beta)*, 20 November 2012. Retrieved 27 November 2015 from <http://genealogy.stackexchange.com/questions/2213/how-should-i-publish-my-family-tree-online>.
- Trauring, Philip. "What's Your Favorite Online Family Tree Site?" *B & F: Jewish Genealogy and More*, 17 February 2011. Retrieved 27 November 2015 from <http://bloodandfrogs.com/2011/02/whats-your-favorite-online-family-tree.html>.
- Wright, Matt. "Family Tree is Available to All Users." *FamilySearch Blog*, 12 April 2013. Retrieved 27 November 2015 from <https://familysearch.org/blog/en/family-tree-users/>.

Note: This is a slightly updated listing. There are many, many more articles, blogs, and information (pros and cons) about online family trees. Consider the above to be just a starting point. Google "Family Trees Online" for state-of-the-art information.

For more information on where to post or access trees, check Cyndi's List: <https://www.cyndislist.com/family-trees/> (this will represent the most up-to-date information)