

Blogging for Family History: **How to Launch a Blog and Make It Successful**

by Laura Hedgecock

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Introduction

Is blogging for you? Have you considered starting a blog to share your family history, research, or your own stories? If you're not sure if you're ready, you're not alone. Aside from providing content, there's a lot to think about—technical options as well as aesthetics and your goals for your audience. Though ready to start writing, many would-be bloggers feel overwhelmed at the prospect of choosing a blogging platform and setting it up. They pull a Scarlett O'Hara instead and decide to “think about it tomorrow.” Or next year. Or not at all. Or they simply choose the blogging platform their colleague uses.

That's where *Blogging for Family History* comes in. In it, we'll explore the technical options while we examine what blogging entails, empowering you to evaluate your goals for blogging, find the best technical fit for those goals as well as for your limitations, and launch a professional-looking site. We'll look at why family historians blog, what is involved in setting up a blogsite, and how to make it successful for you. That “for you” qualifier matters. There's not a magic formula or a one-model-fits-all prescription on how to set up a blog or website. Blogs are as individual as the people who create them, and each blogger brings his or her own expectations, expertise, and enthusiasm to the blogosphere.

That said, there *are* some things to consider when deciding whether to join the family of genealogy bloggers. Whether you're still mulling over if you want to start a blog or are interested in revamping your site, the process is similar. Either way, you'll need to get a feel for what blogging entails and identify your personal or professional goals. If you do decide blogging is for you, these same considerations will help you set up, launch, and improve your site.

As with any well-considered choice, a good decision requires a degree of self-examination. As we examine the ins and outs of family history blogging, you'll need to hold your own goals and motives to the light of day as you weigh the options and responsibilities. You won't be directed to a “best” choice, but rather you'll find insight to help you make good decisions based on your personal situation, finding the best technical fit for your needs.

Whatever your commitment to blogging, read on. You may find you're more interested than you knew. You might realign your plans or rethink your goals.

Even if you decide that blogging isn't for you, the topics we'll cover in this book will help you make an informed decision.

Part One: Why Blog?

Chapter 1: The Advantages of Blogging for Family History

Bloggging Is a New, Old Idea

Bloggging is a newer technology, but the idea behind it is old. In fact, my maternal grandmother had a mid-twentieth-century version of a blogg: a journal.

Grandma wrote by hand throughout her life, recording her memories, describing relatives, relating stories of ancestors and family lore, and telling anecdotes of life on the farm and of watching her children grow. She even threw in a few good recipes, pondered some of life's bigger questions, and shared a few deeply personal ruminations. She called her collection her "Treasure Chest of Memories."

The biggest difference between my grandma's writing and a blogg of today is that it took Grandma several decades to share her writing. That and the fact that my mom had to decipher Grandma's handwriting, transcribe and type her stories, and spend a lot of time at Kinko's making copies.

Bloggging lets you share immediately and globally. With a few mouse clicks, blogggers can push information out to loved ones or followers, or they can post things to the web for others to find as they need—or as they please. Unlike my grandmother, blogggers aren't limited to the written word. They can share documents, images, audio clips, and video files.

You're Not Too Late

More and more family historians are dipping their quills into the bloggosphere. As of April 2015, Geneablogggers.com, a family history blogg listing service, had 3,186 family history bloggs in its registry.¹

But don't worry; you haven't missed an opportunity. Impressive as that number is, the market isn't saturated.

