



# Genealogy Tips and Hints

## Connecting with your family history





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## Velkommen to Sons of Norway Genealogy Tips and Hints:

### Connecting with your family history

Are you curious about your Norwegian connections and broader Nordic roots? Then you've come to the right place! We believe that the history of a nation and the nature of its culture are best described through the stories of its people. Sons of Norway hopes you'll soon agree that researching genealogy and family history is a great way to connect to your heritage and learn more about your unique family stories.

Will you find connections that change your perception of who you are today? Your journey of discovery offers an opportunity to truly get to know your family members—who they were, where they

“A lot of my family history was lost when my Grandmother died. I am very interested in finding out more about them.”

came from, and what they did with their lives. Perhaps you will be surprised by what you learn. You may even find interests or traits that have carried through the generations from Viking times to yourself and other family members.

Whether you are new to genealogy or need to brush up, read the following pages about Norwegian history, names and culture to inspire your exploration of family history and genealogy.

### Do not forget me when you arrive in the new land...

These words, from the autograph album her Grandfather Ole Hanson, age 18, took on the ship “Tunisian” to North America, have lingered with Sons of Norway member Lonna Hanson. Knowing her Grandpa Ole never saw his mother or homeland again makes them almost painful to even recall.



Lonna started researching her Norwegian and Swedish roots about 20 years ago. She said **“My parents were first generation Americans who were part of large farm families. They lived through The Great Depression and World War II, but never thought of themselves as extraordinary people. But I knew they were. I wanted to preserve their story as best I could.”**

Going back in time, Lonna traced both paternal and maternal family lines. She reviewed family letters, Bibles, papers, and photos. “When you start pulling threads on the family tapestry, you need to be prepared for what you might unravel. Not all ancestors are saints. But I’ve also found occupation trends with many clergy, teachers and scholars plus those who worked on railroads and many, many farmers.”

Traveling when possible, Lonna visited the places her families lived, worked or were buried. She said “I’ve been to country school houses and country churches they attended. If you stand very still, you can *almost* see them there. I have not been to Norway and Sweden yet, but my brother and I are planning to go in the next couple of years.”

“I have learned that I am connected to so many, many people. No one is an island. If you think you have no family, it’s only because you haven’t looked hard enough.”

Feeling more deeply connected to her roots and extended family after years of research, Lonna said, “I have learned that I am connected to so many, many people. No one is an island. If you think you have no family, it’s only because you haven’t looked hard enough.”







## Inspiration in *Viking* magazine

Are you looking to gather more ideas before you begin researching your family history? As a Sons of Norway member, you have members-only online access to the *Viking* magazine archive. Use your member login at [sofn.com](http://sofn.com) to read fascinating articles and learn about North American immigration, family history and more, including:

- *Genealogical Treasure Trove*  
The largest collection of Norwegian history books in North America.  
[*Viking*, May 2019]
- *An Unbreakable Bond*  
Stavig brothers' letters offer details about the one who left Norway and the one who stayed.  
[*Viking*, August 2018]
- *Have Ancestors, Will Travel*  
[*Viking*, March 2017]
- *The Name Game*  
Scandinavian naming practices offer a glimpse into family lineage.  
[*Viking*, August 2015]
- *Family Ties*  
A step-by-step guide to starting your own genealogical journey.  
[*Viking*, August 2014]

[www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com)

## TIPS AND MORE

### “The more I've learned, the more I want to learn...”

Member Lonna Hanson

Here are a few additional tips from Lonna, based on her experience researching family history:

“Talk to your older relatives before they die. Ask them everything and let them ramble on! ... think before you toss. Sometimes the most mundane things have clues—pay stubs, car registrations, funeral flyers, obituaries clipped from newspapers, Bibles with births and deaths recorded, post cards, letters sent during wartime or calendars marked with special events. Save the memories. Your descendants will appreciate it.”

“I'm getting to know my family roots.”



