Searching for Dead People: Using Genealogy Tools for Name Authority Work

My fascination with genealogy began when I was 15 years old. Every week I would ride my bike to the library to scour the Internet for names, dates, and biographical details that would make my family history come alive. When my dad bought me genealogy software that enabled me to enter my data, link it to source information, and run reports for data accuracy, I became a fanatic. If I had known at the time that the cataloging profession existed, I could have predicted my future career.

Last year I began my first forays into name authority work, focusing on our special collections. Since most of the name authority records that I create or enhance are for people active in the 18th and 19th centuries, the skills I learned while doing genealogical research translate well for name authority work. Chris Evin Long discusses this connection in detail in his article, "Disambiguating the Departed,"[1] but here I will elaborate on two of the free tools that he mentions: FamilySearch and Find A Grave.

FamilySearch (https://www.familysearch.org)

FamilySearch is the most comprehensive database of free genealogical records available, though it requires you to sign up for a free account to search for records. It offers two main features of interest to NACO catalogers: Search and Family Tree. You can find records directly through the Search tab either by searching the entire records database, a geographic subset, or a specific collection, such as Iowa Delayed Birth Records, 1850-1939.

Most of the in Family Search records come from the United States, with national, state, and local sources, but it also includes records from other countries. Record types include national and state censuses, church records, military records, immigration and naturalization records, and vital records (e.g., birth, death, and marriage). You can view the full list of collections at https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list. Some collections are indexed only, while others include images of the original records. Though all collections are maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, original sources vary by collection. For example, the Iowa state census collections come from the Iowa State Historical Society, the United States World War II draft registration cards come from the United States National Archives, and the Netherlands civil registration records come from the Netherlands National Archives. Most of the content in FamilySearch is not indexed by Google, so you need to search the site directly and not rely on Google search results.

The Family Tree feature is a universal collaborative family tree for everyone. It has one record for each person in the tree, so if somebody has already done research on the individual in your name authority record, you could find helpful information and save yourself some searching the Search function.
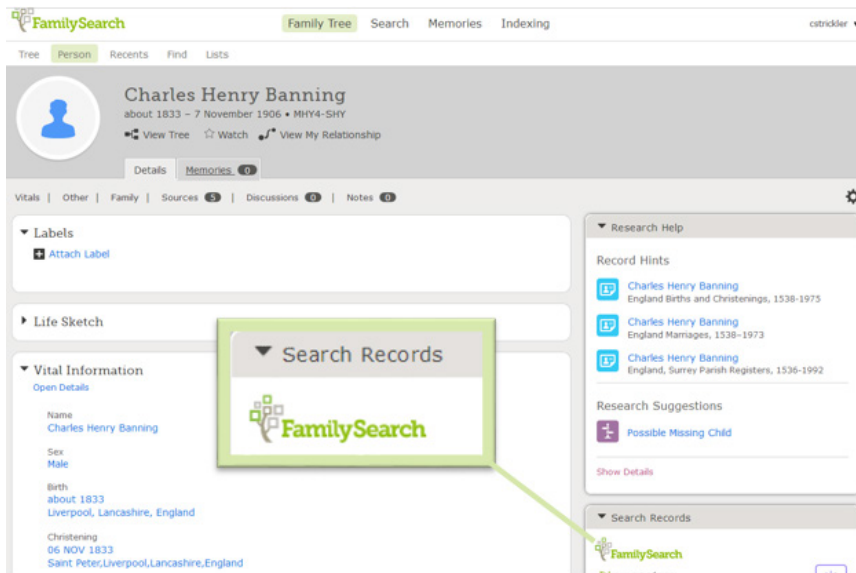

Figure 1: FamilySearch Family Tree profile for Charles Henry Banning: https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/MHY4-SHY

For example, I recently created an authority record for C. H. Banning, who appeared on a title page as the vicar of Strood, Kent. I had no birth or death dates, nor a full name. A search in the Family Tree feature for C. H. Banning, with a geographic limit of England, retrieved the page for Charles Henry Banning, christened in Liverpool, England, in 1833. I still wasn't sure if this was my C. H. Banning, so I ran a second search using the FamilySearch button, (Figure 1) which automatically populates a search with the information from the person's page.

