

The 15 Habits of Highly Frugal Genealogists

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Researching your family history can be fun, but like many hobbies, it can turn into an obsession, and an expensive one at that. There are many ways to save money while you pursue the “hunt” for your roots: some are just common sense while others are, quite frankly, ingenious. Also keep in mind that it doesn’t pay to be so focused on “frugal” that in the long run you either lose money or that genealogy is no longer “fun.”

Why Genealogy Isn’t “Free”

It isn’t easy to consolidate the “why aren’t genealogy records free?” argument into a short paragraph, but here goes: Yes many vital records and other records are public domain or owned by federal and state governments. But it takes money to scan and digitize these items and then not only host the images on a website but also index them in such a way that you can find what you need. In addition, some vendors like Ancestry.com employ proprietary methods of making images easier to use and read – these too cost money to develop. So most of the records are free, if you are willing to travel to the closest NARA location or a state archive, then search through the items.

The 15 Habits

Ready to save some real money when it comes to genealogy? Who knows, some of these habit might just rub off and be useful in other areas of your life!

- 1. Holidays Mean Freebies.** If you don’t have a membership to a subscription site like Ancestry.com or MyHeritage, look for “free days” around specific holidays. Very often the week before Memorial Day or Veterans Day will allow you to access military records. Labor Day offers occupational records for free. Sign up for a site’s e-mail alerts to stay on top of the latest offers.
- 2. Cycle On and Cycle Off.** A common technique many genealogists use to save money is to purchase a short-term membership on a research site like Ancestry.com. Instead of signing up and paying for a year, get a three or six month membership. Once the membership has expired, take a break and then use other websites for research. Maintain a research log “wish list” of records you want to access or find, and then sign up for that genealogy website again. Get to work locating what you need, then drop off again for a few months.
- 3. Don’t Be Shy – Ask for a Discount!** Have you ever tried to cancel your television cable service and the company offers a huge discount so you won’t go to a competitor? Use the same technique when dealing with genealogy vendors. Don’t accept the listed price on the website or in an email you receive when it is time to renew a subscription. Actually call the company and get right to the point: ask if there is a discount for being a loyal customer. You might be surprised at the low price offered since the company wants to maintain its subscriber base; the cost to recruit new subscribers might allow for a discount to existing customers.

4. **Leverage Coupon Websites.** The genealogy business is not as insulated and small as you think! Many vendors such as Ancestry.com and others offer discounts and promo codes on the big coupon sites such as **Retail Me Not** and **Coupon Cabin**. Always get in the habit of searching these sites BEFORE you use the Checkout option and plunk down your money!
5. **Use Virtual Credit Card Numbers.** Have you ever had a subscription service renew automatically especially when you decided you wanted to cancel? Most genealogy research sites force you to accept the auto-renew option (it is in the Terms of Service that, of course, you read before making your purchase, right?). One way around this is to go to your credit card or bank website and ask for a virtual credit card. By doing so, you can pay for a service from your bank or credit card, but the payment credentials won't allow more than one payment generation.
6. **Access Your Local Library.** A card at a public library can be your ticket to savings when it comes to genealogy research! More and more municipalities are providing access to Ancestry.com, fold3 and ProQuest as well as other subscriptions to their citizens. And don't think you have to use these databases in person at the library! Very often, after getting your library card, you can access sites from home. As an example, in Wisconsin, state residents can access [BadgerLink](#).
7. **Stay Alert and Be Alerted!** Sign up for a vendor's newsletter where often you'll be the first to know about a new product or a discount. Also, if the site has a blog, make sure you subscribe to the posts either via email or RSS feed. Concerned about receiving too much junk email? Create a special email account at Google or Yahoo that you use just for signing up for deals and specials. Also learn how to use Google Alerts to get notified: create alerts using keywords such as **genealogy** and **sale** or a **product name** and **sale**.
8. **Abandon Your Online Shopping Cart.** One trick to use is this: add items to a vendor's online shopping cart and let it sit for a few days. Then go in and "cancel" your cart. It is likely that the site will send you an email with a special discount to lure you back so you can finalize your purchase.
9. **Convert Gift Cards to Amazon Credit.** Are you sitting on several Visa or MasterCard gift cards with small balances? Did you know that you can purchase an [Amazon Gift Card](#) for an exact amount, like \$7.54 and then use it to purchase genealogy books or other items on Amazon? A great way to make sure you don't lose money on those pre-paid debit/gift cards!
10. **Don't Be Afraid to Cancel.** Once you cancel a service, don't be surprised if they contact you and ask *why* you left. Be honest with them and tell them why. They may offer you a greatly discounted price or a free month of their service.
11. **Become An Affiliate.** If you run a website or a blog, you can sign up with many vendors to be an *affiliate* of that site. What does this mean? It means that you can earn money based on