## Ancestor/Pedigree Chart

**PEDIGREE/ANCESTOR CHART**

## Family Group

**FAMILY GROUP SHEET**

Individual's Name	Date	Place	Individual's Name	Date	Place
Birth			Birth		
Baptism			Baptism		
Marriage			Marriage		
Death			Death		
Burial			Burial		
Emigration			Emigration		
Other			Other		

**SOURCES LIST**

For each page of this unit you will add a certain number of people to your ancestor chart. For each person you add to the ancestor chart, document your findings with as many primary sources and records as possible. One your sources by completing this list of sources. Include the type and location of each source you used for each person. Remember: you only need to complete this information for the people in Part 1, for people in Part 2, and six people in Part 3.

**PERSON:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SOURCES:** \_\_\_\_\_

**LOCATION:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PERSON:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SOURCES:** \_\_\_\_\_

**LOCATION:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PERSON:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SOURCES:** \_\_\_\_\_

**LOCATION:** \_\_\_\_\_

## What is Genealogy?

## What is Family History?

Genealogy is a word derived from Greek that means tracing the descent of a family or individual. In this sense, it simply means charting the vital facts; the full names, birthdates, marriage dates and so forth of one's ancestors. Typically this sort of information is compiled into a chart called a pedigree. "Pedigree" is a word derived from French meaning "crane's foot" because the chart used in early genealogies was a three-line mark that resembled the footprint of a crane.

Family history is genealogy plus much more. It includes collecting documents, recording stories, making scrapbooks, storing and sharing photos, videos and memories. Learning and writing about the life, times and traditions of the people on your chart will help you make connections to the past that defined and shaped your life and attitudes.

As you research your family, it will be useful to use tools including an **Ancestor/Pedigree Chart** and **Family Group** documents to keep track of everyone. These are available from Sons of Norway as part of our Cultural Skills Program, or through other resources.

"[I have] become part of a family that I didn't know I had until I had my DNA done."



# A Brief Introduction to Norwegian History, Emigration, Names and Geography

Before you dig into your research, it will help to know a bit about the unique social history, emigration patterns, naming conventions and regions of Norway.

## Changes in Society

It's difficult to imagine today, but in the early 1800s Norway was one of the poorest countries in Northern Europe. Although only about 3% of Norway's land has ever been good for farming, Norway was an agrarian society that had changed very little since feudal times. Norwegian society was highly stratified, and nearly every citizen belonged to the state Lutheran church, which closely regulated the private lives of the Norwegian people.



The early 1800s were a time of growing unrest in Norway. For the first time since the Black Plague of the 14th century, the population was swelling. Cities were becoming more crowded, and farms were less able to produce food for Norway's inhabitants. When the Napoleonic Wars climaxed between 1807 and 1814, the British blockade of continental Europe

crippled Norwegian trade. Denmark, which had politically dominated Norway for nearly 400 years, was so devastated by the war that in 1814 the country went bankrupt and was forced to forfeit control of Norway. Soon thereafter, Norway entered into a union with Sweden that was to last until 1905. Around this time Norway also experienced waves of religious dissidence, as activists like Hans Nilsen Hauge began traveling the country protesting the authoritarianism of the state church. At the same time, a new country across the ocean was growing. As the United States added more and more territory, it badly needed people to populate its expanding borders.

The first known group to emigrate from Norway left Stavanger in 1825 in a small vessel called *Restaurasjonen*. Although the voyage of *Restaurasjonen* is widely acknowledged as the official beginning of Norwegian emigration, the great exodus did not truly begin until the late 1830s. From that point on until the early 20th century, social agitation in Norway and the lure of personal opportunity abroad inspired mass waves of emigration that would, by 1914, deprive the country of one quarter of its population.

Most Norwegian-Americans can trace their ancestors to one of two broad social categories, the *bønder* or the *husmenn*. The *bonde* (farmer) class was made up of farmers who owned the land they worked. The *husmann* (literally “house man,” but often translated as “cotter”) was one step down the social ladder. Unlike the *bonde*, he could be hired and fired, and so his position on the farm—and, in turn, in society—was not as secure as the *bonde*. Another important social category is the *leilending* or *bygdselmann*. A *leilending* was a tenant farmer who rented his land under a contract called a *bygdselbrev*.

