

WHAT TO ASK YOUR FAMILY THIS HOLIDAY

A one-sitting interview guide for the dinner table, the couch, and the car ride home.

THE METHOD ASK · RECORD · WRITE IT DOWN THAT NIGHT

The holidays are the one time a year your best living sources sit in the same room. You do not need a formal interview. You need a short list of questions, a phone set to record, and the discipline to write down what you heard before you go to bed. This guide gives you the questions in the order that works, a worksheet to fill in, and what to do with the answers on Friday.

KEY RULE What you hear at the table is a lead, not a fact. Write it as "Aunt said," with the date and who she heard it from. Prove it in the records before it goes in your tree.

BEFORE YOU SIT DOWN

DO THIS	WHY IT MATTERS
Pick one person, not the whole table	A room full of relatives will correct and interrupt each other. Sit beside the oldest person and ask quietly, after the meal, over coffee.
Ask permission, then record	Set your phone to a voice memo and lay it face down. You will not remember the details by Saturday. Say the date and the person's name at the start of the recording.
Bring one old photograph	An unlabeled photo is the best conversation starter there is. Someone may know the faces, the house, or the year.
Bring this guide and a pen	Fill in the worksheet on page 3 as you go. Names and places, spelled the way they are said.
Do not argue with a story	Family legends are usually wrong about the details and right about something. Record it as told. Test it later.

START HERE THE THREE QUESTIONS THAT MOVE OHIO RESEARCH

1. "WHERE DID OUR FAMILY LIVE BEFORE OHIO?"

Most Ohio families arrived between about 1800 and 1850 from Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Connecticut, or straight from Germany and Ireland, and the paper trail before the move is thin. A relative who remembers "near Pittsburgh" or "somewhere in the Shenandoah" has handed you a county to search. Write down every place word, even the ones you think are wrong.

2. "WHO WAS THE OLDEST RELATIVE YOU ACTUALLY MET?"

A relative in their eighties may have known someone born in the 1870s, who knew people born before the Civil War. Get the name, where they lived, what they did, and anything they said about their own parents. Then the follow up everyone forgets: "Did they leave anything? A Bible, a photo, a letter, a deed?" Someone at the table knows which cousin has the drawer.

3. "WHAT STORY DID THE FAMILY TELL THAT NOBODY COULD PROVE?"

The Revolutionary War ancestor. The three brothers who came over together. The land that was lost. The name changed at the courthouse. Record it exactly as told, including who told it and who they heard it from. The legend is usually wrong about the war and right about the county.

GO DEEPER FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS, BY TOPIC

You will not get through all of these, and you should not try. Pick the section that fits the person you are sitting with. Every question is written to be asked out loud.

PLACES AND MOVES

- Where were you born, and where was the house? Is it still standing?
- Where were your parents born? Your grandparents?
- Why did the family move to Ohio, or to this town? Who came first?
- Did anyone go back? Did anyone stay behind?
- What church did the family belong to? Did it change?
- Where are the family buried? Which cemetery, which town?

NAMES AND NICKNAMES

- Was the family name ever spelled differently, or changed?
- What did people call your grandparents? Their real names?
- Were any children named after someone? Who?
- Did anyone have a nickname that was not their real name?

FOOD AND TRADITIONS

- What did your grandmother cook every year that you still miss?
- Who taught her to make it? Is the recipe written down anywhere?
- Were there dishes that came from the old country, or from Pennsylvania or Virginia?
- What did the family always do on this holiday when you were small?

WORK AND LAND

- What did your father and grandfather do for a living?
- Did the family own a farm or a business? Where was it?
- Did anyone lose land, a house, or a business? How?

MILITARY SERVICE

- Did anyone in the family serve in a war? Which one?
- Did they come home? Where did they settle after?
- Did anyone get a pension, or bounty land?
- Are there medals, discharge papers, or a uniform anywhere?

PAPERS, PHOTOS, AND THINGS

- Is there a family Bible? Who has it now?
- Who has the old photographs? Are any of them labeled?
- Are there letters, diaries, deeds, or a funeral card collection?
- Did anyone ever write the family history down?

HARD QUESTIONS, ASKED GENTLY

- Was there anyone the family did not talk about? Why?
- Did anyone die young, or in an accident, or far from home?
- Was there a child who was raised by another relative?
- Is there anything you were told never to repeat, that you think should be remembered now?

