Should You Take the Hint? Automatic Record Hinting on the Giant Genealogy Websites

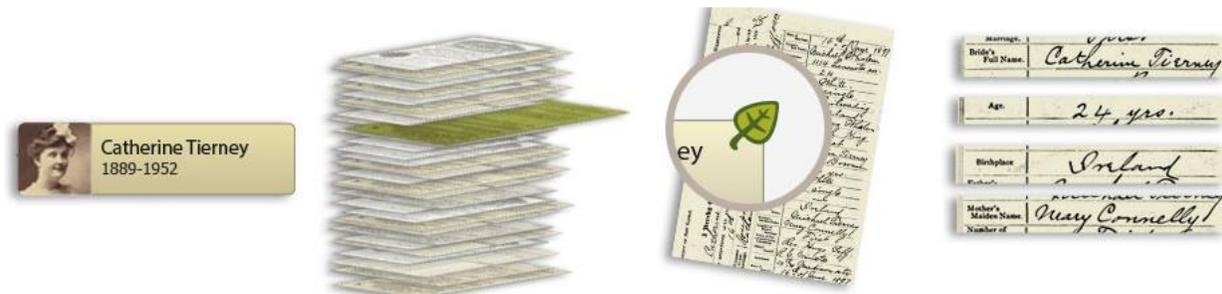Sunny Morton (www.sunnymorton.com) is a Contributing Editor for Family Tree Magazine; the NGS award-winning Editor of Ohio Genealogy News and an occasional contributor to Lisa Louise Cooke's Genealogy Gems Podcast. She's the author of *Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy* (Family Tree Books) and co-author with Harold Henderson, CG, of the forthcoming *How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records* (working title, Genealogical Publishing Co.). Sunny holds degrees in history and humanities from Brigham Young University.

Find her popular quick reference guide, "Genealogy Giants: Comparing the 4 Major Websites" at www.genealogygems.com or at the RootsTech 2019 Genealogy Gems booth #1303.

What is hinting?

Hinting is an automated process that looks for records about your family, based on your tree. Here's how it works at Ancestry, FamilySearch, Findmypast and MyHeritage:

YOU: Upload or create a tree, with as much detail as possible.	**SITE:** Compares your tree data to billions of historical records.	**YOU:** Review each record hint to see whether it matches.	**YOU:** Reject the record or add data to your tree.

(Graphic at https://www.ancestry.com/cs/us/hints; used with permission.)

Hints are different than searches: do them both!

Hint: Automatically comes from the website. The more data you enter, the more accurate and plentiful the hints.

Search: Something you do. The more data you enter, the fewer results you get, because a search looks for records with *everything* you ask for.

8 Strategies: Get the most out of record hints

1. **Be sure your online tree is current.** Enter everything you know about your relatives to give the system as much data as possible. To upload a tree:
   a) Ancestry: Trees > Create and manage trees > Create a new tree OR Upload a GEDCOM file
   b) FamilySearch: Free tutorial at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDTXfIXvxtM
   c) Findmypast: Family Tree > Import a tree OR Create a tree
   d) MyHeritage: Tree > Import a GEDCOM

2. **Subscribe to the sites.** At Ancestry, Findmypast and MyHeritage, access to records revealed by hinting requires a subscription. Hints not available in library editions, since you can't log in with your user account and access your tree. Compare subscription options in "Genealogy Giants: Comparing the 4 Major Websites" by Sunny Morton.

3. **Explore hints from each person's profile.** Work from the present backward, one person at a time in each generation. That way, you will know more about their lives and families, and better recognize them in records when you see them.

4. **Focus on record hints rather than tree hints.** Ancestry and MyHeritage hint on others' family trees, too, which may or may not be accurate. Consult others' trees with caution. Review supporting evidence and add only verified data to your tree.

