FAMILYSEARCH

THE CASE FOR MOVING TO "OUR TREE"

A FAMILYSEARCH WHITE PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper discusses upcoming changes to the new FamilySearch website (new.familysearch.org). It will:

- Discuss known challenges found in new.familysearch.org.
- Describe potential solutions that FamilySearch will provide.
- Discuss concerns that you may have.
- Provide a place where you can tell FamilySearch about your concerns.

THE GOALS

The new FamilySearch website has made great progress in decreasing duplicate temple work and increasing the number of members participating in family history.

However, it has not yet met the goal of reducing duplicate research, which requires an accurate, source-based family tree whose data endures longer than any of the researchers who contribute to it.

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THE CHALLENGE

To achieve this goal, new.familysearch.org needs to solve these problems:

- **A lack of meaningful sources.** The consistent use of sources prevents errors and minimizes contention among researchers working on the same lines.
- **The inability to correct errors.** The database contains a lot of information that has been submitted over the last several decades. When you find errors, you probably cannot make the required corrections because:
  - You cannot correct others' errors.
  - Others can mess up your own work by combining the wrong records together.

- Until a recent fix, some records contained disputes, which prevent all corrections.
- Many key individuals in a family tree have so much bad information that correcting them seems impossible.

THE SOLUTION

To improve the data in the family tree, information will be divided into three types:

- **Sources** show where information in the tree came from.
- **Conclusions** are the best available facts about each individual in the tree. Sources strengthen conclusions.
- **Opinions** are variations of the conclusions, such as theories, variations, or contradictions found in various sources.

The genealogical information from the Pedigree Resource File, Ancestral File, Church membership records, and Church temple records will not automatically become conclusions, as they are now. Instead, they will be large resources of "opinion" data that you can search and use to create conclusions.

To allow a community of interested researchers to identify, record, and maintain an accurate set of conclusions in the family tree, the family tree feature will be modified to:

- Remove features that prevent you from correcting other contributors' data.
- Add new collaboration, monitoring, and roll-back features to help control this more open environment.

INTRODUCTION

The new FamilySearch website (new.familysearch.org) allowed Church members, for the first time, to see all of the information about their ancestry that had been submitted to the Church over the years. This data appeared in many different systems, but it was never all in the same system at the same time.

President Gordon B. Hinckley set two important goals for new.familysearch.org:

- Reduce duplication of temple ordinances and family history research.
- Increase the number of Church members participating in family history.

This first version of the system has been successful at reducing ordinance duplication. It has not yet addressed duplication of research. It is clear that our next goal must be to create an accurate, source-based family tree whose data endures longer than any of the researchers who contribute to it. This is the only way that we will ultimately reduce the time-consuming duplication of research.

BARRIERS TO AN ACCURATE, SOURCE-BASED FAMILY TREE

With its current features and data, new.familysearch.org cannot become an accurate, source-based family tree for several reasons:

- Due to a lack of meaningful sources, it is impossible to tell which information is most accurate. Further, if you enter sources, the system does not indicate which versions of a name, event, or other information have sources. Other users may never see them.
- Even when you have sources that prove which information is correct, it is nearly impossible to correct or remove errors. You cannot change or remove what other people contributed.
- The system performs slowly at peak times and with many concurrent users.

LACK OF MEANINGFUL SOURCES

Meaningful sources and citations provide many benefits. They can:

- Prove or disprove the accuracy of the information in a family tree.
- Reduce or eliminate duplicate research required to validate others' work.
- Reduce conflict in collaborative research efforts.

Data in new.familysearch.org lacks meaningful sources and citations for many reasons:

- Legacy systems such as Ancestral File and the International Genealogical Index did not preserve a contributor's sources.
- Some contributors did not track sources or contribute them with their data.
- Although you can add sources into new.familysearch.org, the feature, as it currently exists, is deficient and gets little use.

Even when sources are available, you cannot provide images or links to online records. If you want to validate the research, you have to find and examine the records manually.

