

# Five tips for starting research in a new locale

By J. H. Fonkert, cg

**T**raveling salesman Harold Hill rolled into River City, organized a phantom boys' band, and was nearly run out of town because he didn't know the territory. Smart genealogists, just like smart traveling salesmen, will get more satisfying results if they get to know the places they are working.

Because our ancestors rarely stayed in one place, family history researchers often find they need to get to know a new locale. Successful researchers do their homework before tackling new territory. They get to know the geography, the local history, the record-keeping jurisdictions, the range of available records, and the researchers who know their way around town.

The first trick, of course, is knowing your destination. We don't always know the "where" in the question: "How did they get to here from where?" Searchable online federal and state census indexes are often the easiest way to pinpoint a family's earlier place of residence. But, when we can't find a family in a census, we must turn to other sources that might give clues to migrations. Some examples:

- A deed in Sioux County, Iowa, names A. P. Zorgdrager of Hardin County, suggesting he migrated west from Hardin County.<sup>1</sup>
- A petition for citizenship for A. P. Morstad of Otter Tail County, Minnesota, tells us that he

filed his declaration of intention in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>2</sup>

- Tax books in Mercer County, Kentucky, from 1814 to 1822 state that John C. Fawkner owed tax on land eighty miles north in Gallatin County, suggesting a previous residence.<sup>3</sup>

Family Bibles, death records, passport applications, church records, county histories, and other records may give clues to migration paths.

## Curious about George

George N. Faulconer lived in Walnut Township, Atchison County, Kansas, in 1880. The census said he was 84 years old, born in Virginia, and lived with his son, John.<sup>4</sup> How did George get from Virginia to Kansas?

George's War of 1812 pension file outlines the migration story. Asked to state his residences since discharge, he replied: "In Kentucky til 1851, then in Missouri til 1865, since which time I have lived in or near Leavenworth, Kan."<sup>5</sup> In another document, dated 1851 in Jessamine County, Kentucky, he stated he had enlisted at Georgetown, Kentucky, in January 1815.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in yet another document, he stated that he had married Margaret Bourne in Jessamine County.<sup>7</sup>

The 1850 US census did, in fact, find George "Falkner" and wife, Margaret, in the "First Divison" of Jessamine County.<sup>8</sup> The census

enumerator did not name locales below the district level. It is time to get acquainted with Jessamine County, Kentucky.

## Know the geography

Get a map. Locate Jessamine County. The tattered paperback road atlas that lives near my desk reveals that Jessamine County is situated between the Kentucky River (on the west) and Fayette County (on the east). A United States Geological Survey (USGS) topographic map shows that Jessamine County straddles a divide between streams that flow west to the Kentucky River and streams that flow east into the South Elkhorn watershed. (Free downloadable USGS map images are available at <http://nationalmap.gov/ustopo/index.html>).

A convenient source for genealogists is the free, online version of the *Red Book*, available at [http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Red\\_Book:\\_American\\_State,\\_County,\\_and\\_Town\\_Sources](http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Red_Book:_American_State,_County,_and_Town_Sources). A great place for starting to get to know the territory, the *Red Book* provides county outline maps of each state.

In your encounters with more obscure place names, you can turn to a gazetteer, such as the Geographic Name Information System (GNIS) (<http://geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic>). Faulconer was taxed on land in the Hickman Creek watershed from at least 1831 to 1851,<sup>9</sup> and his father, James, was taxed there as early as 1811.<sup>10</sup> A search for a stream named Hickman in the GNIS reveals that Hickman Creek is located at 37 degrees, 46 minutes, 5 seconds North and 84 degrees, 36 minutes, 47 seconds West, and is found on the Little Hickman USGS topographic map.

USGS offers a free topographic map locator and download function at <http://tinyurl.com/y8z2k89>. The Little Hickman 7.5 minute map shows Hickman Creek flowing northeast to southwest south of Nicholasville toward the Kentucky River (the boundary between Jessamine and Garrard counties). Knowing that the family lived somewhere in the creek's narrow watershed may help differentiate this Faulconer family from others of the same name.

