

Writing a Biography



By ALookThruTime

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What is a biography?

[Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) defines a biography as a “written account of a person’s life.”

A biography can be as short as a sentence or a full length book {some individuals may need multiple volumes}. A short biography tells the basic facts of that person’s life. Longer biographies include detailed information, often in story form.

What is the difference between a biography and autobiography?

An autobiography is written by the person the biography is about.

A biography can be written by anyone else. That can be someone the subject knows {such as a spouse, child, friend or acquaintance} or a stranger.

Why write a biography?

There are many reasons to write a biography. A celebrity might write an autobiography to share with their fans. Other people in the public eye {politicians, religious figures, business moguls, speakers, infamous figures} may have a biography written about them to share their journey and accomplishments.

In genealogy, a biography or autobiography is written to profile the life of that individual. This may only be of interest to family members, but at least future generations have a written record of that person’s life. There are so many ancestors that have come and gone. We are often lucky to have the birth and death information. People want to know about where they came from. They want to know about the accomplishments of the parents and grandparents that came before them. They want to know why that individual made some of the decisions they made throughout their life.

Types of Biographies

Popular biographies—often these would include someone famous or a celebrity

Historical biographies—would include a historical figure; such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Henry VIII, Cleopatra. These are often seen in historical fiction, where extensive research has been done to effortlessly bring the subject to life in their time period.

Literary biographies—is dedicated to literature; often compiled in an encyclopedia which is sorted by genre, period or topic. These usually focus on British or American literature.

Reference biographies—is a website, book or form of reference that contains a comprehensive collection of biographies. These can be searched by genre, topic, etc.

Fictional biographies—is about a real person but includes extensive embellishments and untruths. When dealing with genealogy, this is the kind we do not want. If you decide to use an ancestor in a story and make up the events and information, you are writing fiction, but a biography.

What do I need to write my biography?

You will need to find: Basic information about this person's life {see sources below}

There are some individuals where you will find a wealth of information. There are other ancestor's where you will find little if any information. I have one ancestor that I've often wondered if he really existed. All I have is his name in the family Bible and one census record.

Who will be interested?

Unless your subject is famous, most likely this is for your immediate or extended family. You are writing a biography of a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle or other relative.

I find it so easy to get excited about the ancestor or subject but please remember that not everyone is going to share your enthusiasm. This is especially true if the subject is not a personal friend, relative and a complete stranger to the person you're speaking to.

Questions to consider before you start writing?

- Why do I want to write this biography?
- What characteristics, attributes or traits do I want to discover?
- What effect did s/he have on other people?
- What stories from their life best express what you want to share?
- What events shaped this person's life?
- What obstacles/risks did s/he experience?
- How did this person make the world a better place?

Where do I find my sources?

There are two types of sources:

Primary—includes information in that own person's words. These are original, firsthand accounts of the event and/or person.

If the individual is still alive the best place to start is with an interview

Other primary sources include: letters, diaries, official records, will, marriage record, military record works of art {this would include a family quilt, doll, woodwork, etc}, pictures, notebooks, speech, birth and death records, family bibles, naturalization records, or newspaper articles/accounts

Secondary—is information provided by someone else. These accounts can also interpret or analyze a primary source.

Is a child, grandchild, sibling, niece/nephews, cousin still alive? interview this person about the life of this relative.

Other source might include: other biographies, census records*, histories {city, county, church, family, etc}, vital records not present for or done later.

*census records could be a primary or secondary source depending on who gave the information. If it was the family then it is primary. If a neighbor gives the information then it is secondary. Since we have no way to know and these records often have errors, I've listed the records as secondary.

Where do I start?

- To write a good biography, begin with an outline of information you want to cover
- Pull out any interviews. You may want to pull out your interview questions and answer them yourself. Use these to refresh your memory about what you know about the subject.
- Review any recordings or videos.
- Review photos and letters to jog your memory
- Start writing freely about this individual. You will be amazed at the memories that are jogged and the information that comes out. You can then go back and review this material to decide what you want to keep and what you want to get rid of.