5. **Review hints carefully: accuracy varies.** (See image, previous page for illustration.) FamilySearch and MyHeritage both claim > 95% record hinting accuracy. Accuracy is higher for indexed records and lower for print materials scanned via optical character recognition (such as newspaper articles, city directories and yearbooks).
   a) Compare what's already in your tree with what's in the record.
   b) View record images (if possible), which may contain additional clues. Click to explore record images on other websites, if needed, or to view indexed data.
   c) Watch for agreement on multiple pieces of data, especially unusual names, tiny locales, specific dates and relatives' identities. The more agreement, the more likely the match.
   d) Accept only the hints you want—but get them all. Review and accept individual pieces of information, rather than just accepting an entire record. Otherwise, you may inadvertently accept incorrect information. But sure you transfer *all* details from the record to *all* relevant people. Go back into ancestral profiles after accepting hints to add any data that didn't transfer.
   e) Don't accidentally overwrite better information you may already have in your tree (see below).
   f) Don't accept a hint if you can't tell whether it's a match. If it's a possibility, use "maybe" option (if offered). If you're fairly confident and you're working in a private tree, consider accepting it, but then work to verify it (and mark this tree data as tentative).

Less specific info in record		More specific info already in tree
1852	→	15 Oct 1852

Don't replace it!

6. **Research possible multiple identities.** If you start seeing duplicate or near-duplicate records, this may indicate that others of similar description lived in the same time and place. Follow them across several record collections until you can tease them apart.

7. **Watch for new hints to appear.** New records are frequently added to all the sites. Changing your tree data can generate new hints, too. Ancestry's "Suggested Records" and MyHeritage's "Record Detective" both generate new possibilities based on your activity.
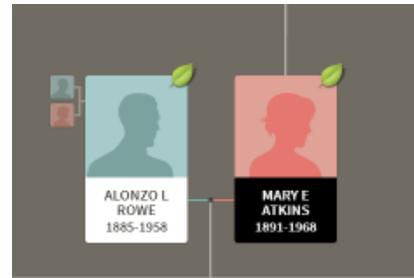
8. **Follow up on hints with targeted searches**. Hinting won't usually find every record on the site. None of the sites except MyHeritage include all record collections in hinting. Watch for gaps in the records you should have found, depending on the time period and place. Pay special attention to smaller or obscure collections (which may not have been included in hinting), and to print materials for which hinting accuracy may be lower.

Automated record hinting on the Giants

Ancestry.com Hints
- <u>What they look like:</u> Green leaf icons
- <u>What records are included in hinting</u>: The most popular indexed and OCR-searchable historical records (about 65-75%) and user-submitted trees
- Set hinting display and email preferences under username > Site preferences.
- Advanced strategy: To review all your Ancestry hints for a specific collection (say, when the 1950 census comes out), see this tip by Randy Seaver: https://www.geneamusings.com/2015/01/tuesdays-tip-search-ancestrycom-hints.html.
- More: https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Ancestry-Hints-1460091979344-3686
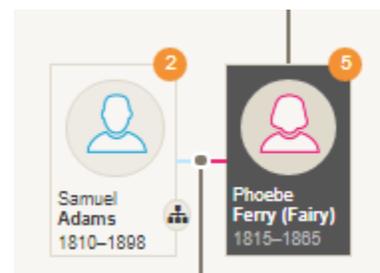
FamilySearch Record Hints
- <u>What they look like:</u> blue rectangular icons
- <u>What records are included in hinting:</u> Most historical records. Not included: FamilySearch Books; collections without much data.
- More: https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/record-hints.

Findmypast.com Hints
- <u>What they look like:</u> Orange circles
- <u>What's included:</u> 1939 Register, censuses, vital and military records
- Set hint email alerts: My account > Communication preferences.
- More: https://www.findmypast.com/hints

MyHeritage Record Matches:
- <u>What they look like:</u> Brown icons
- <u>What's included:</u> All historical records.
- Matching includes name translations.
- More: https://blog.myheritage.com/2012/09/introducing-record-matching/