Genetic Genealogy Journey
First Look at Shared Genealogy of DNA Matches
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So, you've joined the genetic genealogy community by taking a DNA test. You know that you need to contact your DNA matches and try to determine who your common ancestor is. If you don't share genealogical information you cannot determine how you may be related to your DNA matches. What are some of the ways to share genealogical information? What things should you consider as you determine how much information to share about your family tree and your DNA? How do you find a good balance between sharing necessary information for you and your DNA matches to confirm and extend your family trees while not sharing information that some may prefer be kept private?

SHARING GENEALOGY INFORMATION WITH DNA MATCHES

DNA testing companies generally provide ways to share information on the earliest known ancestor, a surname list and geographic areas, and/or a family tree. This article discusses ways to use each of these items.
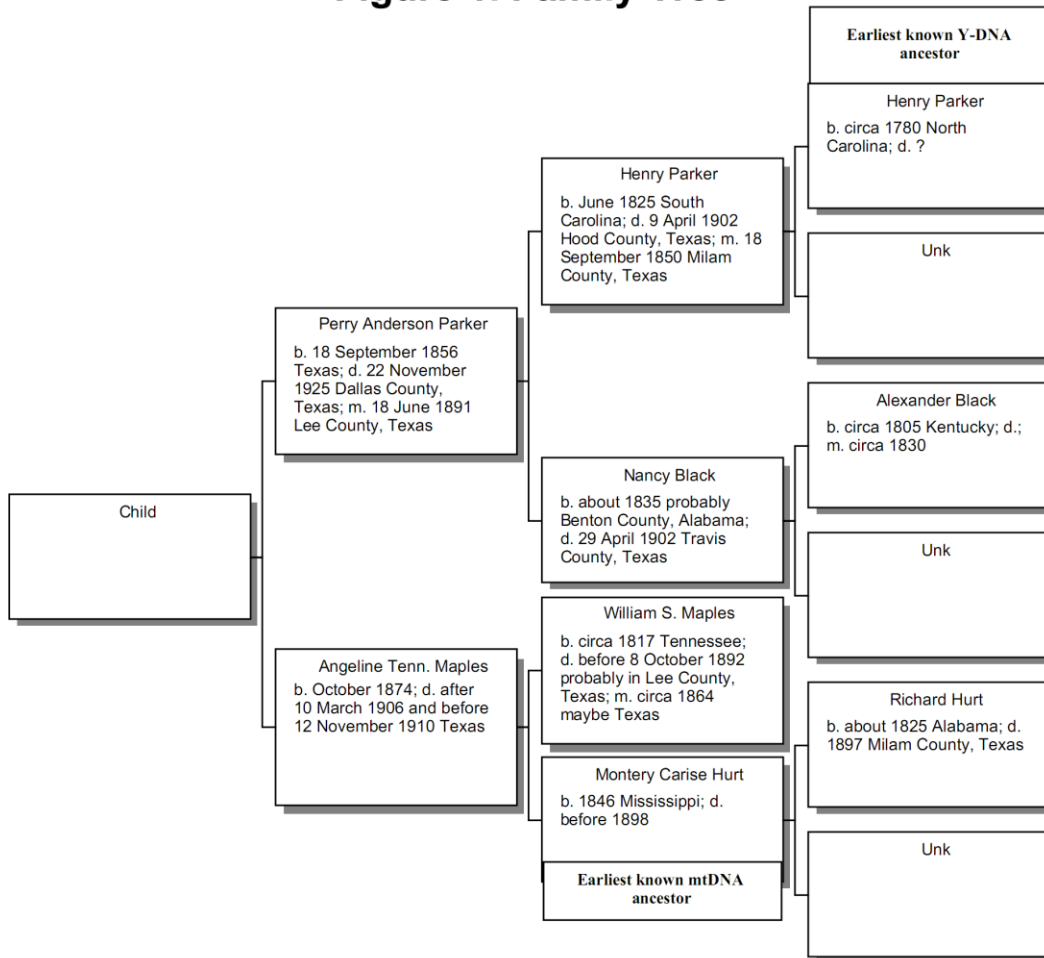
Earliest Known or Most Distant Ancestor

Earliest known (most distant) ancestor fields were conceived when the only DNA tests available were Y-DNA and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). There is only one earliest known ancestor for the Y-DNA line and one for the mtDNA line—the terminal link in the outer lines displayed in a pedigree chart (see figure 1). If one of your DNA matches also traces his Y-DNA or his/her mtDNA line to the same earliest known ancestor as you do, assuming both trees are accurate, you both inherited that DNA from the same ancestor.