Making an outline

- You will want to make an outline.
- If the biography is going to be long or a book you will want to create chronological subtitles or chapter headings
- You can organize your biography based on time periods, locations lived, people in life, accomplishments, events, etc.
- Make a list of all of the special time periods or events of that have taken place in the subjects life.
- Add dates, names and other identifying data
- Go back and add more in-depth information
- Expand each event as far as possible. Explain why or how this event affect the person's life.
- If necessary go to your sources and do research.

Double check any identifying information

- You will want to double check all necessary facts such as dates, names, location, etc.
- Often people will keep these on note cards
- Check your records and the primary source to double check

Writing a biography

- Most biographies are written in chronological order.
- If the individual has a major accomplishment, you may want to start with a story about that accomplishment. Then tie that back in to the person's birth or early years and work chronologically forward. This is a great technique if the biography is going to be long or in book form.
- When writing a biography you want more than a bunch of names and dates. Get in touch with the subjects personality. Add character, personal or interesting memories, tidbits, etc.

Information you want to include in a biography:

- ✓ Name
- ✓ dates {birth, marriage, death}
- ✓ Parents and siblings
- ✓ Spouse and children
- ✓ education and schools
- ✓ jobs and career information
- ✓ divorce
- ✓ hobbies and interest
- ✓ family traditions/legends
- ✓ friendships
- ✓ medical history
- ✓ military service
- ✓ moves
- ✓ personality and values
- ✓ personal characteristics
- ✓ pets, recreation
- ✓ religion
- ✓ travels
- ✓ important accomplishments

Historic events:

- Natural disasters {hurricane, earthquake}
- 9/11
- Kennedy Assassination
- Challenger
- WWII
- Great Depression
- Man's first walk on the moon

Writing:

- ❖ Rough draft—this is the first draft you write. Write freely and allow the words to flow.
- ❖ Edit—you will go through your draft and cut things that don't work
- ❖ Revise—rework your draft again. Reword sentences that don't make sense. Make other changes that need to be made.
- ❖ Let sit few days or weeks and then go back to it—give yourself a breather. When you come back to your draft, it will be fresh.
- ❖ End on high notes/people don't want to read all doom and gloom—find a positive note to end on

Writing tips:

- ❖ Start with a strong sentence—start with a sentence that will grab the reader’s attention
- ❖ use active words—show the action and keep things moving
- ❖ show/don’t tell—this is one of the first things we’re taught in writing classes; show the action, don’t tell.
 - Ex. Tell—Jane is pregnant show—The baby in Jane is growing larger and larger every day. Jane’s abdomen has extended with the babe inside and her skirt won’t fit around her figure any longer.
- ❖ Detail—use as much detail as possible; search for a list of adjectives and adverbs to use

What should a bio include?

- You will want to include as much information as possible
- Your biography or story should have a beginning, middle and end
- Work on a lead in to a story. When you’re finished find a way to lead out {smoothly transition} to your next story or bit of information.
- You want to keep a steady flow and not make the biography feel choppy

Things to remember

- There are plenty of biographies in the encyclopedia you can use as a guide
- Read biographies/autobiographies to get a feel of how to write one
- You can also check county or family histories
- People outside of your family may not be interested

Things to keep in mind

- ✓ Not everyone will be interested in everything
- ✓ Start with a hook to draw people in
- ✓ Make sure dates, settings, names, and other identifying information is correct
- ✓ While something may be important to you, others may not see it that way
- ✓ Include struggles, weaknesses and heartaches
- ✓ Include strengths, accomplishments, accolades, joys and good memories
- ✓ End each chapter with a hook to keep the reader wanting to read on
- ✓ Don't make the biography so long that no one will want to read it
- ✓ If writing for children, make the story a length that will hold their interest
- ✓ Add humor to the story
- ✓ Include information about career and work history
- ✓ Include events and beliefs that shaped the subjects life
- ✓ Include other people that infected the subjects life
- ✓ Show the action instead of telling about it
- ✓ Use phrases and terms you used in that day {language changes from one decade to the next}
- ✓ When you get on a roll keep writing, you can fill in the blanks later