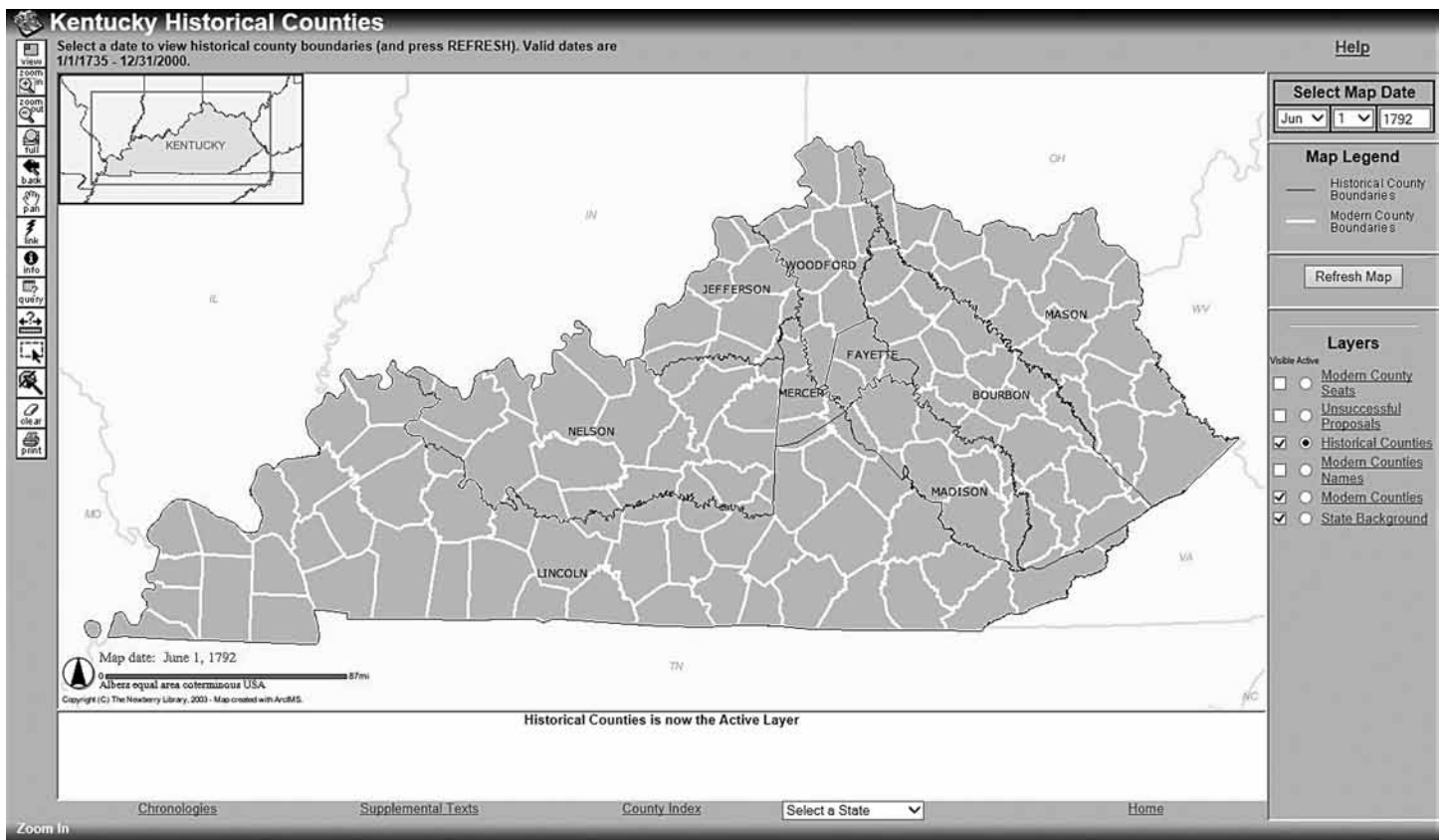
There is more to geography than location on a map. You will also want to learn about a place's physical setting and relative location. The topographic map informs us that this is an area of narrow stream valleys bounded by steep hillsides. It also shows the area's proximity to the booming early nineteenth-century town of Lexington and water transport down the Kentucky River.

## Learn the history

Your ancestor's life will make more sense if you know something about the local history. A first stop might be the website of the local historical society. Offerings vary widely, but a society's website will usually tell you how to get in touch and often includes a short synopsis of the county's history. It also may offer lists of local researchers, or links to helpful websites. The Jessamine County Historical Society's site (<http://www.jesshistorical.com>) is richer than most. It includes republished lists of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 veterans, book lists, links to maps, an index to circuit court records, and a transcription of the 1799 tax list.

You might find a published county history, but beware as many of these (especially in the Midwest) were commercial projects that were more concerned with profit than academic objectivity. Biographies of prominent individuals or early settlers often give accounts of a family's migration history. USGenWeb (<http://www.usgenweb.org>) sites for many counties offer a short summary of the county's history. Search for published historical accounts of particular communities or counties at WorldCat.org. A keyword search for "Jessamine history" returns several books, including two general county histories and books about the history of particular roads and churches.

Don't overlook regional or state-level history or biographical compilations. For example, *The Kentucky Encyclopedia of Biography* contains an article about George Faulconer's brother's family. Volume 7 of William Henry Perrin's *Kentucky Genealogy and Biography* covers Jessamine and eight neighboring counties.



Interactive map of Kentucky Historical Counties from 1 June 1792 from The Newberry Library's Atlas of Historical County Boundaries, <http://historical-county.newberry.org/website/Kentucky/viewer.htm>.

## Determine what government kept the records

Jurisdiction and boundaries matter! Many of the records used by genealogists—vital records, tax records, and court records—were created by local governments. Jurisdiction refers to the geographic area over which a governmental unit had authority. The first step in researching a family in a new locale is usually using map indexes, or possibly a reference site like Wikipedia, to match a town or other place with its host county.

County boundaries often changed, especially in the first several decades of statehood, as the legislature created new counties to accommodate expanding populations. The *Red Book* includes a table for each state listing the date each county was created, as well as previous counties from which its territory was taken. The Newberry Library's *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*

(<http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/>) offers interactive maps showing how county boundaries in each state have changed over time. It also provides detailed information about the legislative acts that changed a county's boundaries.

