

# How Generative AI Benefits Family History

David Ouimette, CG, CGL

[david.ouimette@familysearch.org](mailto:david.ouimette@familysearch.org)

*This class explores several ways that artificial intelligence has supercharged genealogy and family history. Come and learn about this transformative technology and how you can benefit from generative AI in your own family history.*

## Welcome to Generative AI

Generative artificial intelligence refers to computer systems that can communicate like humans. Each has the ability to respond to questions as would an intelligent human, with creative and informed answers. The most popular generative AI systems—also known as chatbots—include:

- ChatGPT (OpenAI): conversational, adept at writing, and can generate creative content
- Google Bard: works with Google’s search engine and can answer complex questions
- Microsoft Copilot: integrated into Microsoft Office products and able to draft emails and generate documents
- Claude (Anthropic): virtual assistant aligned with human values

When asked, ChatGPT stated that its goal is “to create algorithms or models capable of generating new, realistic data or content that is indistinguishable from data or content created by humans.”

## Transformative Tech

Several genealogy websites apply generative AI to supercharge family history experiences:

- Ancestry
  - Estimates ethnicity based on DNA profiles
  - Optimize search-engine results
  - Maintains a Big Tree synthesized from millions of family trees
- FamilySearch
  - Transcribes handwritten documents, enabling full-text search
  - Summarizes the genealogical information in transcribed documents
  - Builds family trees from indexed records

- MyHeritage
  - Colorizes and dates historical photographs
  - Clusters genetic cousins
  - Produces record hints

## **Your Research Assistant**

Family history research involves many creative activities such as:

- Identifying the most valuable records to consult to learn about an ancestor
- Analyzing and summarizing the information found in a historical document
- Translating a document from one language into another
- Correlating evidence from multiple sources to draw a conclusion about an ancestor
- Identifying conflicting evidence and suggesting how to resolve the conflict
- Writing a persuasive conclusion or genealogical proof
- Telling the story of an ancestor based on evidence found in several documents
- Interpreting details found in a historical photograph
- Building family trees from indexes
- Integrating the family story into the proper historical context

You could employ a genealogist to perform any of these activities. However, today's chatbots can accomplish these tasks in whole or in part, thus acting as your research assistants.

## **Researching Thoroughly**

More family historians will do more thorough research as generative AI fully transcribes additional record sources. FamilySearch has converted hundreds of millions of handwritten images to full-text transcripts. Over the next few years, FamilySearch will transcribe most of their historical images.

You can ask chatbots to guide you to build your family tree. Why not ask ChatGPT for help? As your research assistant, a chatbot can identify some of the best records to search to extend your family tree. Pick an ancestor, decide what you want to learn, and then ask a chatbot which historical records to search to answer your question. Ask effective research questions that clearly identify an ancestor and seek specific information.

## **Analyzing Evidence**

Generative AI systems can analyze information and reveal evidence. For example, consider FamilySearch's full-text-search engine (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/full-text>). First, search for an ancestor in a given place and time. When you find the document, say, a

last will and testament, click to view the transcript. Then click “Summarize the document” to see an AI-generated overview of the document, followed by a list of key dates, names, and relationships. Document analysis is easy for AI systems trained on the appropriate handwriting and language.

You can take any transcribed document and ask a chatbot to provide whatever analysis you require. As you gain experience working with chatbots you will learn how to formulate questions that coax meaningful answers from generative AI.

## **Correlating Evidence**

Generative AI systems can correlate evidence from your research, forming amazing conclusions. As you document your findings in MS Word or Excel, you can drop your file into an accommodating chatbot and ask that the data be sorted, arranged in a table, or otherwise correlated to suit your needs. You can ask the chatbot to make sense of what you’ve gathered and to summarize meaningful insights and conclusions.

## **Resolving Conflicts**

It’s inevitable. You can’t avoid finding evidence in one record that conflict with evidence in another. When this happens, you might be tempted to brush aside the annoying evidence. However, this may lead you to false conclusions. Good genealogy approaches conflicting evidence directly. Chatbots can offer suggestions to help resolve conflicts. Perhaps one of the sources is more susceptible to error than another, or there’s a reason to believe that the outlying piece of evidence is questionable. A genealogist could provide you with this rationale. A well-trained chatbot might be helpful as well. Provide your favorite generative AI system with your evidence, including the conflicting evidence, and request possible explanations and resolution for the conflict.

## **A Word of Caution**

As you work regularly with generative AI you will come to appreciate that AI can stand for Artificial Intelligence or Artificial Ignorance depending on the time of day. Both can get you in trouble. Artificial Intelligence may plagiarize another’s work or otherwise act unethically. Artificial Ignorance may produce biased responses or completely hallucinate and do so persuasively. Remember these warnings when using generative AI as your research assistant. Learn how to transcend deficiencies in these tools, as they have much to offer.

## **Crafting the Family Story**

Major chatbots such as ChatGPT, Google Bard, Microsoft Copilot, and Claude have absorbed so much information from the Internet that they have developed a remarkable

ability to communicate. You can feed these AI systems a list of facts or a dry narrative and request a rewrite in any style you'd like. Maybe you want to have the family story told within the context of the time and place where the family lived. Ask a chatbot to take the input you provide and fill in the story within the appropriate historical setting.

When asked to “generate a sonnet in the style of William Shakespeare about the joy of doing family history research,” ChatGPT immediately produced these original verses:

### **The Joy of Ancestry's Gentle Pursuit**

To trace the lineage of blood and bone,  
A quest embarked with heart's most tender care,  
In tomes of yore, the seeds of past are sown,  
Where spirits of the ancients linger there.

Each name, a thread that weaves the fabric tight,  
A tapestry of lives once lived and gone,  
Their stories whisper in the still of night,  
And through the ages, they are ever drawn.

With every page, the echoes of the past  
Resound within the soul, a fervent call,  
To honor those whose legacies will last,  
Their memories a treasure to recall.

Thus, in this search, the heart finds pure delight,  
For in their lives, our own shall find new light.