Things to Consider

- You can build a relationship with your children and grandchildren
- Writing an autobiography allows them to get to know you better
- These stories may prompt conversations and more memories
- Maybe your grandchildren will want to know more about life before TV, in a one room schoolhouse, before electricity, using an outhouse, during the Great Depression, etc.
- If you do not share these stories who will

Preserve Your Work

- ❖ *Back up your work*—you always want to back up your work
- ❖ *Print at least one copy and find a fireproof place to store*
- ❖ *Save a backup copy for the computer*—I strongly encourage you to save the biography somewhere on your computer. You never know when you will want to go back to it or even to improve upon it.
- ❖ *Think about how you want to share your biography*—do you want it published in a book, printed just for your family, emailed to family, posted online, etc.
- ❖ *Is this part of a greater family history?*—will you be writing a biography for all of your ancestors? Will this be included in your family history? What else will you include?
- ❖ *Do you want to publish your own autobiography?*

Let's Write A Biography Together

After much debate with myself, I decided to use a public figure for this example. I also used online sources, only because that way *you*, the reader, have the chance to double check them yourself. There were many public figures I researched, but most of them would have required a full length book and that's not the goal here. I just want you to discover how to write a strong biography of yourself or your ancestor. So I finally decided on Betsy Ross. I was able to find enough information without having too much for our purposes.

First think you want to do is to check your sources. I provided a list of these earlier on. Figure out the best system for you, whether it's on the computer, using note cards or another method.

Notice that I checked more than one source. This allowed me to double check information, find information not available in the first source and discover information I might have overlooked the first time. Here are the key points and sources I used {make sure you **ALWAYS** keep a list of your sources}.

<http://www.biography.com/people/betsy-ross-9464205>

4th generation American
born 1752 in Philadelphia
raised in Quaker faith
split with family when married outside quaker faith
married John Ross
Ross started own upholstery business
legend holds that President George Washington requested she make first American flag
no evidence
birth name: Elizabeth Griscom
born January 1, 1752
8th of 17 children
attended quaker schools
learned sewing and crafts
Ross anglican and marrying outside Quaker faith strictly forbidden
married Ross in 1772
John killed in 1776 when gunpowder exploded during militia duty
Betsy kept upholstery business going
worked day and night to make flags for Pennsylvania
married Joseph Ausburn, a sailor in 1777
1781, Ausburn captured by British and died in prison
1783, Betsy married John Claypoole
Claypoole and Ausburn in prison together--Claypoole delivered Ausburn's farewells
John died 34 yrs later after a long disability {1817}