PRE OHIO TIP If the answer to any question is a place outside Ohio, stop and ask three more: What county? What church? What family came with them? Those three answers are what you need to order the records from that state.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR CLUES HIDING IN ORDINARY ANSWERS

IF THEY SAY	WRITE DOWN	IT MAY LEAD TO
"They came over the mountains"	Pennsylvania or Virginia, overland	Braddock's Road, Forbes Road, Zane's Trace, the National Road; tax lists in the county they left
"They came down the river"	Ohio River landing, likely from Pittsburgh or Wheeling	Flatboat era, 1790 to 1830; land entries in the river counties
"Grandpa got land for the war"	Bounty land	Revolutionary War or War of 1812 bounty land warrants; the Virginia Military District or U.S. Military District
"Grandma always made that for Christmas"	The dish and who taught her	Regional and ethnic origin clues: Pennsylvania German, Appalachian Virginia, Irish, Italian; a recipe can point at a county
"The church was all in German"	Lutheran or Catholic German parish	Church registers in Kurrent script, often never translated
"The courthouse burned"	County name and rough year	Substitute records: tax lists, church books, newspapers, state copies
"She was a widow with little ones"	Husband's death, rough year	Probate packet, guardianship, widow's pension

THE DAY AFTER TURNING ANSWERS INTO A RESEARCH PLAN

A page of notes dated this holiday is a source. A memory of a conversation is not. Do these before the weekend is over.

- ☐ **Save the recording** with the person's name and the date in the file name. Make a second copy somewhere else.
- ☐ **Type up the worksheet** the same night, while you still remember what the shorthand meant.
- ☐ **Cite the interview** in your notes: "[Name], interview by [you], [date], [place]; recording in possession of [you]."
- ☐ **List every place name** from Question 1 and look each one up in the FamilySearch catalog for that state and county.
- ☐ **Find the oldest relative** from Question 2 in the census, then work backward one census at a time.
- ☐ **Write the family story** from Question 3 as a hypothesis, and under it list the three records that would prove or disprove it.
- ☐ **Ask about the drawer.** Contact the cousin who has the Bible, photos, or papers before the holiday glow wears off. Offer to scan and return them.
- ☐ **Schedule the next conversation.** One sitting never gets everything. Ask if you can call in January.

WORKSHEET INTERVIEW RECORD (COPY ONE PER PERSON)

PERSON INTERVIEWED	DATE AND PLACE
RELATIONSHIP TO ME	YEAR OF BIRTH (APPROX.)
RECORDING FILE NAME	OTHERS PRESENT

Q1. WHERE DID OUR FAMILY LIVE BEFORE OHIO?

STATE / COUNTY / TOWN
CHURCH, RIVER, OR LANDMARK
FAMILIES WHO CAME WITH THEM
WHO TOLD THEM THIS

Q2. OLDEST RELATIVE THEY ACTUALLY MET

NAME (AND WHAT THEY CALLED THEM)
WHERE THEY LIVED / WHAT THEY DID
WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT THEIR PARENTS
PAPERS, BIBLE, PHOTOS: WHO HAS THEM

Q3. THE STORY NOBODY COULD PROVE

THE STORY, AS TOLD
WHO TOLD IT, WHO THEY HEARD IT FROM
DETAIL MOST LIKELY TO BE TRUE
RECORDS THAT COULD TEST IT

OTHER NAMES, PLACES, AND DATES MENTIONED

EVIDENCE WHERE THE ANSWERS LEAD IN THE RECORDS

WHAT YOU HEARD	RECORD TO CHECK FIRST	WHERE
A county or town before Ohio	Tax lists, church registers, deeds in that county	FamilySearch catalog (by state, then county); state archives; county genealogical society
A soldier ancestor	Pension file, muster roll, bounty land warrant	Fold3, NARA, FamilySearch; Ohio Patriots & Pioneers series for how to read them
A family farm in Ohio	Deed index, original land entry, plat map	County recorder; BLM GLO records; Ohio History Connection
A widow, orphans, or a lost estate	Probate packet, guardianship, estate sale	County probate court; FamilySearch full text search
A German or Irish church	Baptism, marriage, and burial registers	Diocesan or synod archives; FamilySearch; volunteer translators for German script
A death away from home	Newspaper notice, coroner, cemetery record	Chronicling America, Ohio Memory, county library newspaper index

THE PLEDGE Original records over unsourced trees. Honest uncertainty over a tidy story. Every name in the archive was a real person who deserves to be remembered accurately, and that includes the ones at your table.

KEEP GOING

Free Ohio county guides, record cheat sheets, and worksheets are at brickwallsbuckeyes.com. Post the brick wall your interview uncovered on the Ohio Brick Walls board there, and watch Ohio Research Strategies on the Brick Walls & Buckeyes YouTube channel for the records walkthroughs that follow this guide.

This guide is free for personal and classroom use. Please share the link rather than the file so researchers always get the current version.