

# Internet Genealogy

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## The Future of Genealogy

Lisa A. Alzo asks the experts what the future holds for genealogists!

**T**EN YEARS HAVE ELAPSED SINCE I APPROACHED A NUMBER OF EXPERTS FOR THEIR OPINIONS ON the future of genealogy. This 10th year anniversary seems an appropriate point at which to take stock of how things have developed and whether there have been any major advances along the way. We've brought back a few of the professionals from the previous panel and added a few new faces to round out our list of experts. We asked the same two questions we asked in 2009:

1. What sources (databases, technologies, etc.) or trends do you think will be "hot" in the coming year?
2. What do you foresee happening in the field in the next five to 10 years?

### OBSERVATIONS FOR THE COMING YEAR



**Blaine T. Bettinger:** "In the coming year, I predict that DNA and digitization will continue to lead the charge. DNA databases continue to grow, which help break more brick walls and feed new tools. Digitization creates new

datasets, preferably indexed, that were largely undiscoverable. Both help create new evidence that genealogists can use to build and test hypotheses, ultimately reaching a conclusion. In 2019 and beyond, we will use these tools to recreate millions of relationships otherwise lost to time.

Following DNA and digitization, a close third will be third-party tools. New software is filling many different niches in the field of genealogy, and I predict there will be continued innovation of helpful functionalities that capture, store, and generate genealogical information."



**Schelly Talalay Dardashti:** "As a researcher of Sephardic Jews (those who left, were murdered or were exiled from Spain because of the Inquisition in 1492 and earlier, and who migrated around the Mediterranean from North

Africa, Sicily, Italy, Turkey, Greece, the Balkans, etc.), I believe that the rich holdings of extant Inquisition documents will be scanned, digitized and placed online for the millions of descendants of those individuals. While some files are quite short, others contain tens or more of pages detailing genealogical information, inventories of possessions and much more. Genie Milgrom of Miami has been instrumental in working on this, and we hope it comes to fruition sooner rather than later."



**Pat Richley-Erikson** (a.k.a. DearMyrtle): "No keyboards, handwriting recognition and cloud technology."



**Thomas MacEntee:** "Top priority will be PRIVACY especially when it comes to DNA test results. Increased use of social media and reliance upon it and the Internet has caused a shift in how we look at privacy. More and more genealogists will hesitate to take a DNA test

or to administer a test for a family member given recent news about DNA testing companies sharing DNA test data with law enforcement as well as pharmaceutical companies. The US Census will be a big topic this year. Not only due to the ongoing controversy involving placement of a citizenship question on the upcoming 2020 Census, but also preparations for the release of the 1950 US Census scheduled for 2022. Given the increased focus on privacy mentioned above, we could see lawmakers extend the period during which the 1950 data is kept private.

Also, the “decluttering” trend shows no sign of slowing down thanks to not only Marie Kondo, but also the realization by Baby Boomers that their children and grandchildren just don’t want their stuff! I predict we’ll see a focus on photo digitization and organization, preservation of genealogy data for future generations, and similar projects.”



**Stephen P. Morse, Ph.D.:**

“When I was asked this question ten years ago, I said there would be a shift from physical archives to online databases. Well I was certainly right about that. FamilySearch has made great strides in making

their physical microfilms available in digital content. The National Archives put the 1940 census online on opening day rather than on physical microfilm, and they are certain to do the same for the upcoming release of the 1950 census. This trend will certainly continue to the point that eventually physical archives will cease to exist.”



**Greg D. Nelson:** “DNA has taken center stage in the research of ancestors and gives a new entry point into genealogy that doesn’t require a well-documented tree to begin. To service these newcomers and traditional genealogists using

this new evidence, DNA tools are developed that help groups find and interpret matches. The tools that will have immediate success will be visually appealing and give researchers small conclusions that lead to more investigation.

The inclusion of DNA evidence is also leading to a generational shift in genealogy, most evident in attendance at national conferences by new researchers

who are seeking a better understanding of their ethnicities and homelands. These next generation genealogists bring a vitality and eagerness, along with new techniques of research, that will open new communities to discover their families. They also bring a sound understanding of technology and will utilize social media for a better experience.

FAN (Friends, Associates, Neighbors) relationships lead researchers to acknowledge communities beyond the biological and will be vital in understanding situations and opportunities for further research. Understanding the different situations in the household and area will lead to a richer experience and deeper understanding of forces that affect a family.”



**Angela Walton-Raji:** “I admit that the advance in digitized resources has made an impact on my life, and I am so grateful for the amazing new databases that have become available. But a new population is coming into the genealogy community – and they are entering the genealogy community through DNA testing. Clearly, many are making new family connections and answering mysteries in their genealogy through DNA testing. But there is also a new population emerging. This new population is seeing their DNA profile and then asking the question”, “*Who are the people who come from these places that reflect my history?*” And the people asking these questions are young people.

