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# Family Tree Magazine

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- Oregon
- Delaware

Stash these guides in your research binder or tote them to the library—and quickly find the essential facts, advice and resources you need to trace your family tree anywhere in the country.





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Available on newsstands and our Web site **Feb. 22.**

### COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

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*EDITED BY LAUREN EISENSTODT*

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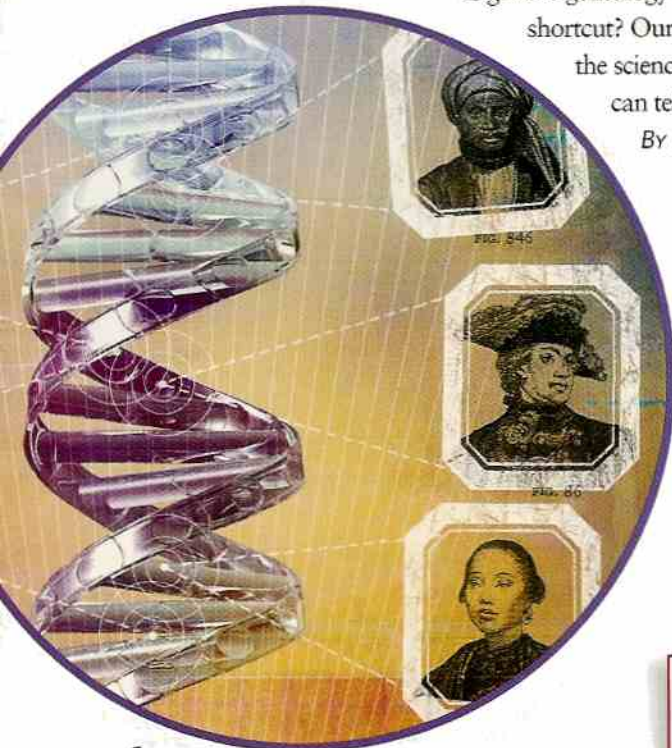
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*You aced Biology 101, but genetic genealogy still makes you dizzy. Stop the whirlwind of haplotypes and helixes with our plain-English guide to DNA tests and what they mean for your pedigree.*

# Demystifying DNA

**Y**ou probably first heard about genetic genealogy a few years ago, but now it's everywhere. Your society is sponsoring a lecture, fellow researchers were chatting about it at the Family History Center, or maybe you got an e-mail asking you to participate in a surname study. But you're unsure about jumping on the DNA bandwagon. How does it work? How much does it cost? What about privacy? And why bother, anyway—will genetic genealogy really tell you something traditional genealogy can't?

Genetic genealogy complements traditional research—it's not a substitute for squinting at microfilmed records and scouring family histories. You can't simply take a DNA test, plug the results into an online database and discover your whole family tree back to the Dark Ages. The odds of finding a meaningful match in a DNA database aren't particularly strong, since not many people have participated yet. And of course, DNA testing won't reveal your ancestors' names and birth dates. But it can help by confirming (or disproving) family legends and research discoveries. You can use it to find out if you're a cousin to other Kowalskis, to

determine if the Austin clans from Colonial-era Massachusetts and Virginia are connected, or to learn the truth behind that yarn about Granddad being adopted. Ultimately, genetic genealogy can save you time and money in researching the old-fashioned way.

That might sound counterintuitive if the \$100 to \$300 DNA-test price tag gives you sticker shock. But I became a believer when I conducted my own surname study. All Smolenyaks trace their roots to one of four families from a town in present-day Slovakia. But the paper trail peters out in the 1700s, so we couldn't find a relationship. Imagine my surprise when DNA testing revealed that *none* of the families shared a common ancestor. My disappointment wore off, though, once I realized I'd been spared years of frustration trying to prove a false belief. DNA testing can steer your research by telling you which paths to avoid and hinting at where you should be looking. Fortunately, you don't have to be a scientist to tap into this new genealogical resource. We'll explain how DNA testing works, how secure it is, and what it can (and can't) tell you about your family tree.



By **MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK**

Illustration by **STUART BRADFORD**





FIG. 674



FIG. 846



FIG. 467



FIG. 86



FIG. 466



FIG. 746



*to that certain part or force  
exposed with water for hours*



## MOLECULAR BUY-OLGY

Genealogy DNA test prices change quickly, and they've been easing lower. Exact prices depend on the test you select, its sophistication and the test company's price structure—a variety of flat rates, discounts and per-marker options. And some companies offer specialized add-on tests. For example, since I tested as an H haplogroup on my mtDNA test, I could pay \$89 more to have my mtDNA further analyzed—but only an H can get this test.