Finding the common ancestor when you and your match both list the same earliest known ancestor is easy. You will both see similar names and birth and death dates. If one of you has traced back more generations than the other then you may not notice you share a common ancestor by comparing only the names. This is one drawback with using only the earliest known ancestor field naming one ancestor.

For example, perhaps I have traced my Y-DNA line back to Perry Anderson Parker, born in 1856 in Texas. My close Y-DNA matches (or my brother's matches since I don't carry Y-DNA) list their earliest known ancestors as Henry Parker born 1827 in South Carolina, Henry Parker born circa 1780 in North Carolina, and William Parker born in 1696 in North Yorkshire, England. All of us list different men as our earliest known ancestor, all born in different states or countries. There is no obvious match. Further research may lead to a conclusion that Perry Anderson Parker is a son of the Henry Parker born in 1827 and that Henry is a son of the Henry Parker born circa 1780. Even if I

can support this conclusion with strong documentary research it does not follow that William Parker must also be part of my ancestral Y-DNA line. William may be an ancestor to the Henry line. William could just as likely be a brother, uncle, or cousin to my Parker ancestor. There is almost a one hundred year gap between Henry born circa 1780 and William born 1696 where anything could have happened. Much more documentary research is needed before I claim William as part of my family. But if I find two men of the same name as my immigrant ancestor and one comes from Yorkshire and one comes from Cornwall I will investigate the man from Yorkshire first. William's birth place is a clue to help me focus my research in likely places from which my Parkers may have emigrated.

Figure 1. Family Tree

Child

Perry Anderson Parker
b. 18 September 1856 Texas; d. 22 November 1925 Dallas County, Texas; m. 18 June 1891 Lee County, Texas

Henry Parker
b. June 1825 South Carolina; d. 9 April 1902 Hood County, Texas; m. 18 September 1850 Milam County, Texas

Earliest known Y-DNA ancestor

Henry Parker
b. circa 1780 North Carolina; d. ?

Unk

Nancy Black
b. about 1835 probably Benton County, Alabama; d. 29 April 1902 Travis County, Texas

Alexander Black
b. circa 1805 Kentucky; d.; m. circa 1830

Unk

Angeline Tenn. Maples
b. October 1874; d. after 10 March 1906 and before 12 November 1910 Texas

William S. Maples
b. circa 1817 Tennessee; d. before 8 October 1892 probably in Lee County, Texas; m. circa 1864 maybe Texas

Richard Hurt
b. about 1825 Alabama; d. 1897 Milam County, Texas

Montery Carise Hurt
b. 1846 Mississippi; d. before 1898

Earliest known mtDNA ancestor

Unk

Surname List

A list of surnames can be useful (see table 1A). Novice researchers may focus only on surnames. Surnames in common between me and a DNA match might lead to an assumption that we are related through that surname. Experienced researchers know having the same surnames in a family

tree doesn't mean those are the ancestors who passed down the DNA resulting in the match. Even when only one surname is seen that is in the family tree of both DNA matches, it is possible the common ancestor is not yet documented. The common ancestor may be behind a brick wall, in a line one of the researchers hasn't fully researched yet, or one of those Lnu (last name unknown) or Unk (unknown) lines where a woman's maiden name has not yet been discovered.

A list of surnames with dates the family was in a particular location is more useful (see table 1B). When you and your DNA match do not find a common earliest known ancestor you may see you both had family with the same surname. If those families were in the same place at the same time that is a clue for further research. For example, once my research leads me to Henry Parker as the father of Perry Anderson Parker, I find Henry's father's birth place is listed as North Carolina on a census record. Having a close Y-DNA match linking with a man with the same name as my ancestor (Henry), of the right age to be my ancestor's father (born 1780), and born in the place where my ancestor's father was born (North Carolina) would encourage research to support or contradict a theory that these two Henrys are father and son. As before, the DNA match alone does not prove the father-son link. The DNA match provides me with clues to focus my documentary research in a way that is more likely to be successful. Even if my DNA matches list a younger Henry Parker as a son of the elder Henry Parker documentary proof is still needed to show my Henry Parker is the younger Henry Parker and that the elder Henry Parker is his father. The best genealogical researchers living today tell us not to trust what we are told without documentary evidence to support the conclusion.