Betsy died on Jan 30, 1836; age 84
grandson, Robert Morris, memories published in 1873
historians today say she did not make the first flag
http://womenshistory.about.com/od/rossbetsy/a/betsy_ross.htm
Betsy demonstrated on a 1776 visit how to cut a 5 point star with a single clip of the scissors
when fabric folded correctly
to George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross, uncle of her husband
she was a flag maker
paid in 1777 by the Pennsylvania State Navy Board for making "ship's colours, &c."
parents: Samuel and Rebecca Griscom
reburied in the Free Quaker Burying Ground in 1857
<http://www.usflag.org/about.betsy.ross.html>
embroidered shirt ruffles for George Washington
Washington wanted a national standard made for the use of the army in 1779
money to purchase the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia was raised by selling ten-cent
subscriptions
http://www.betsyrosshouse.org/hist_woman/
trained upholsterer
met Ross when both were apprentices
on November 4, 1773, Betsy and John fled across the Delaware River to Hugg's Tavern in
Gloucester, New Jersey where they married without the blessing of her family and fellow
Quakers.
Ross and Betsy had no children together
Ausburn and Betsy had 2 daughters: Zilla and Eliza
Zilla died at 9 mos while he was in prison
Eilza died while he was in prison
Ausburn died in 1782
Betsy and Claypoole married on May 8, 1783
a year later Betsy returned to her Quaker roots
Society of Free Quakers, supported America's fight for freedom
Betsy and Claypoole had 5 daughters; 4 living to adulthood
1793 her mother, father and sister died within days of yellow fever
she raised her nieced in
1812, Betsy and John's widowed daughter Clarissa, moved in w/her 5 children and 1 more on the
way
John disabled due to earlier injuries
retired from upholstery biz when 76 yrs old
lived on daughter, Susanna's farm aft retirement in Abington
1833-completely blind
lived last 3 yrs w/daughter Jane in Philadelphia
<http://historicphiladelphia.org/betsy-ross-house/woman/>
Samuel Griscom--successful carpenter
apprentice to John Webster
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betsy_Ross
confirmed other sources
<http://www.ushistory.org/betsy/flaglife.html>

She has been buried in three different locations: Free Quaker burial ground at South 5th St. near Locust, Mt. Moriah Cemetery, and now on Arch Street in the courtyard adjacent to the Betsy Ross House.

5 daughter of John and Betsy: Clarissa Sidney, Susannah, Rachel, Jane, and Harriet, who died at nine months

Now that we have all of our points, let's organize them. I did this by key points and people in her life. Depending on your subject, decide the largest events or people in their life to organize your points.

Outline

Early Years

parents: Samuel and Rebecca
4th generation American
born 1752 in Philadelphia
raised in Quaker faith
birth name: Elizabeth Griscom
born January 1, 1752
8th of 17 children
attended Quaker schools
learned sewing and crafts
Samuel Griscom--successful carpenter
apprentice to John Webster

John Ross

split with family when married outside Quaker faith
married John Ross
Ross started own upholstery business
Ross anglican and marrying outside Quaker faith strictly forbidden
married Ross in 1772
John killed in 1776 when gunpowder exploded during militia duty
Betsy kept upholstery business going
trained upholsterer
met Ross when both were apprentices
on November 4, 1773, Betsy and John fled across the Delaware River to Hugg's Tavern in Gloucester, New Jersey where they married without the blessing of her family and fellow Quakers.
Ross and Betsy had no children together

The Flag

legend holds that President George Washington requested she make first American flag
no evidence
Betsy demonstrated on a 1776 visit how to cut a 5 point star with a single clip of the scissors when fabric folded correctly
to George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross, uncle of her husband
she was a flag maker
paid in 1777 by the Pennsylvania State Navy Board for making "ship's colours, &c."
Washington wanted a national standard made for the use of the army in 1779

Joseph Ausburn

married Joseph Ausburn, a sailor in 1777

1781, Ausburn captured by British and died in prison
Ausburn and Betsy had 2 daughters: Zilla and Eliza
Zilla died at 9 mos while he was in prison
Eliza died while he was in prison
Ausburn died in 1782

John Claypoole

1783, Betsy married John Claypoole
Claypoole and Ausbrn in prison together--Claypoole delivered Ausburn's farewells
John died 34 yrs later after a long disability {1817}
Betsy died on Jan 30, 1836; age 84
5 daughter of John and Betsy: Clarissa Sidney, Susannah, Rachel, Jane, and Harriet, who died at
nine months
Betsy and Claypoole married on May 8, 1783
a year later Betsy returned to her Quaker roots
Society of Free Quakers, supported America's fight for freedom
Betsy and Claypoole had 5 daughters; 4 living to adulthood
1793 her mother, father and sister died within days of yellow fever
she raised her niece moved in
1812, Betsy and John's widowed daughter Clarissa, moved in w/her 5 children and 1 more on the
way
John disabled due to earlier injuries
retired from upholstery biz when 76 yrs old
lived on daughter, Susanna's farm aft retirement in Abington
1833-completely blind
lived last 3 yrs w/daughter Jane in Philadelphia