Here's what you can expect to pay (as of press time):

- **Y-DNA:** \$89 to \$289 (or \$5.99 per marker)
- **mtDNA:** \$180 to \$299 (specialized extra testing available)
- **Biogeographical:** \$219 to \$250
- **African ancestry:** \$349
- **Native American ancestry:** \$159 to \$270
- **SNP:** \$100 to \$200 (specialized extra testing available)

## IT'S IN YOUR GENES

If you've browsed DNA testing companies' Web sites, you've undoubtedly noticed a wide array of tests. Which one's right for you? Your genealogical goals will tell you. Let's take a look at the possibilities.

■ **Y-DNA** (or Y-chromosome): No doubt about it—Y-DNA testing is king. It wasn't the first test, but it's the most popular due to the Y-DNA-surname connection: Only men have Y chromosomes, which are passed essentially unchanged from father to son—quite convenient, since surnames also are passed on this way. As shown in the "Peripheral Visions" box below, all the men in the top line of a pedigree chart share the same Y-DNA—as do all the male-line descendants of an ancestor perched on top of a descendency chart. Because Y-DNA and surnames travel together through time (with the occasional exception of a nonpaternity event such as illegitimacy or adoption), Y-DNA tests are handy for surname projects that determine whether families with the same last name are, in fact, related. And it's not necessary to dig up ancestors' graves, since a man alive today sports the same Y-DNA as his paternal-line great-great-(insert as many greats as you'd like)-grandfather.

Two, 20 or 200 men named Johnson can get tested, and those who share an ancestor will have identical (or nearly identical) Y-DNA results. (See page 60 for guidance on interpreting results.) Women can participate, too, but not directly: Since females don't have

Y chromosomes, they have to persuade a father, brother, uncle or cousin to take the test.

Typically, a surname project starts when an enthusiastic genealogist invites others with the same surname to test and compare results. (To see if your last name is one of the 1,000-plus that are being studied, peruse <[www.worldfamilies.net](http://www.worldfamilies.net)>.) Frequently, eight or nine people join a freshly launched project, and no matches appear. Just as frustration is about to set in, the next participant matches someone. Eventually, clusters of matches emerge.

Each matching group shares a set of Y-DNA marker values. I like to think of markers as landmarks in the landscape of our DNA. Scientists test certain markers that are useful for distinguishing between people and populations. Your test results are presented in **alleles**—a series of numbers that indicate how often certain genetic patterns (called short tandem repeats, STRs, or just **repeats**) recur at each marker tested. You can order Y-chromosome DNA tests ranging from 10 to 43 markers—the more markers, the more precisely the test can indicate how many generations ago you and your match share a common ancestor. A 43/43 match, for instance, is more convincing than a 12/12 match. Two men conceivably could match each other on all markers from a 12-marker test, but only 35 markers on a 43-marker test. As you'd expect, the more markers you test, the more you pay. Many people opt for the middle ground and choose tests with 21 to 37 markers.

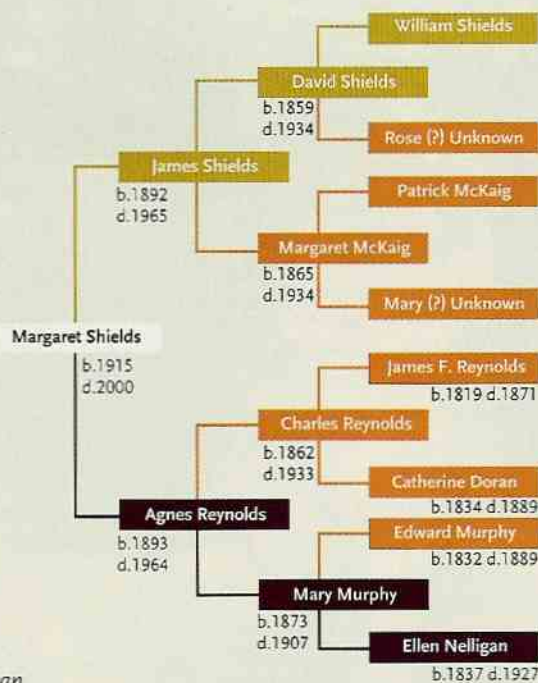
Although each testing company has its own preferred set of markers, they overlap quite a bit, so it's usually easy to compare test results from different companies. Collectively, your marker values form your **haplotype**. To see if we belong to the same haplotype, you and I would simply compare our numbers.