Family Tree

Some researchers use online trees—either created on the DNA testing company website or by referring DNA matches to a tree on *Ancestry*, *MyHeritage*, *Wiki Tree*, *FamilySearch* Family Tree, or one of the other tree websites. Some researchers do not put their family tree online, but use genealogy software on their computer. Some researchers do not use genealogy software and keep their research in a narrative form in a document on their computers. There may even be some who still use paper and pencil and don't use computers at all.

Whatever form is used, the farther back your family tree goes, with accurate and reliable kinship links, the easier it will be to determine how you are related to your DNA matches. Some researchers believe that you should share all of your genealogical research to get the most from the DNA test results. Each researcher should make a decision as to how much of her research she is comfortable sharing. Once you place information in a place where it can be accessed by others you have no control over how that information is used by others in the future whether the information is online or in a printed book.

Don't share anything that you do not want publicly known. Information on living people should be shared only with that person's consent. This recommendation applies to genealogy as a whole, not just genetic genealogy.[1] If you have an ancestral line for which you've discovered new information

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All URLs accessed 17 September 2014.

[1] "Standards for Sharing Information with Others," NGS Standards and Guidelines, National Genealogical Society (http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/standards_for_sharing_information).

that you plan to publish you may not want to share that information until after the publication date. If there is any information in your database that would distress living people you should consider the implications of sharing that information. Every family situation is different. Some of us will be comfortable sharing more than others will. It is important to give due consideration before taking an action that cannot be reversed and to do what you are comfortable with, within ethical guidelines and the law.

Speculative Lines or Proven Links Only

While the testing companies market the autosomal DNA (atDNA) as linking reliably back five or so generations, because of the random nature of DNA recombination, many of us will find matches several generations further back. Some researchers encourage inclusion of speculative links in the tree you share with DNA matches, especially when your research doesn't cover more than five generations back on every line. An experienced researcher may consider speculative to mean highly probable links for which there is no definitive proof yet. A less experienced researcher may consider speculative to mean unproven links that provide a good family legend, but have no supporting evidence whatsoever, or anything found in an undocumented tree. Many experienced researchers feel any family tree we share should include well-documented links we are reasonably sure of, not the links for which we have no evidence other than that fascinating story Uncle Joe told at the last family reunion. New evidence can prove any kinship link to be wrong, but sharing wild speculative guesses can cause proliferation of bad kinship links for generations to come.

Other Options

Another way to share your lineage instead of using a family tree would be through a narrative or an ahnentafel (ancestor table). Most genealogy software can create an ahnentafel and can include source citations so other researchers can see the sources you used to document a kinship link. This file can be shared with your DNA matches once you make contact with them.

GEDCOM OR NO GEDCOM

If you share your family tree (by entering data directly or by uploading a GEDCOM file to the testing company website) you should know that the tree may be downloaded by your DNA matches in the form of a GEDCOM file. Many genealogy sites allow you to specify whether your tree can be viewed publicly or downloaded. Some DNA testing companies provide these and other control options. Once anyone else has your GEDCOM file you have no control over what happens to it in the future. Even if you delete a GEDCOM file anyone who downloaded the file while it was publicly available may still have a copy of it. Consider the implications of this before uploading your file to any website.

Don't trust your genealogy software to "privatize" your exported data without verifying there is nothing included in the file that you, and the people named in your database, are not willing to share

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publicly. A GEDCOM file can be checked with a viewer utility[2], it can be loaded into your genealogy software using a different name so you can view the data with the program you are most familiar with, or it can be viewed with a plain text editor.

CONCLUSION

Once your test results come back and you start reviewing your list of DNA matches you will see some people share no information, not even their names. While this can be frustrating if the person is predicted as a close match, we cannot know why the person chose to keep his or her information private. Others on the match list may provide only their earliest known ancestor, a list of surnames, or all of these as well as a complete family tree. Each of us has our own reasons for testing and each of us may be thrilled, unmoved, or devastated by the results. You cannot change how someone else feels so skip the matches who don't seem to want contact and work on the ones willing to make contact. As you see how you use the genealogical information shared by others this may influence your decision about how much information to share on yourself and your family.

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[2] Cyndi Ingle, "GEDCOM Software," *Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet* (http://www.cyndislist.com/gedcom/gedcom-software/).