Family Chronicle

The Magazine for *Families Researching their Roots*

Matching Records to People:
Do You Have the Right Tom Smith?

Genetic Genealogy Basics:
Using DNA to help your research

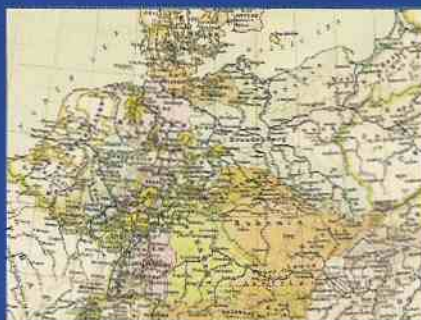### ◀ Tips for European Research Trips:
Getting the most from your research vacation

25 Top Sites ▶ for Canadian Genealogy:
A coast-to-coast list of useful sites

Making Family Maps:
How to track your ancestors' migrations

To Whom it May Concern:
Writing effective genealogy correspondence

◀ "All I Know is Germany":
How to move beyond the basics with German and Prussian roots

Getting and ▶ Staying Organized:
Favorite tricks for organizing data

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Get Smart with GenSmarts

Megan Smolenyak reviews a new software package that acts as a silent research partner.

I CONFESS THAT I'm a new toy addict, especially when it comes to genealogy. Whenever a new contraption or piece of software is introduced, I'm usually one of the first in line. I pay a price for this impulsive streak because the reality of the products doesn't always live up to my expectations, but every once in a while, my spontaneity is rewarded — and this is one of those times.

When I first learned of GenSmarts, I quickly downloaded a free, trial version (available at *www.gensmarts.com*) and started experimenting with it. It didn't take me long to realize that this was something truly fresh and long overdue — a genealogical software package designed to serve as your silent research partner. For a beginner, it essentially provides a 24-hour coach, and for the more experienced, it furnishes an extra pair of eyes. Within minutes, I was so enamored that I invested $24.95 US to download the full version.

What It Is

Over the years, many of us have bemoaned the fact that no one had ever troubled to apply artificial intelligence to genealogy. With such a heavily pronounced "if this, then that" aspect to our research, it seemed a natural fit — but also a daunting one. Based on just the fundamental variables of time and location, there are countless paths our research can take, so how could one tool help steer all of us? Fortunately, Aaron Underwood managed to crack the code.

An avid researcher since childhood visits to his grandmother sparked his interest, Underwood developed GenSmarts as an add-on to conventional genealogical software (e.g., Legacy Family Tree, RootsMagic, Family Tree Maker, etc.). Analyzing data in the files you already have, GenSmarts produces a to-do list of research suggestions, customized for the

On the GenSmarts To Do List screen, the icons next to the highlighted suggestion indicate that it's searchable free online, fills a data gap and has been found.

specifics of your family tree. And for each suggestion, it includes a window of additional information, such as where it can be found, microfilm and book titles and call numbers, and how your family's data might be expected to appear in the resource.

At first glance, the to-do list can be overwhelming, but you can tweak it a number of ways to suit your needs. For instance, you can direct the software to sort the list by Research Priority, Surname, Date or Geography. And you can use a combination of icons — some assigned by the software and some designated by you — to filter the list any way you'd like.

Selection Criteria Icons

It's worth focusing on these icons a bit because they are the root of much of the power of GenSmarts. These icons represent an assortment of selection criteria we typically use in our research:

Direct Ancestors — you can select a central person (most likely yourself) and the software will detect and mark all direct-line ancestors with a star

Available Online/Available Free Online — for every research suggestion, GenSmarts uses a tiny red mouse to show if the data can be found online, and a green mouse if it's free.

Fills Missing Data — a smiley face marks those recommendations that have the potential to lead to data (perhaps a birth date or parents' names) that has eluded you so far.
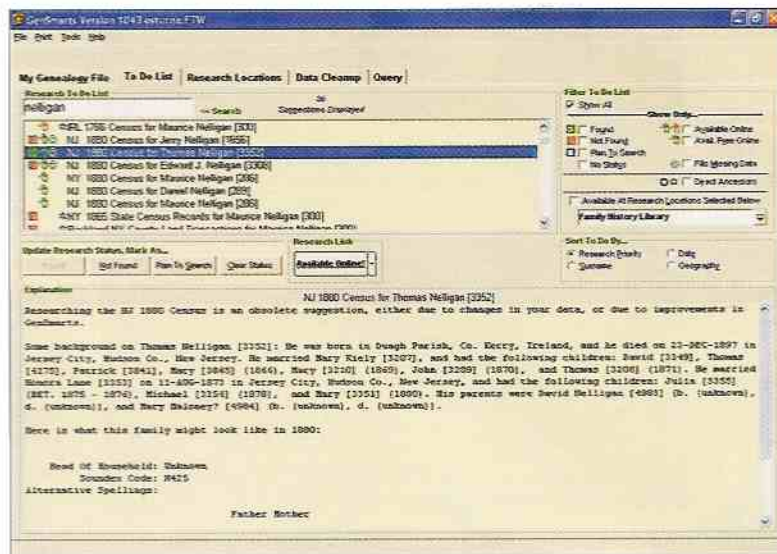
Found/Not Found/Plan to Search — you have the option of identifying each research suggestion as one of these three, which are then shown as a check mark, an X or an empty box, respectively.