For instance, two men with similar surnames might wonder if they share an ancestor. Testing can't reveal *who* a common ancestor is, but it can confirm or disprove a connection and estimate roughly when the most recent common ancestor (MRCA) lived. Let's say that both men take 25-marker tests and wind up with a near match (see opposite page). They have identical results, except that one has 31 repeats on marker 449, while the other has 32 repeats. The two men have slightly different haplotypes—it looks like they're related, but there's been a **mutation**. Mutations serve as a generational clock: The

## PERIPHERAL VISIONS

So far, DNA testing can give answers about the top and bottom branches of your family tree. Y-chromosome tests examine your paternal line; mtDNA tests look at your maternal line. The more-controversial tests of autosomal DNA apply to the lines in between.

- = **Y-Chromosome**  
Tests: SNP, African, Native American, Tribes of Britain
- = **Autosomal DNA**  
Test: Biogeographical
- = **mtDNA**  
Tests: African, Native American





more mutations, the longer ago the MRCA lived. So the results indicate that the men have a common ancestor, but their MRCA probably lived longer ago than the MRCA of two men who match perfectly.

■ **Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA):** Many think of mtDNA as the maternal version of Y-DNA, and there are parallels, but it's important to grasp a few differences. Mothers pass mtDNA to both their sons and daughters, but sons don't pass it on to their children. Just as Y-DNA traces the top line of a pedigree chart, mtDNA follows the bottom line, traveling from mother to daughter. Once sons pass away, their mtDNA lines die out.

For genealogy, mtDNA isn't as useful as Y-DNA because it's a "deep ancestry" test, involving time frames that are more anthropological than genealogical. You may have heard of Bryan Sykes' *The Seven Daughters of Eve*, a book based on the premise that 95 percent of people of European origin can trace their roots to seven women who lived 10,000 to 45,000 years ago. Scientists have tested populations worldwide, and so far, they've uncovered about 36 "daughters of Eve"—each is akin to a maternal branch of the world's family tree. The mtDNA test reveals which of these daughters you descend from, and expresses that result by assigning you to a **haplogroup**. All members of a haplogroup share the same genetic mutation as their "daughter of Eve," but their haplotypes may differ from each other depending on additional mutations that have occurred over time.

My haplogroup is H, the most common European type. That gives me some insight into how and when my maternal line migrated to and within Europe, but it also means I'm distant cousins with more than 40 percent of Europeans, and we all share a maternal ancestor who lived approximately 20,000 years ago. From a genealogical perspective, that's not especially helpful.

But mtDNA can assist in your roots pursuit in three noteworthy ways. First, if you have a rare mtDNA haplotype, you may have a not-too-distant relationship to matches you find in an online database (see page 61). Second, if you're clever about it, you can use mtDNA to tackle specific genealogical conundrums involving maternal lines. Not sure which of Great-granddad's 15 kids belonged to each of his three wives? Locate direct-line maternal descendants of his daughters, have them tested, and use the results to assign the

## MEET YOUR MATCH

Genetic genealogy complements traditional family history research by confirming—or disproving—ancestral relationships. The most popular test, Y-DNA, examines genetic "markers" on a man's Y chromosome. Because the Y chromosome changes little (if at all) as it's passed from father to son, men know they're related if their Y-DNA matches.

Here's an example: James Zavacky and Peter Zavatsky want to find out whether they're related, so each takes a 25-marker Y-DNA test. In comparing their results, they discover that 24 of those 25 markers are identical, with a mutation at marker 449:

	MARKERS																								
	393	390	19	391	385A	385B	426	388	439	389-1	392	389-2	458	459A	459B	455	454	447	437	448	449	464A	464B	464C	464D
James Zavacky	13	24	16	10	14	15	11	13	13	14	11	33	17	8	10	11	11	27	15	20	31	15	15	16	16
Peter Zavatsky	13	24	16	10	14	15	11	13	13	14	11	33	17	8	10	11	11	27	15	20	32	15	15	16	16

That 24/25 match indicates that the men do indeed share an ancestor.

