

# Using Wiki's for Genealogical Research

Dallan W. Quass, PhD

President, Foundation for On-Line Genealogy

a non-profit organization

[dallan@WeRelate.org](mailto:dallan@WeRelate.org)

## What is a Wiki?

A wiki is a website that *anyone* can contribute to by creating new pages or editing existing pages. A wiki makes it easy for a dispersed community to work together, furthering common goals and sharing information. The goal of this document is to help you understand wiki's and how they can benefit your family history research.

## Example: Wikipedia.org

Wikipedia.org is a free on-line encyclopedia, with over 1,000,000 English-language articles and 2,000,000 articles in other languages. It began 5 years ago and is now the 22<sup>nd</sup> most-popular website according to Alexa – more popular than AOL or CNN. The articles are written entirely by volunteers. More than 27,000 people contributed 5 or more edits during December, 2005.

## Wiki accuracy concerns

Anytime you allow anyone to edit articles, you have concerns about accuracy. Inaccuracies are certainly present. For example, an article in Wikipedia claimed that John Seigenthaler, the founding editorial director of USA Today, was a suspect in the Kennedy assassinations, which is not true. However, in comparing Wikipedia to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Nature reported that the accuracy of a sample of scientific articles in Wikipedia was very close to the accuracy of those articles in Encyclopedia Britannica. Articles from both sources contained inaccuracies, with those from Wikipedia having just a few more than those from Encyclopedia Britannica. It appears that it is possible for the quality of community-edited articles to at least approach the quality of professionally-authored articles.

I wonder if applying this principle of community effort to family history wouldn't help us also raise the quality of our individually-maintained family histories due to the opportunity for on-line peer review and collaboration.

## Basic wiki functionality

Although anyone can edit a wiki, that does not mean that they change the only copy of a wiki page. When you edit a wiki page, you simply create a new **version** of the page. Previous versions of the page are still available, and it is easy to view of the differences between any two versions of the page.

In this way, it is possible for people to understand who made what changes to each version of the wiki page, and to reverse those changes if necessary.

## Sharing research tips

One way to use wiki's is to share research tips with others. We've all learned things as we've researched our family history – how to research in specific places, where to find and how to use certain kinds of sources, how culture, ethnicity, and occupation can provide additional leads, etc. Why should people starting out have to learn these same lessons all over again? What if there was a way for you to share what you've learned with others – giving them the benefit of your experience as they start out? It seems that if we make family history research easier for beginners to get involved in, then more people will take it up as an interest, which benefits everyone. More people doing family history means more people available to transcribe records, greater incentive for business to provide better software and access to information, and more sympathy from lawmakers around the need to retain public access to family history records.

There are several dimensions along which research tips can be shared:

- Places
- Sources
- Surnames
- Topics

At WeRelate, there are wiki pages for most places in the world, for many sources of family history information, and for most surnames. Over time we hope to have wiki pages for all places, sources, and surnames. The wiki pages provide a place where people can add research tips about how to research in particular places, use particular sources, and understand surname histories and meanings. In addition, people can create “how to” articles on various family history topics.

## Collaborating on family information

Another way to use wiki's is to collaborate with others researching the same family lines. You can share the information you have gathered and ask questions about what others have found. The challenges are:

- finding people researching the same families to collaborate with, and
- sharing research information without taking a lot of time to organize, copy, and send it.

At WeRelate, you can create *personal research pages* which only you can edit that allow you to track the progress of your research – the sources you've looked at, the information you've found, and what you have left to do. Tracking this information on-line makes it easy to share with others.

In addition, at WeRelate you can create *surname in place articles* which contain information about families having a particular surname living in a particular place. Others who come across these surname in place articles can learn about the families you are researching and can add their own information. You can receive an email whenever the page is changed. This makes it easy for you to find out about others researching the same family lines.

Another possible use for wiki's is in sharing pedigree information. A wiki would allow people to collaborate on people and families – to work together analyzing evidence and coming up with agreed-upon opinions of events and relationships. People could review previous versions of pages to see who contributed what pieces of information, and could use discussion areas to talk with others about what conclusions should be drawn. Others coming along months or years later would have access not only to the conclusions but also to the discussion explaining why those conclusions were made.

## **Wiki's vs. Blogs**

Wiki's and blogs are very similar. Both make it easy to post information onto the Web, and both reduce or eliminate the need to learn HTML. Wiki's and blogs differ in their focus: a wiki is topic-oriented, with one page per topic. A page can be edited or split into multiple pages later, and anyone (usually) can contribute to the page. A blog is date-oriented, with different entries on different days. Blog entries are typically not edited after they are initially posted, and others can add comments but do not usually edit the blog entry itself. Both are useful. Personal wiki pages and shared blogs represent a coming together of these two types of software.

## **Wiki's vs. Message boards**

Wiki's and message boards are also similar. Both allow people to communicate on-line with others without needing to know HTML. Wiki's and message boards differ in their focus in much the same ways as wiki's and blogs. Since wiki pages can be edited after they are initially created, questions and answers can be organized over time into readable summaries of the questions and answers. Others coming along later can see the question and answers all together on the same page rather than having to navigate through multiple message board postings. New wiki pages can be created easily, which helps people reduce the amount of unnecessary information they have to process. So if people are interested just in Phillips' in Texas and not Phillips' world-wide, they can create a "Phillips in Texas" wiki page. If a wiki page grows too large, it can be split into more-specific wiki pages.

## **Creating your own family wiki**

The web page *How to Start a Wiki* ([http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki\\_Science:How\\_to\\_start\\_a\\_Wiki](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wiki_Science:How_to_start_a_Wiki)) lists a number of free and paid wiki hosting providers. In general, if you choose a free provider to host your wiki, the provider will place Google ads to offset their costs. If you choose a paid provider, you should expect to pay a few dollars a month.

## **Creating wiki pages at WeRelate**

WeRelate.org is a free genealogy search engine and wiki that is being developed by the Foundation for On-Line Genealogy, a non-profit (501c3) organization dedicated to making family history research easier, faster, and more rewarding. WeRelate is free to the public, and provides a variety of opportunities to use wiki's to help you with your family history. You can learn more about WeRelate by visiting the homepage ([www.werelate.org](http://www.werelate.org)), or by going through one or more of the on-line tutorials ([www.werelate.org/wiki/Help:Tutorial](http://www.werelate.org/wiki/Help:Tutorial)).