Available at Research Locations Selected Below — a dropdown menu of research locations (which is frequently supplemented) allows you to select just recommendations pertaining to a particular website or facility.

The real magic comes from all the possible combinations of these criteria. Ready to settle in for a late night surfing session? A useful starting point might be Direct Ancestors/Fills Missing Data/Available Online, sorted by Research Priority. And here's a feature you're going to like: if an item is available online, you can simply double click it within GenSmarts. Doing so will take you to the appropriate site and perform the search for you, even entering the relevant data. Incidentally, if you have one or more online subscriptions, you can alert the software to this fact so it will conduct auto-

matic searches in these resources as well.

Want to focus on just the 1880 census or only records pertaining to New Jersey? Select Available Online sorted by Date or Geography and you're on your way. Perhaps you've decided to really "work" the Ellis Island database by unearthing every possible immigrant relative who came through its halls. Use the Available at Research Locations Selected Below option to narrow the field to the Ellisisland.org website and sort by Research Priority. Now you've got a target list to click your way through. The possibilities are endless and simply playing with the various combinations may cause you to look at your data a different way, spot an under-researched branch or alert you to new or underutilized resources.

A chronology and list of relevant research suggestions can also be included in your road trip prep sheets.

Road Trips

If you're planning a jaunt to the Family History Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City (or any of a growing number of other repositories), you'll want to create specialized to-do lists to help maximize your productivity. For instance, I generated a to-do list (which can always be previewed on screen before printing), homing in on possible land records at the FHL for one of my ancestors. You'll be impressed with the array of printing options that permit you to determine just how much or how little information you want to take along with you. I decided to go with "the works" — what GenSmarts calls Research Pack.

The report gave me a list of relevant FHL microfilm numbers and a worksheet for entering any data collected. It also presented the basic data of my ancestor's life, as well as details about his wife and children. But that's not all. It also gave me a chronology (with places included) of life events, the Soundex code for and likely misspellings of his name, and a list of relevant research suggestions including indications of which ones had already been searched
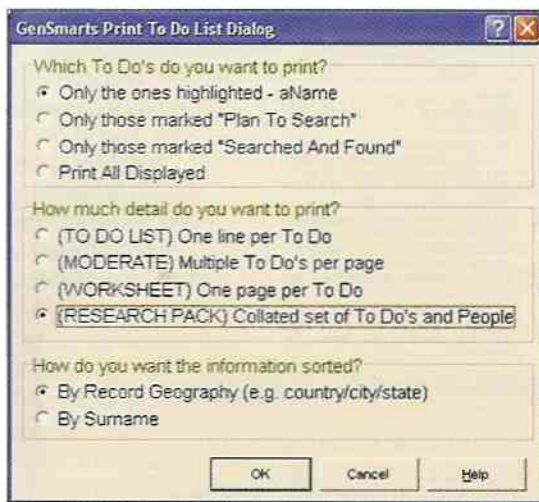
(so I wouldn't duplicate effort — how many of us have done that?). All of this was cleanly condensed into three tidy pages I could take with me.

I happened to have done this for one ancestor, but I could have just as easily done it for everyone in my database

Using the Research Pack printing option produces a report that includes relevant microfilm numbers and a worksheet for entering any data found during a research trip.

or just those research suggestions I had marked as Plan to Search. In short, you can fashion these handy reports any way you'd like to make sure you get the most out of your next field trip.

What's New and What's Next?
Those of you who spotted GenSmarts early might wonder what new functionality the software has added. Not surprisingly, much of it has to do with an ever-growing collection of records and research locations. The software launched with many of the standards that you would expect — Ancestry.com, Family History Library, Ellisisland.org, etc. — but has been steadily adding to the mix, both in terms of the number of locations included and the amount of their content that's incorporated. And with the company now starting to attend major genealogical conventions, it's reasonable to assume that more sources and repositories will appear in coming months. Of particular emphasis of late has been an extension of GenSmart's geographic coverage to Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. All of which means that this already powerful tool will become even more valuable, and ultimately result in "I hadn't thought of that!" moments for even the

most experienced of researchers.

A Kiosk mode — a version which will likely start appearing in libraries — has been developed for those who don't already have a file or who might be searching on the fly during a research trip. And other bells and whistles, such as a Query tab, have been added to the software. Better yet, the company recently announced that it plans to introduce two new genealogically related products this year, and I, for one, can't wait to see what this innovative firm has up its sleeve.

It Delivers
GenSmarts lives up to its name; it really *is* smart. It's also an amiable research companion that's constantly adding to its repertoire. Just as you run out of ideas, it will offer up some new ones — with no smug looks! If you're new to genealogy, GenSmarts will give you a running start and save you innumerable hours in your quest for roots. Those of you who have been at it for a while know that the first time it turns up an unexpected or overlooked resource, it will have more than paid for itself. I suspect that GenSmarts will quickly become one of those tools we wonder how we ever lived without.

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, author of Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots, In Search of Our Ancestors *and* They Came to America: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors, *can be reached through* www.honoringourancestors.com. FC