This retrieved results from the England and Wales Census of 1881, which recorded a Charles Henry Banning, born approximately 1834 in Liverpool, who was the Vicar of Strood in Kent (Figure 2).

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[1] Chris Evin Long, "Disambiguating the Departed: Using the Genealogist's Tools to Uniquely Identify the Long Dead and Little Known," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 60, no. 4 (October 2016): 236–47.

I had found my man. From there I was able to formulate an authority record with dates and a full name (Figure 3).

One caveat about the profile pages: like a Wikipedia article, a Family Tree profile page can be edited by anyone with an account, so the information listed in the profile isn't always accurate. However, the profile can link to original sources from the FamilySearch database, so a check of those can help verify the information.

Name	Charles Henry Banning
Event Type	Census
Event Date	1881
Event Place	Strood, Kent, England
Registration District	North Aylesford
Residence Note	London Road
Gender	Male
Age	47
Marital Status (Original)	Widower
Occupation	Vicar Of Strood
Relationship to Head of Household	Head
Birth Year (Estimated)	1834
Birthplace	Liverpool, Lancashire, England
Page Number	7
Registration Number	RG11
Piece/Folio	883/7
Affiliate Record Type	Household

Figure 2: Charles Henry Banning in the 1881 England and Wales Census: https://www.familysearch.org/search/ark:/61903/1:1:Q27W-7LZP

040			IWW ‡b eng ‡e rda ‡c IWW
046			‡f 1833? ‡g 1906-11-06 ‡2 edtf
100	1		Banning, C. H. ‡q (Charles Henry), ‡d 1833?-1906
368			‡d Rev. ‡d M.A.
370			‡b Marylebone (London, England) ‡c Great Britain ‡f Liverpool (England) ‡f Strood (England) ‡2 naf
372			Missions to Jews ‡2 lcsh
373			London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews ‡2 naf ‡s 1862 ‡t 1906
374			Clergy ‡2 trot
375			Males ‡2 lcdgt
377			eng
378			‡q Charles Henry
670			Banning, C. H. Foreign missions, especially in relation to modern Judaism, 1875: ‡b t.p. (The Rev. C. H. Banning, M.A., vicar of Strood, Kent)
670			FamilySearch, viewed Apr. 12, 2018 ‡b (Charles Henry Banning; christened Nov. 6, 1833, in Liverpool, England; died 1906, in Marylebone, London, England; he was listed as the vicar of Strood in the 1881 census of England and Wales) ‡u https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/MHY4-SHY
670			Jewish missionary advocate, Dec. 1906: ‡b p. 134 (died Nov. 7, [1906]; joined the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews in 1862 and held various positions until his death)
670			OCLC, viewed Apr. 12, 2018 ‡b (usage: C. H. Banning)

Figure 3: Name authority record for C. H. Banning. Still under review and therefore subject to change.

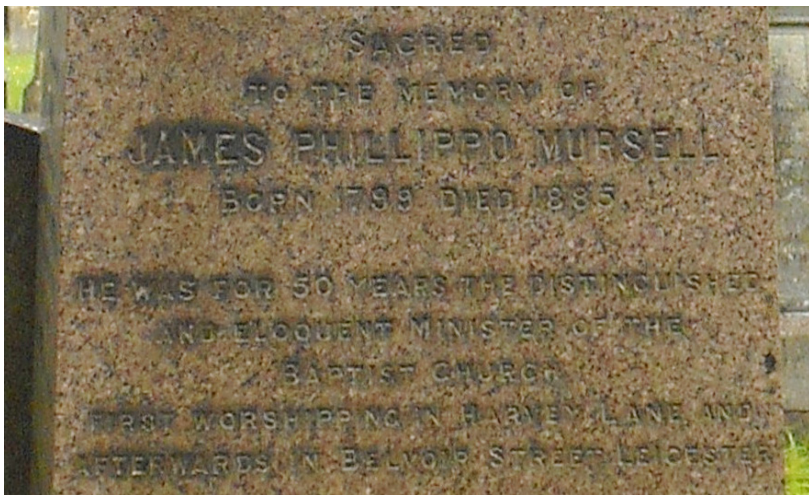Figure 4: Find A Grave memorial page for James Phillippo Mursell: https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24742924/james-phillippo-mursell

