



## FIELD WORKBOOK LEAFLET

A service of the Young Yorker Program. Young Yorkers are junior members of the New York State Historical Association.

TEACHER EDITION

New York State Historical Association.

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# Finding Your Family Tree

By Wayne W. Wright

It is sometimes surprising how little some children know about their family backgrounds. Since families are an every day part of their lives, it would seem only natural that they would be very knowledgeable about them. However, even though they are very much aware of what they actually experience, if family members and history beyond the child's own experiences are never talked about, children don't often think to ask anything about them. Something needs to spark their interest for children to think about their families beyond what they see every day. If grandparents do not live nearby and thus there is little contact with them, children won't think about them. If half-brothers or half-sisters live in another household, children may know little about them. If parents don't mention their own childhoods, children won't become interested in even the family's recent past. Children may not even know their mother's maiden names, for it is likely that they are never discussed.

The primary purpose of this Local History Leaflet is to spark an interest in the student's family history. Students will enjoy delving into family history because it starts with something with which they are familiar - themselves and their immediate family. They may feel a stronger sense of ownership of the project because it relates to them. This study can become a family project with members working together and getting to know each other better.

A great way for a child to get to know more about his/her family history is to talk with a grandparent or other older relative. The focus of this leaflet is to encourage your students to interview their grandparents or older relatives to discover first-hand information about their family history. If grandparents or other older relatives live at a distance, your students may write them letters asking about their lives and experiences. Corresponding with family members can help develop letter writing skills, as well as giving a practical purpose for writing. You may wish to give some practical help to your students as they develop their letters and phrase their questions. Through the mail, family members can get to know each other better even though they are separated by distance. It can certainly help promote understanding among generations.

The blank Question Form provided in the student edition of this leaflet will help your students with questions to ask their grandparents or other relatives as they talk and/or write to them, as well as providing a simple yet systematic way of recording information. Encourage your students to go beyond the basic questions, to delve more deeply into family backgrounds and experiences.

Remember to be sensitive to students who may have a difficult time with the questionnaire. Some students may feel uncomfortable about working on their family histories, perhaps if they come from a single parent household, or do not live with parents at all. Perhaps because of these conditions contact with grandparents or other older family relatives may be limited, difficult, or not possible at all. It is possible that some students' feelings may be overcome with gentle and sensitive encouragement. Attempt to develop an appreciation in each and every student for their family. Make it clear that there is nothing wrong with blank spaces on their questionnaires or in their Family Tree diagrams. More importance should be placed on the information that is learned than on what is left out. Students who do not discover much information should be encouraged to do one of the additional projects offered in this leaflet, after they have accomplished as much as they can on their own family. Learning about the family life of a friend or neighbor can help students get to know those people better; however, substituting other projects instead of having your students work on their own family history may make them feel that something is wrong with their families. At best your knowledge of your students is the most useful information for this important judgment call. This study may contribute to the promotion of family identity and togetherness and, if your students can learn to accept the important reality that not all families are alike, can provide an understanding of what family life is like today.

Searching for information on the life of a grandparent or other older relative, your students will find that the very best source is the person. If the grandparent or other older relative has died, your students need to be encouraged to continue the search. Often the person's life story may be pieced together from other sources. Talking with others who knew the person, or finding written sources such as a family diary or bible, newspaper accounts, family photo album, or other information can help inform a student about the life and history of someone he/she can't talk to in person.

*Wayne W. Wright is Associate Librarian of the Research Library of the New York State Historical Association.*

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

**Primary Source** - A source that is not derived from or dependent on something else; one that is first hand, independent, original; a record created at the time the event happened.

**Secondary Source** - A source that is immediately derived from something original, primary, or basic; a record created after the event and based on other sources.

Anything which provides information about people is a potential genealogical source. No one kind of source is always accurate, but primary sources are more apt to be reliable. Records created by family members, such as family Bible records, tend to be more accurate than those made by non-family members such as census takers. Secondary sources, often created years after the events described, such as published genealogies, are only as reliable as the compiler. However, secondary sources are often more readily available than primary sources. The study of family history can be a good opportunity for using primary sources with children. Remember that primary sources are not always easy for children to read or interpret.