But what about the mismatching marker? Each value here shows how many times a genetic pattern repeats itself on that particular marker. James Zavacky and Peter Zavatsky don't have the same number of "repeats" on marker 449—but their values are close. That mutation in the Y chromosome signals that the men aren't as closely related as men who match perfectly.

children to the correct mothers. Finally, since mtDNA is far more likely than Y-DNA to survive in degraded remains, it's usually the only option for solving mysteries such as the identity of an unknown soldier.

■ **Ethnic:** Generally, DNA tests geared toward identifying particular ancestries, such as African, American Indian, Cohanim (a Jewish tribe) and Tribes of Britain (for example, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon), are your basic Y-DNA or mtDNA tests with additional analysis that compares your results to those typical of a certain ethnicity. If you opt for the standard analysis, the results probably will supply the data you need to do it on your own—provided you don't mind a little Web surfing. (See the August 2003 *Family Tree Magazine* for more on ethnic DNA tests.)

It's worth looking into a few ethnic testing companies that have their own databases of test results specific to certain ethnic groups. African Ancestry's database, for example, includes 10,000-plus people from Africa, and Trace Genetics has a similar collection of Native American samples. Both companies

will compare your results to their data in search of a tribal affiliation—and they've found one for roughly 70 percent of their customers. (One company says that many of the "misses" occur because the testee's paternal line turns out to be European.) As with any Y-DNA or mtDNA test, ethnicity tests apply to a single branch of your family tree, so you'll have to be strategic about who gets tested. If the alleged American Indian in your family was a woman in your father's maternal line, Dad can be mtDNA-tested to determine a relationship—but since he didn't pass that mtDNA strand on to you, being tested yourself wouldn't help.

■ **Biogeographical:** This test, also referred to as DNAPrint and ANCESTRYbyDNA, has generated the most controversy. It goes beyond Y-DNA and mtDNA to evaluate **autosomal** markers—that means it looks not only at the top and bottom lines of your pedigree chart, but at all the branches in between.

The results are expressed in percentages of DNA from various geographic origins, broken into four categories: Indo-European,



Sub-Saharan African, Native American and East Asian. For example, one of my family members of Eastern European stock tested as 95 percent Indo-European and 5 percent East Asian. When you think of the proverbial “invading hordes from the East,” it makes sense that she’d have a dash of Asian blood.

Not everyone is satisfied with the results. Many take this test to prove American Indian ancestry, but the desired evidence may not appear—partly because family lore is wrong and partly because this test is shallower than others (that is, it reflects fairly recent generations). Also, it can be difficult to distinguish between American Indian and East Asian heritage, since these groups have distant ancestors in common. See <[www.dnapiintlog.org](http://www.dnapiintlog.org)> for an interesting collection of test-takers’ expectations versus their actual results.

■ **SNP:** The **single nucleotide polymorphism** test is another Y-chromosome test that’s gaining popularity. Fortunately, scientists had the good sense to shorten its name to SNP (say “snip”). SNPs are a type of mutation that occurs less frequently than STRs (the focus of the Y-DNA test), but there’s a correlation between the two. In fact, your Y-DNA test results can predict your SNP results—you can use the online tool at <[home.comcast.net/~whitathey/predictorinstr.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~whitathey/predictorinstr.htm)> to make such a guess. So why take the SNP test? To be absolutely sure about your deep ancestry along the top line of your pedigree. It won’t sort out your immediate roots dilemmas, but it’s the test to take if you’re curious about, say, whether your paternal line hails from the Eurasian Steppes, Scandinavia or the Middle East.

## TESTING ANXIETY

Happily, DNA testing no longer involves bloodletting. Nowadays, you order a test and receive a cheek-swab kit in the mail. Use the toothbrush-like device to painlessly scrape the inside of your cheek, then ship your cells to the testing company. There, your sample is coded to protect your identity.

With “Big Brother” privacy concerns getting so much attention these days, DNA testing may seem risky. What if the wrong people get their hands on your results—could they find out whether you’re a health time bomb waiting to explode? Learn your true parentage? Keep your sample and use it again without telling you? It’s highly unlikely: The testing that’s done for genealogical purposes differs from medical, paternity and criminal testing.

In fact, if police were to use Y-DNA testing to solve a crime, they’d have to haul in hundreds or thousands of distant cousins as suspects.