To learn how far back vital records, land records, probate, or other court records were kept in your county of interest, turn to the table at the back of each state chapter in the *Red Book*.

Not all records were locally created. The most obvious examples are military and land records created by federal government agencies as part of their management of federal programs—for example, homestead records and War of 1812 bounty land records. Other records may have been created by state agencies. Most state and federal government records will be found in state archives or at the National Archives. Many older local government records have also been transferred to state archives for safekeeping.

## Discover the records

You are now ready to find the records. You have several options.

- Do a place-name search in the Family History Library catalog (<https://familysearch.org/catalog-search>). A search for Jessamine County, Kentucky, returns a list of categories of records held in some form (microfilms of originals, indexes, transcripts, etc.) by the library—in this case, including censuses, court, land, probate, tax, and vital records.
- Check out resources on the USGenWeb site (<http://www.usgenweb.org>) for your county of interest. County Genweb sites vary widely in content, but many include indexes or transcriptions of local records, or at least advice on how to obtain local records. The Jessamine County site includes census transcriptions, indexes to marriage records, abstracts of some wills and miscellaneous Bible records, deeds, and court records. The Jessamine marriage index includes the 25 January 1825 marriage of George Faulconer and Margaret Bourne, and indicates that Elijah Bourne was bondsman. The next step is to find the original record.
- Search the Family History Library (FHL) for microfilm of the records you seek. The FHL has microfilm of 1799–1867 marriage licenses and bonds from the Jessamine County Clerk of Court. FamilySearch has digitized many records for Internet access, and more will come online in the next few years.
- You may have to actually go to the courthouse. Many records exist only there; not everything has been filmed, digitized, or indexed.

The courthouse may be a few thousand miles from your home, so a thorough search of Internet resources such as the Family History Library catalog or USGenWeb may save you a great deal of time and money.

## Find other researchers

Another way to save money is to seek local assistance. Someone has been there before you. Many genealogical societies and state and local historical societies maintain lists of

local researchers who know the territory. They will often know of records that you may never discover on your own, and sometimes will already know something about the families you are researching.

GenWeb sites often include lists of local researchers or “look-up” volunteers. Finally, if you want to hire a professional researcher, you can search the directories of the Association of Professional Genealogists (<http://www.apgen.org>), the Board for Certification of Genealogists (<http://www.bcgcertification.org>) or the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (<http://www.icapgen.org>). These directories include genealogists who are bound by professional standards and ethics.

## Ready, set, go

The focus here has been on getting to know a new locale. But don't forget to take advantage of state-level resource guides. Three stand out:

- The *Red Book* includes overviews of history and records for each state.
- The FamilySearch “wiki” ([https://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main_Page)) offers articles on each state and some localities. Previously published Family History Library Research Guides are now available as PDF files at the website of the BYU Family History Library ([http://lib.byu.edu/sites/familyhistory/research\\_outlines/](http://lib.byu.edu/sites/familyhistory/research_outlines/)).
- The NGS *Research in the States* series has published state-level guides for nineteen states, with more to follow.

Don't be afraid to tackle new territory. If you do a little homework before you start, you will increase your odds of success. 🌳

## Notes

1. Sioux County, Iowa, Recorder's Office, Orange City, Iowa, Deed Book F, p. 475, Warranty Deed no. 413 (August 1874), Iowa Falls and S.C.R.R. to A. P. Sorgdrager, recorded 5 August 1874.
2. A. P. Overland Declaration of Intention, Otter Tail County, District Court, Fergus Falls,

Minnesota, 26 November 1897, Minnesota State Archives (MSA) microfilm publication 76 , reel 5, volume I, p. 253.

3. Mercer County Tax Assessor, Harrodsburg, Kentucky, Tax Books, Family History Library microfilm 8,157.

4. 1880 US census, Atchison County, Kansas, enumeration district 11, p. 13, Walnut Township, dwelling 108, family 109, John Faulconer; Family History Library microfilm 1,254,373; digital image, (<http://www.ancestry.com>, accessed 14 May 2013).

5. George N. Faulconer, War of 1812 Pension File, application no. 13635, National Archives (NARA), Record Group 15, "Claim of Soldier for Service Pension, under the Provisional Sec's 4736 to 4740 Inclusive Revised Statutes, and the act of March 9, 1878," 24 April 1878.

6. George N. Faulconer, War of 1812 Pension File, affidavit of George N. Faulconer, 25 August 1851, Jessamine County, Kentucky.

7. George N. Faulconer, War of 1812 Pension File, affidavit of George N. Faulconer, 2 May 1871, Leavenworth County, Kansas.

8. 1850 US census, Jessamine County, Kentucky, First Division, p. 26 [stamped], George Falkner; NARA microfilm publication M432, roll 208; digital image, (<http://www.ancestry.com>, accessed 14 May 2013).

9. Jessamine County, Kentucky, Tax Assessor, Tax Books, 1831–1853; Family History Library microfilm no. 8,085.

10. James G. Faulconer, *Thomas Faulconer and his Descendants* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1984), 115.

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