

Toy Story

Electronic Tools for Genealogists

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Technology is fun! To some people, getting a new gadget makes you feel like a kid again – and you’ve just opened a brand new present. Even better, there are ways to turn those gadgets into productive tools to help in your family research.

The strategies we use today to research our family history remain much the same as those used by our parents and grandparents. The tools we use, however, are very different from those they used. We have access to information from the comfort of our homes. When we find something interesting, we can share it with other family members in a matter of minutes.

For those who are ready to embrace the digital age, there’s a technology solution for you. New gadgets arrive every day. Software is updated to take advantage of hardware advances. Some of these tools focus on productivity; others are just plain fun. In either case, make sure your Genealogy Toy Box is filled with the latest and greatest gear to make your research easier and more enjoyable.

What’s in Your Toy Box

Here are just a few of the categories you might find in your Genealogy Toy Box. Remember, whatever is in there today will probably not be there in 2-5 years, maybe not even next year. It will have been replaced by something faster and smaller and with more capabilities.

Visit the FamilySearch Research Wiki for resources and links to keep you up-to-date on the latest technology - <https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Technology>.

Laptops & Netbooks

Laptops combine convenience with performance. Take your files with you and use the same software you have on your desktop computer. The disadvantage is often a smaller screen, but the portability more than makes up for that.

Major considerations for laptop computers are often battery power and weight. The larger the screen, the more the laptop weighs. If you travel frequently, you might opt for a smaller screen to keep the weight down. Screens generally are 12-18 inches.

If you’re really looking for lightweight, try one of the new netbooks. These are regarded as “downsized laptops” which generally have the bare minimum hardware needed for productivity. While laptops cost from \$499 up, depending on capabilities, netbooks usually cost between \$300

and \$500 and weigh as little as 2-3 pounds. Most do not include an internal DVD drive, though external drives are available for an optional price.

The **primary question** is: How will you be using the laptop/netbook? If you want to have your full range of software with you at all times, then a laptop might be your answer. If, however, you want something to take with you on your research trips that you can use to keep track of information and check email, then a netbook just might be the solution for you.

In each case, you will evaluate the processor, memory, operating system, storage capacity, display, battery, number of USB ports, networking capability (wireless is a must), keyboard, etc. of each device to determine what will work best for your situation.

Storage Devices

Information can be stored in a variety of ways: internal, external or network hard drive, CD or DVD, online document or photo sharing sites, thumb (or flash) drives. The major differences are in amount of storage, speed of access, and cost. Remember when you thought that 8 gigabytes (GB) was a LOT of information? Today, many laptops offer a minimum 300 GB hard drive built in, and the price for terabyte drives is dropping daily. Thumb drives can be found for \$9.99 for 4 GB. As capacity is increasing, costs are decreasing – a trend that will continue. The advantage to all of this is that there is now no excuse for not having a backup (or several) of your genealogy data!

Tablets

Apple Computer has a reputation for developing innovative products, and the Apple iPad is certainly that. Even people who do not use Apple Macintosh computers are flocking to get their hands on an Apple iPad. It will not replace your laptop, but it could be taken on short trips. Your iPad or other tablet can do a lot:

- Access and update your family tree that is stored online;
- Research online sites;
- Read books, including history, genealogy or family-related stories;
- Create notes while you're interviewing a family member;
- Send email to family and friends;
- Store photos and share them at family reunions.

Take it to family reunions to share old photos with family – maybe even get the names of a few people who look familiar but you can't identify. You can play movies or slide shows that you've created; you can take photos with your digital camera and quickly upload them to the iPad. Prices range from \$499 for the Wi-Fi only, 16 GB model to over \$800 for the Wi-Fi, 3G model with 64 GB storage.

Applications specifically designed for genealogy can be downloaded to your iPad. These include Reunion for the iPad, Mobile Family Tree, iHeritage and others. Visit the FamilySearch Research Wiki for an updated list. Other Apps such as iPages, Dropbox and Plain Text can be used for note-taking and file sharing.

