**START AT THE BEGINNING.** Write down what you know - your name, birth date and location, marriage date and location, etc. Add the same information for your children. Then do your parents and siblings. If you don’t know these details for your parents ask. If your parents are deceased ask your siblings, your parents’ siblings - anyone you can think of who might know. Ask them about your grandparents and any other ancestors they know about. If your parents don’t know perhaps their sibling do. Ask them. The answers will provide your initial research road map.

Collect your own documentation, birth certificate, marriage certificate, any other legal documentation including divorce. Gather your children’s birth certificates and their other documentation. If you don’t have this you may have to obtain copies from the County Clerk in which the birth, marriage or other event occurred. You need a copy of the official record. Next do the same for your parents and your siblings. Do you know everyone’s maiden name, when and where they were born, married and if appropriate died and were buried? Were they in the military and if so when?

One of the top regrets genealogists have is “I didn’t ask my mother/grandmother/uncle when I had the chance and now they are gone.”

You will be doing this progressively back for each generation. Remember, two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents and so on. And if you have step parents in any generation you probably want to include them. They and their children, even if unrelated to you, may be important later.

You can see that there are a lot of people, a lot of information and a lot of documents. With all that information and documents you need to be organized. You need a two part plan, one for recording the information and one for saving the documentation.

The best thing to do with the information is to enter it into the genealogy program of your choice. Data entry can be time consuming but you need to enter every detail you know about every person and you need to cite the source for that piece of information. It will become obvious what you are missing when you enter the data into your genealogy program. Make a list of what is missing and make a plan for finding it.

Citing your sources is a critical step. If a person read your file could they find your documentation? If the answer is not yes you haven’t done it correctly. This is the other top regret - “I didn’t cite my sources [or didn’t cite them fully] at the time and now I can’t find the information.”

Many people have elaborate filing systems for the documentation. I believe you should keep it simple. There are many options but you should chose one that works
for you. If you are not a super detail oriented person you probably won’t carry through on an elaborate filing system. It is more important to file in an orderly manner so you can find it.

To begin try eight files, one for each of your great grandparents using the maiden names of each of the females. If you don’t know your great grandparents do it with your grandparents. You can expand later. In the beginning those eight folders are enough. Later you will probably want to have subfolders for such things as census records, vital records, military records, etc. as you gather more and more data. I scan all the information and keep the files on my computer, backed up of course. You can also easily share the scanned copies with relatives. Think of it as additional backup.

When you have completed your grandparents and you have filled out all the information you can find, with special attention to completing birth, marriage, death and children, then you can proceed backward, generation by generation. At that point you will have a better idea what you need to learn more about - census records, vital records, military records, immigration and naturalization, land records, probate records, etc. There is internet research, courthouse research, library research, archives research, organization - there’s always something to learn that will enhance your genealogy.

And when you have your family under control - you are never really “done” with your ancestors - there is your spouse’s family, the families of your children’s spouses and on and on. Don’t worry. You’ll never run out of people.