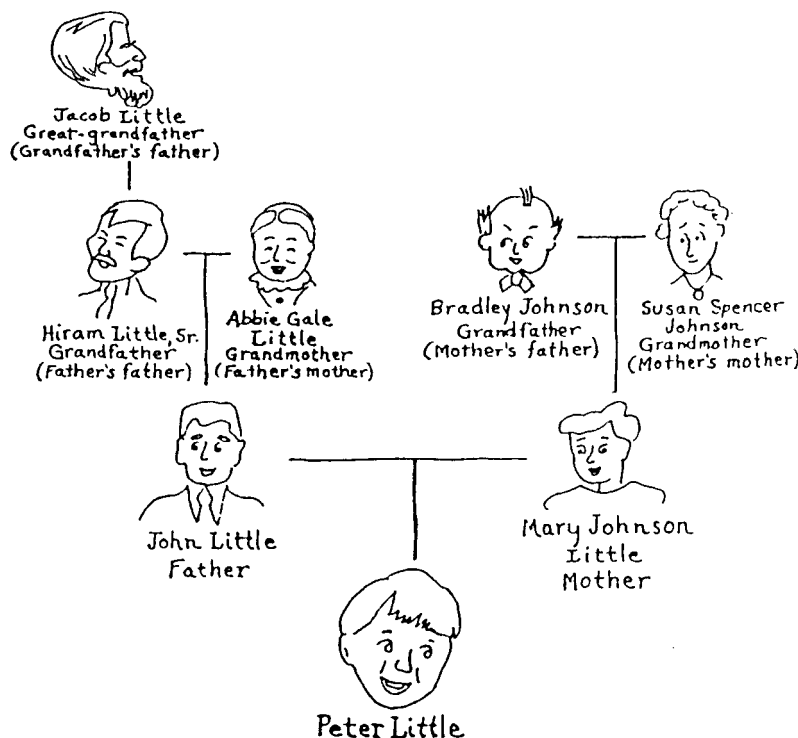
## WHERE TO FIND SOURCES OF FAMILY INFORMATION:

**1. Family members.** A great deal of information can be obtained just by asking family members. Children should speak to parents first, then grandparents, then other relatives. Students may be surprised that family members can tell them a great deal about the past, but never bothered to mention any of it before. Encourage your students to take notes - not just of names and dates, but of occupations, places of residence, funny stories, etc. Students may use a cassette tape recorder for any lengthy interviewing.

**2. Family records.** Diaries, letters, scrapbooks, family Bibles, and photograph albums are all potential sources. Such family papers tend to be disorganized and kept in boxes, drawers, or on shelves, and are often relegated to cellars, attics and garages. Obituaries saved by family members are an excellent source of information.

**3. Libraries and historical societies.** Public libraries often have local history collections. Historical societies generally have information on local families. Nineteenth century books such as county histories, biographical reviews, directories, atlases, and gazetteers all contain information of interest to the genealogist and are usually found in local repositories. Photographs, diaries, and letters are also found in such collections, but such things of interest to a particular individual are more likely to be owned by the family. Always make an appointment before taking a group to visit a library or historical society. Even individuals planning to make such a visit would do well to check in advance to see what kinds of services they can expect or what material is available. Remember, librarians and historical society staff cannot do a person's genealogical research for him.

**4. Government agencies.** Many records compiled by town, county, state, and national governments, although not created as genealogical sources, do contain much family information. In New York State, county clerk's offices have land deeds and census records; county surrogate's offices have wills; and health departments have vital records such as birth, marriage, and death records. Military records and census records have been microfilmed and are available for loan to participating libraries through the Census Microfilm Rental Program, P.O. Box 30, Annapolis Junction, Maryland 207010030. Federal census records through 1920 are available to the public.



**Peter Little's Family Tree**

**The following definitions are provided for your information.**

**Half brother, half sister** – The child of only one of a person’s parents. They are not to be confused with stepbrothers and stepsisters. They are often referred to as just brothers and sisters.

**In-laws** – At one time, “in-laws” were any persons related by marriage, thus “step” relatives were called “in-laws.” Today, “in-laws” are the following:

**Father-in-law, mother-in-law** – Parents of one’s spouse.

**Brother-in-law** – The brother of one’s spouse or the husband of one’s sister. Sometimes the term is used for the brother-in-law of one’s spouse.