They are filming their own DNA reveal on camera and are filming themselves on YouTube to their own circle of friends and associates. There are hundreds of these reveal videos online and we, the “seasoned” researchers, have much to share and to teach these new “self-recruited” genealogists on the methods and strategies of sound genealogical research. We need to meet them where they are – armed with technological skills, the right apps, and the skills to interpret historical data. And we have to learn the strategies of delivering the information also to them electronically, or in video format or in “face time” that they use regularly.

The “hottest” arena will be the arena of technology development, putting genealogy at the crossroad where traditional genealogical research and information technology intersect, and by preparing for this intersection, we will find that more doors will open for all of us. This promises to be an exciting time.”



## WHAT DO YOU FORESEE HAPPENING IN THE FIELD IN THE NEXT FIVE TO 10 YEARS?



**Blaine T. Bettinger:** "Clustering and automation are the immediate future of genealogy. Digitization projects are generating massive amounts of new data on a daily basis, much of which would have otherwise been largely

undiscoverable due to the lifetimes it would take to manually search through it. Accordingly, the next five to ten years of genealogy will focus on manually and automatically organizing this incredible body of data, allowing us to identify and extract the information applicable to a specific research question.

Currently, genealogists manually cluster records and people using methodologies such as the FAN club. This is one of the most powerful tools we have for difficult brick walls. Big data methodology will utilize the fruits of digitization to cluster records, families, DNA, and metadata into large networks that identify new relationships and associations. We will utilize these clusters to generate powerful hypotheses for investigation. Genealogy will become more quantitative, which will allow us to derive confidence levels and probabilities for our conclusions.

Questions such as 'how many families owned land in Upstate NY in the 1870s' or 'how many children did families like mine in Albany in the 1910s have', which can only be extracted from these massive new digitized datasets, will add to the social history of our ancestors."



**Schelly Talalay Dardashti:** "The trend is towards more and more records being placed online, and I do not see this slowing down. The more the merrier! As I wrote in the first article years ago, my most important wish is

for development of a time machine. We all want to go back and check out a story in our family. Even if we cannot communicate with our ancestors directly, we could perhaps be there to observe what really happened and perhaps cut through the embellishments of the intervening centuries. I believe that major advancements are still to be made in the

DNA industry, with the development of even more advanced technology, tools and features to make utilizing DNA testing even easier to connect with unknown family around the world."



**Pat Richley-Erikson** (a.k.a. DearMyrtle): "Genealogy is no longer a solitary pursuit. My best genealogical breakthroughs have been through online collaboration - using public trees to find others

with the same ancestors. I may have inherited the family Bible, but that distant cousin inherited the family photos. Where we once used RootsWeb message boards and mailing lists, we now tie our photos, scanned images of old documents and multi-media recordings to an ancestor in cloud-based public trees. Cooperation in the genealogical community has the potential to bridge color, culture and political barriers, with a ripple effect in our larger communities.

Super high speed Internet access through inexpensive Chromebook computers and hopefully less expensive smart phones will keep end-user access affordable. Major genealogy websites will continue to promote "one tree for all", but researchers will continue to need private space to corral their "current thinking" before venturing on the web. Free, cloud-based server space will be the norm. Desktop genealogy database software will morph into personal, private online database management services.

Where typed records are typically indexed by OCR (Optical Character Recognition) bringing millions of pages to view by typing in a name, AI (artificial intelligence) will provide interpretation of handwriting in the genealogy vertical, as it is currently successful in mail and package delivery services. This will make all but a few cryptic documents every-word searchable. Projects like FamilySearch Indexing will focus on deciphering heavily damaged or difficult to read documents.

FamilySearch is nearing completion of its microfilm digitization project. This and other major genealogy websites are moving beyond typical white, European ancestral scanning projects, recognizing through the rise in DNA testing, we are more alike than we are different. Recording oral

histories in countries with little to no written records is happening. Preserving records with non-Anglo Saxon character sets will bring a long awaited acceptance of our global community's multi-cultural heritage. Programmers will refine search algorithms to accommodate a broader variety of surname spellings based on nuances of language and local dialect.

In the future, we will speak, not type, to initiate an ancestral search or to compose an ancestor's bio. Voice-activated protocols like Alexa, Siri and "Hey, Google" will replace most typed searches and transcriptions.

Thankfully, we have a responsible community of genetic genealogists who have developed ethical guidelines for using DNA technology. These guidelines will shortly be added to the GPS (Genealogical Proof Standards) codified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists in *Genealogy Standards*. Disparity between professional genealogists and the quick-click hobbyist won't diminish until elitism is eschewed and beginners take advantage of in-person and virtual genealogical education opportunities to improve research methodology.

As the last of the baby boomers enter retirement years with disposable income, ancestral tourism will proliferate. There's nothing that pulls on the heartstrings more than walking where your ancestors once walked. Boomers will also find creative tangible and digital approaches for sharing family stories with their descendants.

Someone, somewhere will finally figure out who my ancestor Dolly Yockey's parents are."



