

The FamilySearch Research Wiki, the most valuable resource on the Internet

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With over 64,000 articles and expanding rapidly, the FamilySearch Research Wiki is easily the most valuable genealogical resource on the Internet. The FamilySearch Research Wiki is “hidden” on the Learn page of FamilySearch.org. (<https://familysearch.org/>) accessible from the “Learn” at the top of the home page next to the FamilySearch Logo. There are multiple links to the Wiki on the Learn page including a search box where you can begin searching on the wiki. You can use the Wiki for research for free and without registering. If you want to contribute to the Wiki or edit articles you will have to register for a free LDS Account or FamilySearch Account and login.

What is a Wiki?

The word “wiki” comes from the first wiki, the WikiWikiWeb developed by Ward Cunningham in 1994 and 1995 that was named after a shuttle bus at the Honolulu International Airport called the Wiki Wiki Shuttle. A wiki is a website that allows the creation and linking of a large number of interrelated pages in a collaborative environment and with multiple users, therefore, by definition, a wiki is a product of cooperative networked authors. Wikis would not exist without the immediate collaborative nature of both the format and the Internet environment where the wiki is constructed. In a general sense a “wiki” is a collaborative website maintained by a community of users that allows any authorized user to add or edit content. In another sense, a wiki is a type of server software that allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any web browser.

By further definition, a wiki allows users to create and edit pages by using the users’ own web browser without adding on any other software. Pages that contain encyclopedia-like content are usually referred to as articles. Pages that contain instructions or policies or other non-instructional material are referred to as pages. Even though there is a technical distinction, the two terms are often used interchangeably except in technical discussions.

In its purest form, a wiki would allow anyone to edit any page, but moderated wikis generally have a hierarchy of access depending on factors influencing and allowing access set by the wiki owners or supervisors. The format and construction of a wiki allows almost unlimited links and/or associations between pages. Usually, creation of a new page in a wiki can be as simple as adding text to an existing or new page heading. By certain conventions, a wiki user can tell whether or not a subject is also a page. Creating a new page is accomplished by linking to the title of a page that not yet exists. The linked page is automatically created at the time content is added and the page is saved. It is antithetical to the creation of a wiki to have unlinked pages floating around in hyperspace. By definition, a wiki implies connectivity and interrelationships between the pages. An unlinked page is considered an error in the overall construction of the wiki, as are pages that have no further links, i.e. dead end

pages. The value of the information contained in a wiki increases in direct proportion to the degree to which the information is integrated into the over-all wiki by links.

Although the content of a wiki may be carefully crafted, none of the pages in a wiki are considered final, every page is a work in progress and can be changed anytime by any user unless the owners of the wiki have imposed some rules of access and editing. It is also normal for the wiki to have a hierarchal form of organization, since the sponsor of the wiki almost always has some purpose or goal imposed on the wiki. In that respect, a wiki is not a free form construct, but a collaborative effort towards achieving some predetermined goal. It is obvious that contributors to the wiki may not always understand or agree to its collaborative and free form nature. In the case of a larger open wiki, this means that there will be disagreements over content and form. Depending on the structure of the sponsoring organization and the formality or informality of the wiki, there may be a hierarchal dispute resolution structure or not. Ultimately, the sponsoring organization may invoke some degree of censorship to the content or structure of the wiki.

The wiki relies on its community of readers/collaborators to provide the content of the wiki and to edit existing content. To the extent that the goals and content of the wiki allow, the wiki can limit both the construction and the content. Wikis are most certainly the product of computer networks. Without a network and simultaneous access to the pages, the type of collaboration inherent in a wiki would not be possible.

The open format of a wiki allows the structure to be used for almost any type of collaborative purpose limited only by the imagination of the users. It is normal for there to be a hierarchy of pages in which the content defines the nature and access of the pages. If the wiki is moderated i.e. controlled by a single or cooperative entity, then the wiki will assume the content and structure imposed on it by the owner or owners. In a sense, the wiki must be cooperative because, by its nature, only those items of interest to the entire group will ultimately be allowed. Essentially, the group maintains its own integrity by rejecting unsuitable material. It is this process of refinement, the addition of new material and the editing of that material by all of the users in a cooperative manner, that allows the wiki to grow without a central plan or direction more than a general topic.

It would be impossible to talk about wikis without a reference to Wikipedia.org, the largest and so far, most successful wiki. Wikipedia.org has grown to its dominant position through a policy of adding virtually any subject matter, however the content is governed by a self-appointed group of contributors. A moderated and directed wiki will by its limited nature reflect the goals and purposes of the creating organization or individuals. The Research Wiki is definitely moderated and directed. Seeded content was added at its inception and continues to be added by organized groups of contributors.