INABILITY TO CORRECT ERRORS

When users work in new.familysearch.org, many feel overwhelmed and discouraged. They may have spent years doing original research and correcting prior research. Then the problems all come back, and they have to start all over again. Even if they're willing, they simply cannot make all of the required corrections because:

- You cannot correct others' errors.
- Others can mess up your work.
- The record contains disputes.
- Many key individuals in a family tree have so much bad information that correcting them seems almost impossible.

You Cannot Correct Others' Errors

In the first design of new.familysearch.org, researchers told us that they would not participate in any system that allowed others to change their data. They feared that less experienced people would replace their accurate data with family legends and other errors.

Consequently, features were added to prevent others from changing what you contribute. When you are an experienced, knowledgeable researcher, this seems like a good way to protect your careful work.

Consider, however, that the system provides this protection to all of the information in it, not just the information that is well researched and well documented.

Since only the original contributor can make corrections, you have to contact that contributor and convince him or her to do the needed work. This collaboration adds obstacles. Consider:

- Much of the legacy data that was submitted to Ancestral File and other early systems has remained unclaimed. The original contributors have moved, quit doing family history, died, or are unavailable for other reasons.
- Some contributors do not provide contact information.
- Even when contributors provide an e-mail address, you may not get a response.
- There may be multiple contributors. You may not be able to contact them all, much less convince them to make the required change.
- Temple ordinances were performed using incorrect information. The person who originally contributed the information for ordinances might be able to change his or her own submission. However, the names, events, and relationships that are stored with the temple ordinances cannot be corrected or removed. System administrators can sometimes help, but the process can be daunting, and providing the required documentation can be time consuming.

Others Can Mess Up Your Work

There is one type of change where another user can change hours of your painstaking work: the combining and separating of records.

Combining duplicate records takes a long time and expertise. It can take even longer to identify records that should not have been combined and separate them back out.

After you spend the time on these corrections, you quickly find out that they are not permanent. The system lists the bad records as "possible duplicates" to the next person. That person, lacking your expertise in your family line, recombines them.

Large Amounts of Duplication

Since its release, it is apparent that the duplication of information was a more serious problem than previously understood. Some individuals have hundreds of duplicate records. They have thousands of pieces of information, mostly inaccurate.

Many of these large records are early LDS Church members with many descendants. Others are members of other well-researched family lines, including royalty. They are gateway ancestors who connect millions of people to their heritage.

Take, for example, John Case (see the screenshot on the next page). You can easily tell that his is a problem record because of the triangle next to his name.

His record contains 812 combined records, with over 10,000 pieces of information. If you dig into his details a bit, you'll see:

- 39 spouses.
- Over 50 siblings connected to 4 sets of parents.
- Hundreds of children.
- 19 versions of his name, some obviously belonging to someone else.
- 25 versions of his birth date, ranging from 1619 to "about 1800."

- Birthplaces in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Ireland, and England.

At least 8,000 of Case's descendants submitted him to the Church. When the database that became the new.familysearch.org was first created, John Case's record contained each of these 8,000 submissions, resulting in more than 75,000 pieces of information.

To prevent records like this from causing the system to crash, duplicate pieces of information were deleted. (No unique data was deleted.) This stabilized the system, but records like this are one of the main reasons that the system performs slowly.

With so many errors, and so many contributors who are probably unavailable, it is unlikely that the records of crucial gateway ancestors like John Case will ever be correct unless the system itself changes.

SOLUTION

The solution is large and will not be implemented all at once. The changes can be divided into these basic categories.

- Place much more emphasis on sources and citations.
- Create a family tree that allows the genealogical community to collaborate and

identify the most accurate pieces of information to be shown on the tree.

Let's discuss each part in more detail.

EMPHASIS ON SOURCES

Consistent use of sources prevents errors and minimizes contention among researchers working on the same lines.

To place emphasis on sources, the information in the tree will be separated into sources, conclusions, and opinions. This division will help you identify which pieces of information are reliable and supported by sources.