**Thomas MacEntee:** "Big, big changes. These ideas may be 'out there', but that's what people told me 10 years ago when I said that social media would have a huge impact on the genealogy industry. These are things to look for:

- use of DNA signatures or block chaining to track use of DNA test results
- use of drones to conduct cemetery surveys as well as surveys of hard-to-reach historical sites
- increase in virtual genealogy conferences as Baby Boomers confront mobility issues

- increase in use of voice recognition in genealogy apps and devices
- use of facial recognition to identify people on orphaned photos
- and finally a way to read handwriting on a scanned document and convert it to digital text."



**Stephen P. Morse, Ph.D.:** "More and more databases are becoming available and will continue to do so as the major genealogy companies continue to seek out records that they can digitize. But on the other side of the coin,

we are losing some of our valued databases. Nearly all of the free sites for obtaining birthdays have been shut down. The Social Security Administration is no longer adding new records into the Social Security Death Index (SSDI). And some of the records that genealogists have requested are being returned with redacted fields. All of this in the name of fighting identity theft. Regrettably, I see this trend continuing as well and it will be up to the genealogy community to make their voices heard."



**Greg D. Nelson:** "Under-served areas with enormous populations will gain more access to records and tools that will help them discover their own history in ways that have been unavailable before. Available technology

will give access to researchers in Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, the India subcontinent, South East Asia, and China/Japan/Korea opportunities to develop and share trees and connect with other researchers around the world. Most of these areas have records that will be of benefit to immigrants as they trace their lines to their ancestral homelands. Record sets that have been previously inaccessible such as oral genealogies, jiapu [Chinese family genealogy books], and pilgrimage records will become common bases of research.

The development of better OCR and handwriting recognition technology will open up new



record sets that have previously been difficult to research and understand. Individuals that are generations removed from an ancestral homeland will be able to quickly search Danish church records, Chinese jiapu, and New York probate case files for key pieces of information that would have taken much longer to search page by page. AI can be leveraged to connect these different record sets to each other, identify unique identities, and put them into reconstituted families.

As privacy concerns are addressed, we will see the blending of immediate family history and ancestral family history. The preservation of the present and spaces to share it can lead to communication between families that otherwise may not have happened – a greater connectivity between extended families. Ancestral stories can be developed that go beyond the vital statistics and census records and emphasis will be given to homeland histories with contributions from a variety of sources.

One development to keep an eye on will be how large genealogy companies cooperate and partner with each other. Each has their core competencies and by focusing on the areas in which they are successful while cooperating with others to build them up, the rising tide will lift all boats. This also gives space to non-genealogically focused companies to solve unmet needs and inefficiencies, giving a better and diverse experience to researchers. There will be many opportunities for building and growth if you carefully watch the landscape for changes.”



**Angela Walton-Raji:** “What I foresee will be the ability to create new apps, that will allow people to take their personal history, or community history research and to map them, and to create augmented reality games with a

family history focus. New methods of recording and uploading interviews, or documenting cemeteries will be enhanced in the next few years as well.

The development of new “apps” and databases will provide people with a greater chance to come together more easily and share. New portals allowing people to tell their own stories and to easily record their own stories will make static websites and blogs more dynamic. The explosion of blogs

in the past 10 years has already evolved into “real time vlogging” and we as genealogists will be required to join that community to remain relevant. At the same time – there is critical need to emphasize the critical skills of in-depth analysis and how to reach sound conclusions based on viable research methods and to learn the essential components of sound genealogical proof.”

## the panel

**Blaine T. Bettinger, Ph.D., JD** is an author, blogger, and founder of DNA Central, [www.DNA-Central.com](http://www.DNA-Central.com).

**Schelly Talalay Dardashti** is a journalist/genealogist, and speaker. She is MyHeritage.com’s US Genealogy Advisor. A pioneer Jewish genealogy blogger who wrote the popular *Tracing the Tribe – The Jewish Genealogy Blog* (now on hiatus), she created (in 2008) *Tracing the Tribe – Jewish Genealogy* on Facebook, [facebook.com/groups/tracingthetribe](https://www.facebook.com/groups/tracingthetribe) (28,000+ global members as of March 2019).

**Pat Richley-Erikson** (a.k.a. DearMyrtle) is the author of the award winning *DearMYRTLE’s Genealogy Column*, and host of *Mondays with Myrt* and *WACKY Wednesday genealogy webinars*.

**Thomas MacEntee** is a genealogy professional specializing in the use of technology and social media to improve genealogy research and as a way to connect with others in the family history community. His latest project is *Smarter Genealogy*, <https://smartergenealogy.com>.

**Stephen P. Morse, Ph.D.** is the creator of the One-Step Website at <http://stevemorse.org>.

**Greg D. Nelson** manages content strategy for East Europe, Central Asia, and India at FamilySearch.

**Angela Walton-Raji** is a founding member of *AfriGeneas.com*, author, owner of three genealogy blogs, faculty member of the *Midwest African American Genealogy Institute (MAAGI)*, and also host of the 10 year *African Roots Podcast*.

Author, instructor, and lecturer **LISA A. ALZO** is a frequent contributor to *Internet Genealogy* and *Your Genealogy Today*.