Figure 5: Photograph of memorial stone from Find A Grave, taken by Jackie Marsh, filtered for visibility: https://images.findagrave.com/photos/2016/152/24742924_1464800838.jpg

Find A Grave (https://www.findagrave.com)

Find A Grave is indexed in FamilySearch, but I prefer to search it separately to avoid sorting through massive amounts of search results, and you don't need an account to access the database. In addition to pictures of tombstones, some memorial pages include photographs, obituaries or transcriptions of death records. Like the Family Tree profiles in FamilySearch, Find A Grave profiles can be edited by anybody with an account, so they aren't always accurate. You'll want to ensure dates are verified by a gravestone photograph or other reliable source. Find A Grave does appear in Google search results, though with mixed success, so it's still best to search the site directly. A Google search for James Phillippo Mursell, a Baptist minister, does not retrieve the memorial page shown in Figure 4.

While Find A Grave is most useful for birth and death dates, it has other helpful information for a name authority record. I was recently trying to create a record for James Phillippo Mursell, and some references spelled his middle name as "Philippo," while others spelled it as "Phillippo." A quick search in Find A Grave retrieved his profile, which included a photograph of a memorial stone in his honor (Figure 5). There the name was spelled "Phillippo," so I took that as authoritative. As a bonus, the photograph also confirmed a birth date of 1799, which was incorrectly recorded as 1800 in some sources.

010		no2017162159
040		IWW ‡b eng ‡e rda ‡c IWW
046		‡f 1799-09-07 ‡g 1885-11-02 ‡2 edtf
100	1	Mursell, J. P. ‡q (James Phillippo), ‡d 1799-1885
370		Lymington (England) ‡e Wells (England) ‡e Birmingham (England) ‡e Leicester (England) ‡2 naf
373		Baptists ‡2 lcsh
374		Clergy ‡2 trot
375		Males ‡2 lcdgt
377		eng
378		‡q James Phillippo
400	1	Mursell, J. P. ‡q (James Philippo), ‡d 1799-1885
667		Some references spell the name as James Philippo, while others spell it as James Phillippo. The authorized spelling for the missionary's name that he adopted is James Phillippo, the spelling also found on his gravestone.
667		Some reference sources record the birthdate as 1800, but 1799 is the year found on his gravestone.
670		Evangelical missions, 1855: ‡b front cover (J. P. Mursell)
670		Find a grave, viewed 10/31/2017 ‡b (heading: Rev James Phillippo Mursell; birth: 1799; death: Nov. 2, 1885; buried: Welford Road Cemetery, Leicester)
670		Modern English biography, 1897: ‡b vol. 2, p. 67 (James Philippo Mursell; son of William Mursell; born Lymington, Hants Sept. 7, 1799; Baptist minister at Wells, Birmingham, and Leicester; took the name of Philippo from missionary James Philippo)
670		Baptist encyclopedia, 1883: ‡b p. 826 (Rev. James Philippo Mursell; born in 1800)
670		OCLC, Oct. 31, 2017 ‡b (usage: J. P. Mursell.)

Figure 6: Name authority record for J. P. Mursell.

Thanks to Find A Grave, I could now record accurate data in the name authority record (Figure 6).

The next time you're working on a name authority record for someone in the past, try one of these tools. And if you enjoy creating name authority records, you might try researching your family tree. You'll find the two skills form a natural partnership.

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