## Patterns of Emigration

Emigrants did not leave Norway in a steady stream. Instead, they left home in waves, as detailed in Ingrid Semmingsen's essay *Norwegian Emigration to America During the Nineteenth Century* (Norwegian-American Studies, Vol. XI, p. 66). According to Semmingsen, Norwegians left Norway for America every year from 1836 on, but the movement had its first peak between 1849 and 1854. A period of decline followed, ended

by a brief and dramatic increase between 1860 and 1862, at which point the Civil War and the Dakota Uprising abruptly curtailed emigration. The first major emigration lasted from 1866 to 1873, when 110,896 Norwegians left their homeland. Another lull followed until 1879, when the second mass migration began, lasting until 1893, drawing 256,068 Norwegian citizens. Smaller waves followed in the late 1890s, and again in the early 20th century.

## Last Names

Although some upper-class families used surnames—last names that remained the same from generation to generation—as far back as the 1500s, the vast majority of Norwegians from Viking times up until the about the mid-nineteenth century (and in some cases, until much later) used patronyms. A patronym is a name taken from one's father. Simply put, everyone's last name was their father's first name with the suffix for "son" or "daughter" added on the end. For example, if Jon Olsen has a son named Thor, his name will be Thor Jonsen. In turn, when Thor's son Ole is born, he will take the name Ole Thorsen. Jon's daughter Marie will be named Marie Jonsdatter. When she has children, they will take a patronymic last name from their father.

Those patronymic suffixes (–sen, –datter) have a number of different spellings (–søn, –son, –døtter, etc.) because of the way the Norwegian language has changed over time. Because there were relatively few names in use, the patronymic system by itself could be confusing. Therefore, in addition to the patronym, many people also took an additional "name" from the property where they lived or worked. For example, if Jon Olsen works on a farm called Røen, he might identify himself as Jon Olsen Røen. These farm names were more like an address than a personal identifier, so if a person moved to a different farm, they would take a different farm name. Thus, when Jon Olsen Røen moves to the farm Tveitun, his name becomes Jon Olsen Tveitun.

Norwegian immigrants to America naturally adopted the naming conventions of their new country. The tradition of changing the patronym every generation, which was already going out of style in Norway, stopped completely in America. Some immigrants decided to keep their patronym as their last name, while others kept their farm names. As a rule, if your last name ends in –sen or –son, your last name is probably a patronym, and if you do enough research you will eventually find the Norwegian *stamfar* (arch ancestor) who gave you your family name. On the other hand, if your Norwegian family name is anything else (like Heiberg or Brandjord or Ness), your name probably refers to the farm, estate or village that your ancestors came from. If that is the case, you will have a much easier time tracing your roots. If you are really lucky, your name might be the name of a place in Norway that is still in existence and that you can find on a map—and maybe even visit.

When found at the end of a name, the suffixes –en, –a and –et are indicative articles, meaning "the." Røen means "the clearing" (rø = clearing, en = the).

### Common words used in place names:

bakk – hill	plads, plass – place
berg – mountain	rud – clearing
bo – dwelling	set – place
bråte – burned clearing	seter – mountain pasture
dal, dale, dahl – valley	skog – forest
eng – meadow	stad, sted – place
gard, gaard, gård – farm	stein – stone
haga, hage – garden	stova, stue – cottage
haug – hill, mound	strand – beach
krog, krok – corner	sve – burned over place
land – land, country	in the forest
li, lie – mountain meadow,	vang – grassy spot
hillside clearing	vik – bay
mark – field	vol – grassy meadow
mo – heath	øde – deserted
nes, ness – peninsula	øy, øya, øyo – island





## Farm Names

Nearly every Norwegian *gård*, or farm, has its own name. The name of a farm often describes its location, condition or ownership. *Ødegård* would be a deserted farm, while *Jonsrud* means “Jon’s Clearing.” Many contain descriptions of direction; *Østerdal* means “Eastern Valley,” while *Midtrevollen* means “Middle Meadow.” The suffix *–eie* means simply “property of” or “belongs to,” and typically indicates a husmann’s place. *Glesneie* is a husmann’s place on Glesne.