Other

grandson, Robert Morris, memories published in 1873
historians today say she did not make the first flag
reburied in the Free Quaker Burying Ground in 1857
embroidered shirt ruffles for George Washington
money to purchase the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia was raised by selling ten-cent
She has been buried in three different locations: Free Quaker burial ground at South 5th St. near
Locust, Mt. Moriah Cemetery, and now on Arch Street in the courtyard adjacent to the Betsy
Ross House.

Now that you have your outline, you're ready to write your biography. Use your voice and style in your writing. Before you read mine, try writing your own.

Betsy Ross is best known as the woman that made the first American Flag. While historians disagree on this fact, which was perpetrated by her grandson, Robert Morris in 1873, she still led an interesting life at the time our country fought for freedom. Betsy Ross was named Elizabeth Griscom on January 1, 1752 to her busy parents, Samuel and Rebecca Griscom. Elizabeth was the eighth of seventeen children born to her third generation American parents. They were Pennsylvanian Quakers, living in Philadelphia. Elizabeth attended the Quaker schools and learned the art of sewing and crafts at an early age. Her father was a successful and skilled carpenter. He taught Elizabeth the skills of being a carpenter beginning at a young age. Elizabeth apprenticed with the John Webster. While working with Mr. Webster she met another apprentice, John Ross. The two became friends and fell in love. John Ross was an Anglican and Elizabeth split with her family when they married. Marrying outside the Quaker faith was strictly forbidden and they did not have the blessing or attendance of her family, friends or fellow Quakers at their wedding. On November 4, 1773 Betsy and John fled across the Delaware River and were married at Hugg's Tavern in Gloucester, New Jersey. John started his own upholstery business and Elizabeth {or Betsy} worked with him. The couple had not been blessed with children when John was serving on militia duty in 1776. While serving his country, John was killed when the gunpowder he was working with exploded. By the age of twenty-four, Betsy was left a widow. She continued to run the upholstery business, she and John owned. Betsy was a skilled seamstress and embroidered shirt ruffles for General George Washington. Legend dictates that when General Washington visited her in 1776, she folded her fabric showed him how to cut a five point star in a single clip. When General George Washington, Robert Morris and her late husband's uncle, George Ross, visited General Washington requested she make America's first flag. There is no evidence towards either of these events and current historians dispute these accounts. However, this legend has made her memorable centuries later and listed in the history books. We do know that Betsy was paid in 1777 to for sewing flags by the Pennsylvania State Navy Board. The accounts show for "ship's colours, etc.". That same year she married a sailor, Joseph Ausburn. The couple had two daughters together, Zilla and Eliza. In 1781, Joseph was captured by the British. While in prison he was with an old friend of Betsy's John Claypoole. While Joseph Ausburn was in prison Betsy gave birth to their daughter, Eliza. Joseph also never knew that his daughter, Zilla, died at the age of nine months. This must have been a very difficult time for Betsy and was only made more difficult when her husband died while in prison in 1782. After being released from prison, John Claypoole visited Betsy to deliver Joseph Ausburn's farewells. The couple rekindled their friendship and married the next year on May 8, 1783. A year after they were married, Betsy returned to her Quaker roots. The Society of Free Quakers were strong supporters in America's fight for freedom. The couple had five daughters, Clarissa Sidney, Susannah, Rachel, Jane and Harriet, who died at nine months of age. In 1793, Betsy's mother, father, and sister all died of yellow fever within years of one another. Betsy's niece moved in and the couple raised her as a daughter of their own. At some point John became disabled from earlier injuries he sustained, most likely during the Revolutionary War. In 1812, their daughter Clarissa was widowed. She was expecting her sixth child and moved her family in with her parents. John died five years later in 1817. The couple