Dell, HP, Samsung and Sony have all announced tablets or plans to release tablets. Some reportedly will use the Android operating system from Google. It is also rumored that Apple will release a new version of the iPad in 2011.

Scanners

There are several types of scanners used by genealogists: desktop, portable and handheld are the most common. All have improved over the years and will often allow you to scan a photograph at 1200 to 2400 dpi (dots per inch). Most items are commonly scanned at 300 dpi; however, you would select the higher resolution if you wanted to enlarge the image from its original size (4x6 for example) to 8x10 for printing. This would insure that you would retain the quality of your photograph.

- **Desktop scanners** are often built into all-in-one printers from Hewlett-Packard, Epson, Canon, and others. Some include the ability to scan negatives or slides as well as photographs. Epson offers a desktop scanner that allows you to scan 3-dimensional items such as a piece of jewelry or other family keepsake.
- **Portable scanners** are those that can be easily packed in your travel bag when you are going on a research trip. Canon and Hewlett Packard both offer portable scanners priced near \$100. Canon offers a flatbed model, which is a USB device that can be powered by your laptop and does not require a separate electrical outlet.
- **Handheld scanners** are available for \$99. It may take some practice using the scanner to achieve the most benefit; however, it's easy to use; operates on AA batteries; and can be carried in your laptop case or other small space.

Digital Cameras & Camcorders

Digital cameras are everywhere; you can even take a picture with many cell phones. The advantage is that it is easy to have a camera with you at all times. Put it in your pocket and you can take a picture of a page in a book at the library or that elusive deed or will that you finally find at the courthouse. It's handy to have one at your family reunion when someone brings photos you would like to add to your family story.

Camera prices and features need to be evaluated carefully to make sure you buy one that meets your needs. Generally, the first question you should ask is what megapixel the camera captures. The higher number of megapixels, the better quality the image and the more options you have for editing the image. If all you want to capture is snapshot photos, then a 4-6 megapixel camera may be adequate. If, however, you want to capture photos that you might want to enlarge to 8x10, then you should opt for a camera that has at least a 10-megapixel sensor.

There are several categories of digital cameras from the subcompact to DSLR (digital single lens reflex). Many users start with a subcompact digital camera and gradually work their way up to DSLR as their experience level grows. Subcompact cameras can be found in \$100-\$200 range while DSLR cameras generally start at \$450-\$500, excluding lenses.

The Flip camcorder has become a popular movie camera that includes a USB plug for connecting directly to your laptop, desktop computer or TV. Take a movie and upload it to the

Internet in a matter of minutes. Most Flip cameras include 1-2 hours of movie storage with prices starting at \$150, with occasional sales pricing as low as \$99.

GPS Devices

GPS stands for global positioning system, a satellite-based navigation system operated by the Department of Defense. Most of us use GPS devices in our cars to help us find the courthouse, school or cemetery where we hope to learn more about our ancestors as we travel to remote locations. You can do more.

- Find a cemetery or old family home while driving;
- Mark the exact location of a grave and display the information on Google Maps, including with a picture of the tombstone;
- Use coordinates of the “old homestead” from land records to help you find what’s on the property today.

Some GPS devices have a built-in camera. Other inexpensive devices can be used in conjunction with your existing digital camera.

There are several types of GPS devices made by Garmin, Magellan and TomTom that can be selected based on your intended use: cemetery exploration, driving, multifunctional.

SmartPhones

Cell phones today do more than make phone calls. You can take pictures, search the internet, review your family tree if it’s stored online, or even enter new information into your online tree. Many applications that are available on Tablet devices are also available on SmartPhones. Apple’s iPhone, Droid phones and Blackberry are the most popular models of SmartPhones.

Connectivity

Wi-Fi connections can be found in most hotels and libraries. What do you do if your hotel does not have internet capabilities or if you want to attach more than one device? With a MiFi device from Verizon, Sprint or other cell phone service provider, you can easily access the internet from up to five laptop computers, handheld computers, tablets, or other devices at 3G speeds. You also have internet access from any facility does not have a wireless network, as long as there is cell phone service available in the area.

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