Testing companies promise to keep your identity and results secure. If you choose to have your results posted in an online database, the Web site can serve as an intermediary should a match want to contact you. Or you can opt to withhold your contact information. Surname-project managers who receive results for their group generally post results on the Web using a code or, as is rapidly becoming the standard, the name of the earliest known ancestor. If you’re concerned, you can deny the testing company or project manager permission to share your data in any way.

Ask your testing company what happens to samples after they’re tested. Some companies destroy them; others keep them (unless you direct otherwise) in secure storage in case a client wants additional, more-precise tests. Since the lab knows you’re interested in genetic genealogy, you may be asked to participate in research studies, but no reputable lab will test your sample without your permission.

## GETTING RESULTS

You’ll probably wait two to six weeks to receive your test results in the mail or online (if you used a company that gives you a code to access your results on its Web site). They’ll consist of a chart with what resembles a pile of

numbers. If you took a Y-DNA test, they represent the numbers of repeats for each marker your test evaluated. MtDNA results are given as your variations from a comparison standard called the Cambridge Reference Sequence. Other test results may be reported as percentages of ethnic ancestry, a haplogroup identification or a simple yes or no.

How do you interpret the results? You’ll want to perform three levels of analysis:

**1. Within your surname project:** If you’ve joined a DNA surname project, your first step is to compare your results with others in your project. A person with a perfectly matching haplotype will show the same number of STRs for each Y-DNA marker as you; a near match will show differences (or mutations) on perhaps one to three markers. The rarer your haplotype, the more mutations you’ll be willing to tolerate in a match. It’s definitely worth collaborating on genealogical research with matches and near matches. Your family trees likely overlap at some point, so share details about your earliest known ancestor and where he resided—even if your MRCA predates a paper trail. Maybe your research tells you that your ancestor hails from Ireland, and a few of your haplotype matches have traced their lines to County Armagh. Now you know where to focus.

If you’re a genetic orphan in your study—with no haplotype matches in sight—you’ll



## A SOLID FOUNDATION

If you donated a blood or saliva sample and a filled-in pedigree chart at a genealogical conference or seminar during the past few years—thanks. You did us all a favor by contributing to the **Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation** (SMGF) genetic-genealogy database. The nonprofit SMGF <[www.smgf.org](http://www.smgf.org)> aims to collect DNA samples and family trees from 100,000 people worldwide. Its researchers are using the test results to create a comprehensive database of genetic (Y-chromosome, mtDNA and autosomal DNA) and genealogical data they say will be a truly revolutionary tool for roots seekers. For privacy’s sake, the database includes genealogical information only of ancestors born prior to 1900. So far, about 50,000 people have contributed their DNA and family data.

You already can search the SMGF site for Y-DNA matches by entering your test results in the foundation’s Web site. An mtDNA database looms in the not-too-distant future. In time, SMGF says you’ll be able to query the database for family information gleaned from more-meaningful autosomal DNA test results. It might be possible to learn, for example, that people of your genetic makeup were heavily concentrated in Finland in 1850, in Illinois in 1900 and so forth.



just have to wait. As the project grows, someone eventually should match you. If you have no matches in a sizeable project, it's probably time to inspect your research for errors and hints of illegitimacy, adoptions or other non-paternity events.

**2. Through your testing company:** Whether or not you have any matches within your study, look at the information your testing company supplies. For instance, most companies provide a list of customers outside your project who share your haplotype or come close (and have given the company permission to share their information). If you have a common haplotype that's shared by 50 others, you probably won't want to launch an e-mail campaign—but if you match only one or two others, it doesn't hurt to contact them.

Your testing company may provide other information, such as an ethnic analysis that lists the self-declared nationalities or ethnicities of your close matches. A customized analysis might blend and interpret your genealogical and genetic data, even indicating when a mutation might have occurred or where your research may have a glitch.

**3. In online genetic-genealogy databases:** Once you've exhausted the resources of your surname project and testing company, investigate online databases for more matches. The following four databases operate more or less the same way: Use a drop-down menu for each marker to enter your results, then compare them to others. The sites contain some overlapping data, but each one also has unique content and a spiffy feature or two that makes it worth checking out.

■ Scientists designed the **Y Chromosome Haplotype Reference Database (YHRD)** <[www.yhrd.org](http://www.yhrd.org)> for other scientists, but genealogists discovered it back when they had no other options. You can't upload your data, but you can search. With more than 26,000 haplotypes representing 229 populations, YHRD doesn't provide names, but tells you where your haplotype mates are.