had been married for thirty-four years. In 1828, at the age of 76, Betsy retired from her upholstery business. After her retirement, she moved in with her daughter Susanna on a farm in Abington. By 1833, Betsy was completely blind and went to live with her daughter Jane in Philadelphia. Betsy entered her eternal rest on January 30, 1836. She has been buried in three different locations. In 1857 she was laid to rest in the Free Quaker Burying Group which is adjacent to the Betsy Ross House. Money was raised to purchase the house she lived in and the house is now a historical museum. Regardless of her contribution to the flag, she is an American Patriot. She's a reminder of a time gone by and a way of line. Her historic home allows us to remember the sacrifice that so many of our patriots made for our freedom.

Now that we've written the biography we can review what's been written, edit, add to and embellish feelings and actions. Let's look at some of the notes I made.

Betsy Ross is best known as the woman that made the first American Flag. While historians disagree on this fact, which was perpetrated by her grandson, Robert Morris in 1873, she still led an interesting life at the time our country fought for freedom. Betsy Ross was named Elizabeth Griscom on January 1, 1752 to her busy parents, Samuel and Rebecca Griscom. Elizabeth was the eighth of seventeen children born to her third generation American parents. They were Pennsylvanian Quakers, living in Philadelphia. Elizabeth attended the Quaker schools and learned the art of sewing and crafts at an early age. Her father was a successful and skilled carpenter. He taught Elizabeth the skills of being a carpenter beginning as a young child. Elizabeth apprenticed with John Webster. While apprenticing with Mr. John Webster she met another apprentice, John Ross. The two became friends and fell in love. John Ross was an Anglican and Elizabeth split with her family when they married. Marrying outside the Quaker faith was strictly forbidden and they did not have the blessing or attendance of her family, friends or fellow Quakers at their wedding. On November 4, 1773, Betsy and John fled across the Delaware River and were married at Hugg's Tavern in Gloucester, New Jersey. John started his own upholstery business and Elizabeth {or Betsy} worked with him. The couple had not been blessed with children when John was serving on militia duty in 1776. While serving his country, John was killed when the gunpowder he was working with exploded. By the age of twenty-four, Betsy was left a widow. She continued to run the upholstery business, she and John owned. Betsy was a skilled seamstress and embroidered shirt ruffles for General George Washington. Legend dictates that when General Washington visited her in 1776, she folded her fabric showed him how to cut a five point star in a single clip. When General George Washington, Robert Morris and her late husband's uncle, George Ross, visited General Washington requested she make America's first flag. There is no evidence towards either of these events and current historians dispute these accounts. However, this legend has made her memorable centuries later and listed in the history books. We do know that Betsy was paid in 1777 to for sewing flags by the Pennsylvania State Navy Board. The accounts show for "ship's colours, etc.". That same year she married a sailor, Joseph Ausburn. The couple had two daughters together, Zilla and Eliza. In 1781, Joseph was captured by the British. While in prison he was with an old friend of Betsy's John Claypoole. While Joseph Ausburn was in prison Betsy gave birth to their daughter, Eliza. Joseph also never knew that his daughter, Zilla, died at the age of nine months. This must have been a very difficult time for Betsy and was only made more difficult when her husband died while in prison in 1782. After being released from

Comment [m1]: Notice I started with a strong sentence. I want to grab the reader.

Comment [m2]: I began with the legend and how it started here to keep you interested instead of at the end.

Comment [m3]: I combined these sentences

Comment [m4]: Instead of saying they were childless, I incorporated the fact in with other information

Comment [m5]: Describes her ability

Comment [m6]: Action word

Comment [m7]: If there is controversy don't shy away from it. Find a comfortable way to approach the subject.