Here are a few more hints about Norwegian names:

- Sometimes people were identified by their occupation. Examples: Jon Olsen Gårdmand (farmer), Jon Olsen Klokke (sexton), or Jon Olsen Lendsmann (sheriff).
- Women did not adopt their husband’s name. Marie Jonsdatter used that name her entire life. The suffix *–datter* is often abbreviated *d.*, *dt.* or *dtr.*
- The first son was usually named for the father’s father. Example: Jon Olsen will name his son Ole, who will then be Ole Jonsen. The

second son will be named for the mother’s father. The same pattern follows for girls; the first is name for the father’s mother, the second for the mother’s mother.

- If a parent dies before a child of the same sex is born, the child receives the parent’s first name. Example: Elling Aslesen died three weeks before his son was born, and the child was named Elling Ellingsen.
- The first child in a new marriage is often named for the deceased spouse.

“I am always interested in learning more about my ancestors and have been very interested in tracing my family history back.”



## Geography

Another key to unlocking your ancestors' past is figuring out where exactly they came from in Norway. Because of its unique history and language, answering that question can be more complicated than you might expect.

### Another way to talk about places in Norway is in terms of its geographic regions:

Østlandet: Eastern Norway  
Vestlandet: Western Norway  
Sørlandet: Southern Norway  
Trøndelag: Area surrounding Trondheim  
Nord-Norge: Northern Norway  
Troms og Finnmark: The very northernmost region

Today the mainland of Norway is divided into 18 administrative districts called *fylker* (there are 19 if you include the far northern island Svalbard which is subject to special administrative regulations). The word *fylke* is usually translated as “county” in English but fylker are the largest unit of local government in Norway, analogous to states in the U.S. Next, each fylke is divided up into local municipalities called *kommuner*. A *kommune* is the smallest unit of local government in Norway. There are currently more than 400 kommuner in Norway.

### Similarly, you may also find Norway described in terms of its five traditional districts:

Østlandet (also known as Austlandet)  
Vestlandet  
Sørlandet  
Trøndelag  
Nord-Norge (also known as Nord-Noreg)

These regions have no governmental meaning, and the boundaries between them are not always totally clear. However people living within them share certain cultural and linguistic similarities. Think of these regions as being analogous to the way people in the U.S. talk about “the Midwest” or “the East Coast.”



This vintage map shows the Scandinavian countries in 1897.





## More Information and Resources

Ready to get started researching now? Please use the information included here as you start to explore your heritage and Nordic roots. We hope these hints and tips make your research easier, as you connect to the unique story of you—and your extended family.

We recommend you look to Sons of Norway's **Cultural Skills Unit 5, *Genealogy*** for even more ideas and resource information. You'll find the guides, activities and the **Ancestor/Pedigree Chart** and **Family Group** documents included in the unit to be especially helpful. And listings of other research organizations or genealogy source documents can also prove extremely useful in your exploration.

When you take part in the ***Genealogy*** unit of the Cultural Skills program, you complete your research activities at your own pace. You may want to work completely on your own. Or, you may belong to a local lodge with other members who share your interest and can offer their insights on your research.

## About Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program

Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program is a fun, hands-on way to get in touch with your heritage and be recognized for your achievements. We offer a wide variety of topics—14 for adults and 5 for youth—to learn about traditional and contemporary Norwegian Culture. Each unit uses a framework with learning activities. You can complete the units on your own or with other members.

There are 3 levels of skill-specific activities to guide you as you learn. For each level, you'll complete a few activities and email (or mail) them to Sons of Norway headquarters, get feedback, and earn a pin in recognition of your accomplishments. One of our most popular benefits of membership, the Cultural Skills Program is available only to Sons of Norway members. You are welcome to invite nonmembers to join Sons of Norway to participate in this program. However, we ask that you keep these members-only documents and resources out of the hands of nonmembers.

A full listing of topics in the Cultural Skills Program is available online at [www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com) in the Member Resources area, under the Cultural Programming menu. Just log in to see what topics you're interested in learning more about. You may also call Sons of Norway headquarters at 1-800-945-8851 or email [culture@sofn.com](mailto:culture@sofn.com) to request **Cultural Skills Unit 5, *Genealogy*** or other subjects.