Basic Genealogy: Finding Information

First gather the records and information that you already have in your possession and record them on Pedigree and Family Group charts. Your research will begin where there are gaps on your chart. You can fill those gaps by looking at government and church records. Government records were created for multiple reasons. There are U.S. Federal and State census, military registration, military pension, land records, tax records, and probate records to name a few.

For our purposes we will be starting with the U.S. Federal Census records and vital records.

Federal Census Records:

Federal Census records are some of the most popular records used. They are very useful in finding the names of collateral ancestors and can be the source for clues that you can build on. As useful as they are there can be omissions and duplications. Each enumerator had boundaries he was to work within, if he went outside his boundary there would be duplications of that family. Sometimes numerators didn't include each house for whatever reason and thus there are omissions.

a) You can find census records on microfilm at your local library and digital images are available on Ancestry.com and Familysearch.org.

b) The federal census started in 1790 and was taken every 10 years. The census records are released every 72 years.

c) Census records 1790-1840 only had the name of the head of the household. Everyone else on the census was reported as a tick mark in categories divided by age range and gender.

d) Census records from 1850-1940's give the names of each individuals that lived in the household. Relationship to the head of the household didn't begin until the 1880 census.

e) A portion of the 1790 census was lost due to the War of 1812. The 1890 census was lost due to a fire at the Commerce Building in 1921. A few remnants still exist.

f) An official census day was established for enumerators to ask the question "as of" who lived in the household. An example would be in the 1940 census, April 1 is the official census day. So the enumerator would have asked as of April 1 who lived in the house, those who were born after April 1 were omitted in the census and those who died after April 1 were included. This information can be used as clues to determine what month someone was born or died in your research.

g) When using census records pay attention to the neighbors of your ancestors. Families lived next to each other so the neighbor could be a sibling, older child or cousin. Neighbors can be a witness on other documents, thus helping to separate out people with the same name. The names of the neighbors can also be used as clues when researching military records since the men would enlist in a group.

h) To learn more about census records and the kind of questions that were asked see Emily Anne Croom's *The Genealogist's Handbook and Sourcebook*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2003. Or National Archives www.archives.gov/research/census

Vital Records:

Vital records are the next set of records commonly used. They include birth, marriage, divorce and death records. Thus, information found on a vital record can be held in a government agency or be part of local church records.

a) To find records held by government agencies, you will be using vital record indexes. These are either bound indexes or indexes that are online. Once you find your ancestor in an index you will need to record the name of the book and page number your ancestor is listed on. You will then contact the organization to get a copy of the original record. Some places charge a fee, but it varies by the organization. Most birth and death records are kept at the health department; while marriage and divorce records are at the courthouse. Some counties have their own archival facility. Saint Joseph County, Indiana has the facility Saint Joseph County Archives and Record Center. There you will find marriage, divorce and wills information.

b) There are guide books that will tell you where each type of vital record is archived and when the different counties began to keep vital records. This is valuable so that you aren't looking for a record that doesn't exist. These guide books are the following:

   i. ***Family Tree Sourcebook: Your Essential Directory of American County and Town Records.*** Cincinnati: Ohio. Family Tree Books, 2010*.
   ii. ***Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources.*** Salt Lake City: Utah. Ancestry Pub, 2004.
   iii. **The Handybook for Genealogists: United States of America.** Draper, Utah :Everton,2006

c) Understanding the history of the area your ancestor lived can help you from looking in the wrong places. Some counties were created from other counties. Since boundary lines of counties and townships moved it would be valuable to know the history of the area where your ancestor lived.
   For example, Starke County, Indiana was created from St. Joseph County, Indiana and unorganized land. Your ancestors in Starke County could have records archived in St. Joseph County, if the area where your ancestor was living was still part of St. Joseph County at the time the record was created. An advantage with the Family Tree Sourcebook is that it gives a little background information on the creation of each county in the United States.

d) To find records that were generated by a church, you will have to contact that church. It will vary how those records were archived. Some local libraries do have church records on microfilm.

Resources:

Powell, Kimberly, "Genealogy Research at the Courthouse, Archives or Library: 10 Tips for Planning Your Visit & Maximizing Your Results". About.com Genealogy, Web. 23 May.2012.