■ The first public database created specifically for genealogists, **Ybase** <[www.ybase.org](http://www.ybase.org)> is affiliated with the company DNA Heritage. You can enter your results and search for matches among more than 2,800 haplotypes and 4,400 surnames. Extra features include allele statistics, which can help you understand how common or rare your results are for any one marker, and surname distribution maps.

## TOOLKIT

### WEB SITES

- **GENEALOGY-DNA Mailing List**  
<[lists.rootsweb.com/index/other/DNA/GENEALOGY-DNA.html](http://lists.rootsweb.com/index/other/DNA/GENEALOGY-DNA.html)>
- **Genetic Genealogy Articles**  
<[www.genetealogy.com](http://www.genetealogy.com)>
- **World Families Network**  
<[www.worldfamilies.net](http://www.worldfamilies.net)>

### BOOKS

- **DNA and Family History: How Genetic Testing Can Advance Your Genealogical Research** by Chris Pomery (The [British] National Archives, 9.99 pounds—about \$18—from <[www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)>)
- **DNA for Family Historians** booklet by Alan Savin (\$6.99 from <[www.savin.org](http://www.savin.org)>)
- **The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey** by Spencer Wells (Random House, \$13.95)
- **The Seven Daughters of Eve** by Bryan Sykes (W.W. Norton & Co., \$15.95)
- **Trace Your Roots with DNA: Using Genetic Tests to Explore Your Family Tree** by Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak and Ann Turner (Rodale, \$14.95)

■ **FamilyTreeDNA's Ysearch** <[www.ysearch.org](http://www.ysearch.org)> lets you link your genetic and genealogical data by uploading your test results and GEDCOM file. You can easily search more than 6,300 haplotypes and 8,100 surnames, and use built-in tools (YSearchCompare and Genetic Distance) to take a closer look at individuals of interest to you. In late 2004, the company launched an mtDNA database called **Mitosearch** <[www.mitosearch.org](http://www.mitosearch.org)>, which contained 500 individuals' results at press time. You can enter results from any testing company, search for matches and compare two people.

■ The **Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation (SMGF)** database <[www.smgf.org](http://www.smgf.org)> was the first to combine genetic and genealogical data. Although you can't upload your own results, they eventually will find their

■ **Unlocking Your Genetic History: A Step-By-Step Guide to Discovering Your Family's Medical and Genetic Heritage** by Thomas Shawkler (Rutledge Hill Press, \$19.99)

### TESTING COMPANIES

- **African Ancestry**  
(202) 439-0641, <[www.africanancestry.com](http://www.africanancestry.com)>: African tests.
- **DNA Heritage**  
(866) 736-2362, <[www.dnaheritage.com](http://www.dnaheritage.com)>: Y-DNA tests.
- **DNAPrint Genomics**  
(941) 366-3400, <[www.dnaprint.com](http://www.dnaprint.com)>: Biogeographical test.
- **FamilyTreeDNA**  
(713) 868-1438, <[www.familytreedna.com](http://www.familytreedna.com)>: Y-DNA, mtDNA and SNP tests.
- **Oxford Ancestors**  
<[www.oxfordancestors.com](http://www.oxfordancestors.com)>: Y-DNA and mtDNA tests.
- **Relative Genetics**  
(801) 461-9799, <[www.relativegenetics.com](http://www.relativegenetics.com)>: Y-DNA, mtDNA and Native American tests.
- **Trace Genetics**  
(866) 500-4153, <[www.tracegenetics.com](http://www.tracegenetics.com)>: Y-DNA, mtDNA, biogeographical, Native American and SNP tests.

way into this database if you participate in the SMGF genetic genealogy project (see page 60). In the meantime, you can search 9,800-plus haplotypes representing more than 6,600 surnames, and explore the pre-1900 family trees for matches.

Who knows? Maybe you'll find a cousin. Only you can decide whether DNA testing is a good next step, but for a growing number of genealogists, the answer is a definite yes. If you're dealing with stubborn brick walls, wishing for a way to verify your traditional research, or struggling with your Smith or Jones line, it might be time for you to take the test. 🐾

MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK is the co-author of *Trace Your Roots with DNA: Using Genetic Tests to Explore Your Family Tree* (Rodale, \$14.95) and web-master of <[www.genetealogy.com](http://www.genetealogy.com)>.