Why is the wiki form of online organization at all desirable, much less preferable? By opening up the content to the “general online public” a wiki is almost assured of pertinent and universal content. But at the same time there is always a tendency for the content to drift into areas deemed unacceptable by the

governing or sponsoring body. To the extent possible, the Research Wiki has a *laissez-faire* policy towards content, founded in the firm belief that the users will correct gross errors and that the Wiki will gravitate towards the consensus. For the most part this is true. But, in the case of an institutionally sponsored wiki, such as the Research Wiki, the sponsoring organization, for policy reasons, will not tolerate certain types of content. The values and standards of the wiki will always reflect those of its sponsoring organization.

Whatever their motivation, there will always be a core of wiki contributors willing to spend their time and effort to add new material and correct and edit the existing content. In the case of the Research Wiki, the process cannot be entirely *laissez-faire*, because it has a conservative sponsoring organization and there are actual employees involved in its maintenance and content.

So why should you care about wikis or their content? The format and structure of a wiki is particularly suited for presenting huge amounts of collaborative information. In the past, the only type of outlet for such an effort was the production of a huge encyclopedia. But, the nature of printed material was such that the content of any such printed encyclopedia was out-of-date almost from the moment of its release to the public. Some encyclopedias tried to remedy the larger errors in content through using an annual yearbook with updates. In contrast, in a wiki, the information submitted is instantly available to the online world. Updates can be made as they occur. The overhead of time and expense experienced by more traditional methods of presenting masses of information have been largely eliminated.

Why does a Wiki work?

One of the first concerns expressed by people who learn about the wikis, is how can they work if everyone has access to make changes? Why isn't a wiki just a pile of junk? There is no simple answer to this question. Part of the reason the wikis work lies in the structure of the program and its administration. Before getting into the nuts and bolts of how the program works and presenting screen shots showing the details of the Research Wiki, it is important that you accept wikis as a viable format for the presentation of information. If you do not believe that a wiki can work, then you will not be comfortable with using the Research Wiki as a reference.

There is an abundance of discussion in the media, primarily online in news accounts and blog posts about the merit of wikis as a viable method of presenting information. Most of the discussion centers around the disputes involving the content of Wikipedia on certain very controversial subjects where no one expects the participants to ever agree even on a middle ground. What is not discussed are the millions of uncontroversial articles where there is no real dispute over the accuracy of the content. That is not to say that the Research Wiki will be entirely free of controversy. Any time you have people with opinions, there will be controversy. As you continue to work with the Research Wiki, I am sure that you will realize that the nature of the content, genealogy, will reduce controversies to a minimum.

One of the main reasons the Research Wiki can be considered a reliable reference for genealogical information and sources is that it is a moderated wiki. This means that the content of the Research Wiki is continually reviewed for accuracy and completeness. Bear in mind that the Research Wiki is a work in progress. Many subjects have yet to be added and many geographic areas are either missing or only lightly touched at the time this Guide is written. There is no danger that the Research Wiki will either run out of topics or run out of contributors. It is still in its infancy as far as having complete information, but its structure is fully developed and functioning. At the heart of the Research Wiki (and every other wiki) are the volunteer contributors. People who are willing to spend their time adding content without any compensation whatsoever. It is true that some of the information in the Research Wiki has been and continues to be added by FamilySearch employees, but the bulk of the information is currently being added by individual volunteers from all over the world. The key to the success of the Research Wiki as a genealogical resource is in the participation of a large number of contributors.

What is in the Research Wiki?

All registered users of FamilySearch Wiki are invited to help by contributing articles about the records they have searched for their ancestors. One person's experience in using a single record could benefit many others who are searching the same record for their ancestor. All of the instructions for using the Wiki and a detailed explanation of all of the features is included in the Wiki itself. Additionally, there are thousands of articles on how to do genealogy and instructions for researching specific topics such as immigration, minorities, probate records, tax records, and many, many more.

It is really easier to say what is not in the Wiki. The Research Wiki does not contain information about individuals or individual families. It is not a place to record your family history or talk about your relatives. It is a community project, participants who contribute to the Wiki are encouraged to have a User page telling about themselves. There are weekly Wiki meetings online for contributors and support people associated with the Wiki. You can find help about contributing to the Wiki from the thousands of help pages and from other members of the Wiki community. You can participate in the Wiki Forums ([Forums.FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org/learn/forums/en/forumdisplay.php?f=5)) (<https://www.familysearch.org/learn/forums/en/forumdisplay.php?f=5>) and ask questions any time you need to do so. Although there is a Wiki community, the Wiki is not a social networking site. Discussions are limited to subjects that pertain to genealogy or the conduct of the Wiki.