Comment [m8]: Use quotations when quoting a source or person

Comment [m9]: My source did not say this, but put yourself in her shoes. How would you feel? Often you can empathize to come up with some idea of thoughts or feelings.

prison, John Claypoole visited Betsy to deliver Joseph Ausburn's farewells. The couple rekindled their friendship and married the next year on May 8, 1783. A year after they were married, Betsy returned to her Quaker roots. The Society of Free Quakers were strong supporters in America's fight for freedom. The couple had five daughters, Clarissa Sidney, Susannah, Rachel, Jane and Harriet, who died at nine months of age. In 1793, tragedy struck again when Betsy's mother, father, and sister all died of yellow fever within years of one another. Betsy's niece moved in and the couple raised her as a daughter of their own. At some point John became disabled from earlier injuries he sustained, most likely during the Revolutionary War. In 1812, their daughter Clarissa was widowed. She was expecting her sixth child and moved her family in with her parents. John died five years later in 1817, after thirty-four years of marriage. In 1828, at the age of 76, Betsy retired from her upholstery business. After her retirement, she moved in with her daughter Susanna on a farm in Abington. By 1833, Betsy was completely blind and went to live with her daughter Jane in Philadelphia. Betsy entered her eternal rest on January 30, 1836. She has been buried in three different locations. In 1857 she was laid to rest in the Free Quaker Burying Group which is adjacent to the Betsy Ross House. Money was raised to purchase the house she lived in and the house is now a historical museum. Regardless of her contribution to the flag, she is an American Patriot. She's a reminder of a time gone by and a way of line. Her historic home allows us to remember the sacrifice that so many of our patriots made for our freedom.

Comment [m10]: I'm once again using supposition here, but isn't that what most people would do?

Comment [m11]: Important historic event she lived through

Comment [m12]: Possibly her husband was killed in the War of 1812. I did not mention this fact, but you could if you wanted.

Comment [m13]: Notice I edited this sentence from our earlier draft.

Comment [m14]: Instead of saying 'she died' I found another way to express the occasion; I could have also said 'entered her heavenly home', 'was reunited in eternity with her family', etc.

Comment [m15]: I ended on a positive note

I hope that by going through the stage and writing a biography together has been a help to you.

Before we close let's write a genealogy biography.

For the sake of this tutorial I'm going to give you a list of sources I made up.

Name: Andrew Davis

Bible: birthday—January 16, 1842; death—September 29, 1915

Marriage bond: married Anne Cunningham on May 3, 1881

Place of Residence: Asheville, NC

1850 census: living with parents, William and Jane Davis
siblings—William, 12; Mary, 10; Jane, 6; Margaret, 4; Jesse, 2

Also on the 1860 and 1870 census with his parents

Civil War service for the confederate army; his brother, William, killed at the
battle of Bulls Run

1880 census: married to Anne; children: Andrew, 6; William, 4; Anne, 2; Jane 1
month; unable to read; occupation: farmer

1897—letter Andrew wrote to his brother, Jesse

1900 census—Andrew and Anne living alone; he works in the textile mill

Church Records: 1901 called as a Deacon at the Baptist Church

Have a quilt and doll {named Dolly} Anne sewed

Have Andrew's gun and family Bible

1910 census: Andrew, Anne, Jane Parker {listed widow daughter}; Jane's two
children

Death certificate: mother's maiden name Alexander; cause of death: heart attack

Will list the married name of his daughters

Interview with granddaughter, Amanda Parker Peterson

How would you write this biography?
Here's what I wrote:

Andrew Davis lived through a turbulent time in America's history. He was made of strong stock and a self-taught man. Andrew was born on January 16, 1842 in Asheville, NC. He resided in this area for all of his life. He was the third child of William Davis and Jane Alexander, of the famous Alexander family of the area. He had an older brother, William and a older sister, Jane. His younger siblings were Jane, Margaret and Jesse. When the Civil War broke out Andrew picked up his gun and enlisted to fight with the Confederates. The eighteen year old, five foot nine inches young man must have been excited to go fight the Yankees. Can you see his blue eyes sparkling beneath his auburn hair? He must have been full of hope and adventures, only to be met with the ravages, hardships and realities of war. His brother, William, was killed at the Battle of Bulls Run on July 21, 1861 in Virginia. Andrew fought alongside his brother and one can imagine his despair when his brother was shot and died. Most probably had the duty of sharing this sad news with his parents. He served in the war and was taken a prisoner, being released on April 12, 1865. One can only speculate about the long journey back home. This man with threadbare clothing, little to no money and suffering from exhaustion. After his time in prison he may have been emaciated and suffering from lice, as this was very common for prisoners of war. After the end of the Civil War, Andrew returned to Asheville where he began to farm with his father. He married Anne Cunningham on May 3, 1881. The couple was married by Anne's father, Rev. James Cunningham. The couple had four children, Andrew, William, Anne and Jane. According to the 1880 census, Andrew was illiterate but we have a letter he wrote to his brother, Jesse, in 1897. Somewhere during this seventeen year span he learned to read and write. He farmed alongside his father until his father's death in 1899. In 1900 he was working as a loom operator in the textile mill. Andrew had a strong constitution and faith and raised his children in a Christian home. In 1901 he was elected a deacon of the Baptist Church. Anne was a talented seamstress. She made a doll; she named Dolly, for her granddaughter, Amanda. Amanda has passed this doll down to her own granddaughter. Amanda also had a patchwork quilt Anne made. Amanda remembers hearing her mother say that her mom was often found sewing but the fire place. Andrew was an expert hunter and his gun is still in the family today. His most treasured possession was his Bible, with which he led his family each day in worship. This treasure is carefully preserved and stored. In 1910, Andrew and Anne's daughter, Jane, was left widowed. Jane and her two children: Amanda and James moved back in with her parents. Andrew went blind in his later years according to his granddaughter. He saw his Savior's face on September 29, 1915, when he suffered a heart attack. Anne lived another fifteen years with her daughter Jane and her second husband, Kenneth Wilson. Anne joined her husband on March 23, 1931. Andrew and Anne may be gone but the love and teachings they passed on to their children and grandchildren continues to be upheld and will never be forgotten.

Comment [m16]: Due to the Civil War

Comment [m17]: Famous history

Comment [m18]: Military records

Comment [m19]: Description of his appearance from military records

Comment [m20]: Knowledge of being 18 and how young men felt about going to war

Comment [m21]: Supposition, but try putting yourself in his shoes

Comment [m22]: Based on research of those conditions

Comment [m23]: Information from their marriage bond and the family bible

Comment [m24]: Again supposition, based on the information listed

Comment [m25]: From interview with Amanda

Comment [m26]: Implies that this item is still in the family

Comment [m27]: A strong ending that includes their legacy

What could you add or embellish to make even better than what I wrote? What ways can you make it even more interesting?

Other ways to Document a Life:

Story Corps—is an online website that archives interviews and peoples storylines

Digital Slide Show—you can use powerpoint to make a slide show using pictures and stories of an individual's life

Timeline—timelines are a great way to chronologically list events in the person's life

Other information

- Programs such as Dragon Speak will allow you to speak while the computer types for you
- You could also use Dragon Speak this to transcribe your interviews
- Genelines is some genealogy software that allows you to create a timeline {although I do mine in Excel for free}

Bibliography

I strongly encourage you to keep a listing of all of your resources, both online and offline.

You will never know:

- When you will need to return to that source
- You will need to double check your information
- Someone may ask you what source you used

Assignment

Choose a relative and write his/her biography. Better yet, write your autobiography.

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Check back soon for other e-books

ALookThruTime is part of Diana Leigh Matthews Ministries.

ALookThruTime offers a look at life in other times and places. Leigh also provides genealogy tips and advice. You can check go to her website at www.alookthruTime.com to check out her blog and speaking schedules.