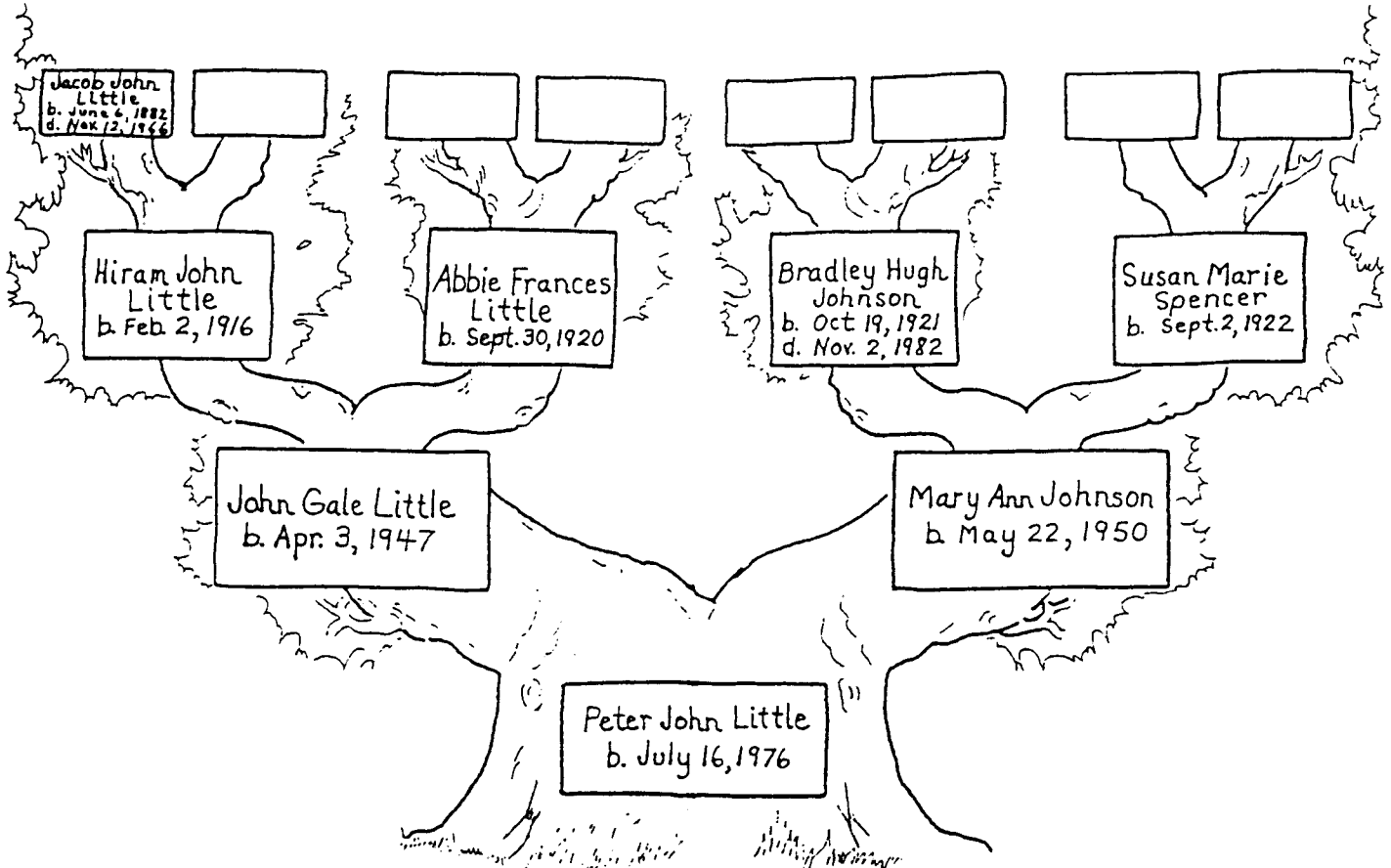
**Sister-in-law** – The sister of one’s spouse or the wife of one’s brother. Sometimes the term is used for the sister-in-law of one’s spouse.

**Step relatives** – Persons related by marriage, not by blood, such as:

**Stepfather** – The husband of one’s mother by a subsequent marriage.

**Stepmother** – The wife of one’s father by a subsequent marriage.

**Stepbrother, stepsister** – Son or daughter of one’s stepparent. Having no parent in common, stepbrothers and sisters are not to be confused with half brothers and sisters.



## YOUNG YORKER ACTIVITIES

Encourage your students to try some of the activities listed below, either as individual or small group or classroom projects. All of these activities are designed to build upon family history themes.

**Draw Your Family Tree** – Fill in the Family Tree diagram in the student edition of this Local History Leaflet or design your own individual form.

**Dress As Your Ancestor** – The fashions of your parents when they were your age looked very different; or perhaps one of your family came from another country, known for their ethnic costume. Borrow these clothes and bring them to class (carefully!).

**Cook/Bake a Family Favorite Food** – With your parents' or friends' help prepare a favorite family dish and share it with your class.

**Find Your Family on a World Map** – Locate the countries of origin for your family members and your classmates on a world map, mark with pins and add flags or colored drawings.

**Use the Language** – Learn a song, poem, story, or a sentence in a language from a country of your ancestors.

**Visit a Place of Interest** – In your local community or farther away that has a connection to your family, one or more of your classmates, or to the history of your community.

**Read a Fable or Folktale** – From an ancestral nation of your family or one of your classmates. Illustrate it, share it with your family and class.

**Write Your Own Life Story** – Remember, family history begins with you.

*Note: The above ideas were contributed from a Family History Month brochure produced by the Monmouth County Genealogy Club  
70 Court Street  
Freehold, New Jersey 07728.*

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*Note: The above references are available for purchase from the Fenimore Book Store of the New York State Historical Association. For more information:*

*Fenimore Book Store*

*N.Y.S.H.A. Dept. LHL*

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