

Researchers Beware: The Potential Perils of Online Genealogy

Scott Noegel

"Researchers Beware: The Potential Perils of Online Genealogy." In *The Researcher: The Newsletter of the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center*, 25/3 (2015), 10-11.

Online genealogy resources are thriving in the digital age and there is no doubt that they have helped to make family research easier. Sites like ancestry.com, findagrave.com, and various newspaper and governmental archival web portals are growing exponentially and they are gaining in usage and popularity. Nevertheless, those who are new to such resources or to genealogical research generally should be aware that there are very real dangers in using such tools. Below I highlight three potential perils that I personally have encountered in the hope that others might avoid them or know how to handle them should they occur.

1. Stolen Intellectual Property

Probably few users of findagrave.com realize that the famous website is now owned by ancestry.com. This information is neatly tucked away in the latter site's seldom-read FAQs (i.e., "frequently asked questions") under the rubric "general questions about find a grave." Those who enjoy membership in ancestry.com have noticed this recently, but only subtly, when links to the Findagrave site began to appear as "hints," via the cute little green leaf that signals possible new research directions for users. While the integration of the two sites allows for greater synergy and collaboration it also has created a liminal passage through which one can find one's intellectual property flowing illegally from one site to the other. I came to realize this recently while perusing the findagrave site, when I discovered a photograph of my grandmother and her siblings posted next to their personal entries. Since I own the original photograph, I was bewildered. As it turned out, the person who posted the photograph had obtained it through another member of ancestry.com. However, this other person was someone, who many years ago had taken that image from my ancestry.com site after I had briefly granted her access. Just finding this out took sleuthing! (Note: members have the option to keep their trees private, public, or grant access to specific individuals.) When I wrote the person who posted the image on findagrave.com to ask that my private photograph be removed, she claimed that she had obtained it from someone else, and therefore, she did not feel obligated to remove it. She was severely mistaken. As the website's FAQs also state, people cannot post a photograph or even an obituary unless they own the copyright for it. In fact, posting any image on that site second-hand is illegal, though the site's unwieldy nature makes this difficult for the company to enforce. When I wrote info@findagrave.com about this, I received a polite email from the larger corporate site ancestry.com asking for details. After proving that I owned the image, the photographs on the site were quickly removed; but the entire process took some effort. At the very least, the experience showed me that some users on both sites, perhaps most of them, are unaware of what constitutes intellectual and personal property in the digital age. Unfortunately, one senses here also at times something of a competitive cult of the personality—folks trying to achieve online recognition by striving to outdo each other in the "game" of posting the most records and photographs. While contributors might feel they are doing a service by sharing everything and anything they obtain through either site publicly, in fact, they are stealing and are subject to serious legal action. They are essentially digital plagiarists.

2. "Credit Thieves"

This naturally brings me to what I shall label "credit thieves." The rather brazen attitude of the findagrave "contributor" that I just described, while misinformed and annoying, pales in comparison to another claim that I experienced a few years ago. Having just located and translated numerous German records that enabled me to trace several ancestral lines back several centuries, I was surprised when another researcher (a self-labeled "genealogist") contacted me to say that she had a good deal of information for me concerning the antiquity of the German ancestral line in question. Apparently, she had seen mention of the particular family name on my website (where I had listed it as part of a book project). She said had done a lot of hard research on that line herself and wanted to help. Knowing that I had been the only person in many decades to see the German records, I was curious. I soon learned that the research she wanted to offer me was my own. Once again, the same person to which I had allowed brief access to my ancestry.com site, unwittingly had allowed other people access to her site, and they mined it for all the data they could. Again, the information came from a third-party, but she apparently felt no scruples about passing it off as her own research, despite that I had worked for a couple of years to obtain this information and had traveled to Germany at my own expense to obtain much of it. When I confronted her about this, she never got back to me. Lesson learned.

3. "Ahistorical Viruses"

The third potential peril of online research is probably the one that disturbs me the most—though in the interest of full disclosure I confess, that as a university professor, such things naturally make me bristle. I call it the spread of "ahistorical viruses." As evidenced by the previous two perils, there is a great deal of sharing that takes place among members of ancestry.com. Mostly this is of a collaborative nature and often it allows distant relatives to connect and

share information that they otherwise might not be able to locate. This is all well and good, and it remains one of the best aspects of membership to that site. On the other hand, the data mining of other peoples' public genealogical trees can only be described as uncritical and rampant. From a historian's vantage, such a method is considered reckless. Without ascertaining whether data is accurate, users graft other members' trees to their own simply by clicking the right buttons. When I first became a member of ancestry.com, I often wrote other members whose trees were public when I found data and photographs attached to people that I knew were in error. I soon found this to be a fruitless endeavor, because the "ahistorical virus" had spread so pervasively that it was endemic to the site. Indeed, there exists on that site a veritable forest of inaccurate and/or unverified genealogical trees that continue to be adopted blindly wholesale. Sadly, the sloppiest and most pedantic of genealogical trees on ancestry.com can appear indistinguishable.

Of course, one can avoid these three potential perils by posting only those images and other records on findagrave.com that one personally owns and by keeping one's ancestry.com site set to private, unless absolutely certain that those allowed access do not themselves offer still others access to their own trees. However, this probably will not quell the massive wave of digital plagiarism that is taking place between the two online sites; and while I am encouraged by the way that ancestry.com took action when alerted to the contributor's illegal post, the website's television advertisement depicting the excitement of a new user discovering her ancestors by finding a little green leaf, and then another, and another, remains something of an implicit endorsement of the uncritical method by which far too many members discover their roots. "Caveat emptor," as they say.