A corresponding increase in blogg readership supports the growth in family history–related bloggs. Bloggs in general are gaining audiences because they occupy every imaginable niche topic. They appeal to both special and specific interests, something that traditional media outlets aren't able to do. As they've gained loyal followings, bloggs have also gained credibility. They are no longer something that snarky folks refer to with air quote gestures. Blogggers who provide both information and passion about their subject matter continue to attract growing audiences.² As they connect with their readers, blogggers nurture relationships. In fact, Technorati's *2014 Digital*

Influence Report found blogs “to be the fifth-most trustworthy source overall for information on the internet.”³

Genealogy: No Longer “Just the Facts, Ma’am”

Genealogists have a long tradition of embracing newfangled ideas. From nineteenth century *Ahnentafels* to twentieth century PAF and GEDCOM file formats to twenty-first century online collaborative trees, family historians have adopted new technology to share information.⁴ Of course, that begs the question: Other than the fact that we tend toward geekiness, why should family historians embrace yet another tool? The older technologies are still quite effective at sharing facts.

But Genealogy isn’t just about the facts. Neither are genealogists interested in sharing only with fellow researchers. Many family historians want to present their own version of *Who Do You Think You Are?*—the television show that opens up the world of genealogy through stories. They want to provide connections to the past via compelling narratives that reach an audience unlikely to delve into their family history on their own.

Unlike other genealogy tools, blogs help bring family history alive to those who are not genealogically inclined. In addition to sharing facts, blogging makes a great way to share the stories that hold the dry facts together and demonstrate why the facts matter. Through blogs, family historians can paint pictures of what life was, or is, like. Those pictures are the stories that bind us to our ancestors. In addition, blogs allow family historians to explore the questions and mysteries that underlie their near obsession with rooting out the facts.

When it comes to sharing facts *and* stories, blog platforms have a lot to offer:

- Blogs are affordable. There are free blogging platforms, but even paying for a domain name and hosting isn’t very expensive.
- The technology really *is* easier than ever. The learning curve has become a gentle slope; no coding is required. Today’s visual editors are all *WYSIWYG*, which stands for “What You See Is What You Get.”
- The blogosphere welcomes newcomers. It’s not a landscape open only to professional writers and sites with a staff of developers. Today’s platforms’ user-friendly interfaces and preformatted themes require only the most basic skills.
- Family history blogs cut across segments of scrapbooking, photo archiving, family history, storytelling, and memoir. You can make your blog what you want it to be.
- Blogs offer tremendous organizational flexibility and customization. One size doesn’t have to fit all. You can decide if you want to tell personal stories, family stories, research stories, or any combination thereof. You can review books or technology. It’s totally up to you.
- Blogs not only allow you to tell stories, they make storytelling and sharing a multimedia experience by integrating images, audio files, and videos.

- Blogs and websites grant family historians control over their content. You're not submitting or uploading your narratives to other sites, working within their subject-to-change guidelines.
- Blogs lend themselves to writing piecemeal, which makes them a great way to fight that little devil on your shoulder that keeps promising you that you'll get around to it someday. You don't need a comprehensive, completed family history project to publish. Your work in progress makes a great blog.
- The time commitment of blogging is flexible. Depending on your personal and professional goals, it can take a lot or very little time.
- Blogs allow you to decide on a post-by-post basis how much you share. You can share only with family or a group of selected individuals, or make articles visible to anyone on the Internet.
- The informal nature of blogging lets you express thoughts that you might not share in other genealogy publications.
- For a small businessperson blogger, the additional control gained by building your own site can benefit you down the road. Although web designers build beautiful sites, the product they provide usually isn't something you can easily revamp. If your needs change, you have to pay them again—assuming you can find them—to rebuild your site. By understanding how to configure and reconfigure your site, you eliminate headaches as well as financial outlays down the road.

¹ Thomas MacEntee, Private email to author, April 3, 2015.

² Brandon Gaille, "How Many Blogs are on the Internet," *WP Virtuoso* (blog), Nov 20, 2013, <http://www.wpvirtuoso.com/how-many-blogs-are-on-the-internet/>.

³ Technorati Media, "2014 Digital Influence Report," *Technorati Media*, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://technorati.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/tm2013DIR3.pdf>, 13.

⁴ "Encyclopedia of Genealogy," *Eastman's Online Genealogy* (blog), accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.eogen.com/ahnentafel>.