sales made through special links on your site. Many of the major genealogy vendors have these affiliate programs. And **Amazon** has a program as well. You may not get rich, but you could earn enough money to offset costs.

12. Avoid Impulse Decisions.

Just like shopping at the grocery store on an empty stomach, you need to use some common sense when making genealogy related purchases. When considering a purchase, even a small one (because the small ones add up, right?), set it aside and come back to the website or shopping cart a few hours or days later. Also, disable any “one click” shopping mechanisms like those used on **Amazon**. If the purchase process takes several steps, you are more likely to reconsider the purchase. It might turn out that the “must have” item is one quickly forgotten about in a few days.

13. Get the Conference Discount.

Many genealogists attend national or state conferences which involve travel, hotel accommodations and other items - all costing money. Try to attend conferences that have a roommate matching service so you can split hotel costs, if you are comfortable sharing a room. Also consider ride-share services like **RideBuzz** to save on transportation costs. And what about volunteering? Many conferences are willing to either comp your registration or give you monetary credit towards the cost if you commit to a certain number of volunteer hours.

14. Get the Senior Discount.

Again it comes down to not being shy about asking. Here in the US, the American Association of Retired Persons or AARP, allows membership starting at age 50. And with membership comes huge discounts on many items, including an Ancestry.com subscription!

15. Check with Your Employer.

Did you know that the **Microsoft Home Use Program** lets you download Microsoft Office and other programs for a one time price of \$9.95? Your employer must use the Microsoft program and be enrolled in the program.

Be Frugal, Not Foolish

With all these tips and tricks to save money, it could be easy to try and squeeze out every penny while still trying to do your genealogy research. Make sure that your efforts and technique are rooted in reality. Here are some areas where being overzealous when it comes to savings and discounts can backfire:

- **Don't share login credentials.** Many services don't allow multiple logins using their credentials to access the site. Doing so is usually a violation of the Terms of Service for the site and you could find your account cancelled and you won't get a refund on what you paid. Websites can track your IP address and actually see if there is more than one login at a time. Don't take the chance of being banned from a genealogy website!
- **Read the Terms of Service before you buy.** Fully understand how the website services work, especially if there is an auto-renew process. It is your responsibility to read all the text and to make a decision on whether or not to use the site. If something isn't clear, email or call to get clarification.
- **Watch for Expiring Credits!** Some sites allow you to purchase credits and use them as needed to download records. However, most credits expire after a set date, usually a year from purchase. Don't be caught short when it comes time to get that needed record and you're wondering what happened to all those credits!
- **Don't Try Multiple Intro Accounts.** Many of the vendors have gotten smart to those who use different email addresses to sign up for a 7 or 14-day intro to a genealogy website. Most sites will track your IP address instead. Also, you'll likely receive a phone call from the service asking if you have any questions or need help with the site.

Resource List

- **Amazon Gift Cards**
<http://www.amazon.com>
- **Ancestry AARP Discount**
<http://www.ancestry.com/cs/us/aarp>
- **Coupon Cabin**
<http://www.couponcabin.com>
- **Microsoft Home Use Program**
<http://www.microsoft.com/hupus/chooser.aspx?culture=en-US>
- **ProQuest**
<http://www.proquest.com>
- **Retail Me Not**
<http://www.retailmenot.com>
- **RideBuzz**
<http://www.ridebuzz.org>
- **WorldCat**
<http://www.worldcat.org>