- You will add **sources** with a new sources feature. This new feature lets you upload a scanned document, enter a citation that identifies where it came from, and link the scanned document and citation to individuals in the tree. If you do not have a scanned copy of the source, you can submit the complete citation without the image. You will be able to save this source and reuse it as needed.
- **Conclusions** are the best set of available facts about an individual in the tree. Each individual will have one set of conclusions, which you and a community of interested researchers maintain. Conclusions without sources are considered weak. Anyone can add

a source to strengthen a conclusion or replace a weak conclusion with a stronger one.

- **Opinions** are variations of the conclusions about an individual. They may be "theories" that you post so that you can work with others to substantiate them with sources or disprove them. They may simply be variations submitted over time or contradictions found in various sources.

Think of the conclusions as a sort of "beefed up" individual summary and the opinions as all of the variations shown in the details.

Data from the Pedigree Resource File, Ancestral File, and Church membership records will not automatically become conclusions, as they are now. Instead, they will be large resources of "opinion" data that you can search. If you find good information, you can add it to the conclusions in the tree, and then add even more sources to strengthen those conclusions.

Temple records will provide two types of data:

- The ordinance dates and places will be sources that indicate the ordinances are done.
- The accompanying genealogical data will become another set of "opinion" data that you can search and use to form conclusions. That means, for example, that the system will not automatically generate a marriage relationship simply because a sealing-to-spouse ordinance was done. You could use the temple record as a source that supports your conclusion of a marriage event and relationship.

Separating the data in this way also allows the system to perform more quickly since it can bring up one small set of conclusions instead of bringing back all of the information at once. Large records like John Case's will no longer cause problems because:

- He too will have one set of conclusions.
- He will have many fewer incorrect spouses and children because the ordinance records no longer automatically create relationships.

COLLABORATIVE CONCLUSIONS

As new.familysearch.org evolves, the features that prevent you from correcting other contributor's data will be removed. A community of people who are interested in their lines in the family tree will be able to evaluate sources and maintain the most accurate set of conclusions possible.

This type of change might alarm many of you. Let us try to reassure you on two levels:

- **User Behavior.** In the current new FamilySearch website, the individual's summary works in a collaborative manner. Any user can change the summary. Everyone sees just one summary. How the summary gets used has been monitored. The result is that less experienced researchers do not usually change summaries because they assume someone with more expertise has already made the best choice.

   Other collaborative websites find this same behavior pattern. Most people change something only when they really do have better information. Experts monitor their subject area and quickly correct errors, unintentional and otherwise.

- **New features.** To control this more open system, new collaboration, monitoring, and roll-back features will be added:
  - A *discussions* feature was added in the August 2010 release. Each individual now has a discussion page where you can discuss the data with other interested researchers.
  - A *watch* feature was added in the December 2010 release of the system. It lets you monitor the individuals of interest to you and receive notifications when their information changes.
  - In a future release, features will be added that let you see a *history of the changes* made to an individual. You can undo any change and explain why that change needed to be undone.

- The *report abuse* feature will be available in more places. This will allow you to handle conflicts and report deliberate attempts to vandalize the data.
- *Community roles* will provide expert community members the tools they need to monitor activity in the tree, resolve issues, and "lock" ancestors when heated issues need a chance to cool before further changes are made.

TIME FRAME

The time frame for seeing these changes is difficult to predict. As previously noted, the discussions and watch features already exist.

The following features will be added in upcoming releases. The exact dates have yet to be determined, but the priority order is currently as follows:

- Attach or link to sources and citations.
- Separate Ancestral File, Pedigree Resource File, and temple ordinance data into record sets.
- Add a history of changes, and allow changes to be undone.
- Create a family tree containing conclusions.
- Create community roles.

These priorities will probably change somewhat over time. Use of the system will be monitored and your feedback for insights about the correct priority order will be evaluated.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW?

Remember, the old features that prevented others from changing your accurate work are the same features that prevent you from correcting others' mistakes. The new features will provide many "checks and balances" to help you maintain the accuracy of the data that means so much to you. Sources will be much more visible and accessible. You can monitor your line and undo any errors that others introduce. You will be able to collaborate with others much more easily and report intentional abuse quickly.

Please share your thoughts with us. Go to www.familysearch.org, and click **Feedback**, then **Share your ideas**. Enter your thoughts, marking your comments with the product name **Family Tree**.