

AI: Friend or Foe?

Practical AI Tools for Genealogy

AGENDA

- Introduction & Demystifying AI
- Deciphering Old Documents (OCR & Handwriting)
- Translation & Historical Context (Focus on Czech/Slovak records)
- Organizing Data & Writing Family Narratives
- AI Ethics, Limitations, and "Hallucinations"
- Case Studies
- Q&A and Wrap-up

Reading the Unreadable

- Handwriting Text Recognition (HTR)
- Transkribus: Built for old European archives
- AI Assistants: Quick transcription helpers

AI "sees" patterns we miss.

Crossing Borders and Languages

- Context over literal translation
- Navigating multilingual records (Latin, German, Czech)
- Tracking shifting town names & surnames

AI understands the *history* behind the languages, not just the words.

From Raw Data to Family Stories

- Organizing chaotic research notes
- Drafting narrative ancestor biographies
- Brainstorming "Brick Wall" solutions

AI can turn a timeline of dates into a readable story for the next family reunion.

The Golden Rule: Trust, but Verify

- Beware of "Hallucinations" (AI making up facts)
- AI does not know your family—you do
- Never accept an AI claim without a primary source citation

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Comparison of Genealogy AI Tools

Tool Type & Name	Primary Superpower	Live Database Access?	Best Used For
FamilySearch AI Assistant	Finding new ancestors	Yes (FamilySearch)	Automated record matching & handwriting full-text search
MyHeritage AI (GAIA & Biographer)	Presentation & Tree Interaction	Yes (MyHeritage)	Generating Wikipedia-style biographies & family media
Ancestry AI Tools	DNA Context & Data Extraction	Yes (Ancestry)	Handwriting transcription & DNA ThruLines mapping
ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Brainstorming & Evidence Synthesis	No (Static Knowledge)	Research planning, logic analysis, and report outlines
Claude (Anthropic)	Long Projects & Natural Tone	No (Static Knowledge)	Writing book chapters, reading entire research logs
Google Gemini	Visual Document Transcription	No (Static Knowledge)	Transcribing cursive uploads & photo context analysis
Perplexity AI	Sourcing & Localizing Archives	Yes (Live Web Search)	Finding obscure historical records, repositories, and maps
Transkribus	Historical Paleography	No (Upload Only)	Deciphering archaic, centuries-old scripts (e.g., Kurrentschrift)

Contrast: Platform Native vs. General LLMs

1. Platform-Native AIs (*FamilySearch, MyHeritage, Ancestry*)

- **The Pro:** These tools have direct access to billions of historical records and your active tree. They actively compute probabilities to push relevant hints directly onto your dashboard.
- **The Con:** They operate within closed ecosystems. They cannot creatively brainstorm a complex logic puzzle or format customized research logs.

2. General LLMs & Assistants (*ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity, Transkribus*)

- **The Pro:** They possess massive historical and linguistic knowledge bases. They can analyze unstructured text, build data tables, write beautifully, and translate archaic text with deep cultural nuance.
- **The Con:** Aside from Perplexity, they cannot pull real-time historical records from live databases. You must bring the data to them via copy-pasting or file uploading.

FamilySearch AI Research Assistant

Use Case A (Tree Expansion): The AI automatically builds a background virtual tree and suggests specific historical records that are highly probable to add entirely *new* individuals to an empty branch.

Use Case B (Full-Text Search): Finding an ancestor mentioned deep inside unindexed text (like the middle paragraph of a handwritten deed) because the AI has scanned and read the document images directly.

MyHeritage AI (Biographer & Record Finder)

Use Case A (Instant Wikipedia Bios): Generating a clean, standard, narrative biography of an ancestor using a mix of your tree data and integrated web search records with a single click.

Use Case B (Interactive Tree Q&A via GAIA): Texting an interactive chatbot questions directly about your own tree, such as *"Who are the missing children of Joseph based on my current timeline?"*

ChatGPT

Use Case A (Negative Evidence Analysis): Pasting a compiled timeline of an ancestor's life and asking: *"Generate a negative evidence summary showing what expected records are completely missing from this person's timeline."*

Use Case B (Structured Step-by-Step Research Plans): Feeding ChatGPT a targeted "brick wall" problem and asking for a localized, chronological research checklist complete with targeted historical record types.

Claude

Use Case A (Writing Family Books): Pasting an entire, messy research log or transcript and asking Claude to write a human-sounding, narrative story that mimics a professional biography rather than looking like an obituary.

Use Case B (Project Memory): Using Claude's "Projects" feature to keep hundreds of pages of a specific lineage in memory across weeks of research, ensuring style and factual consistency.

Google Gemini

Use Case A (Cursive Transcription): Uploading a photo of a clear but confusing 19th-century cursive letter and getting a letter-for-letter transcription text file.

Use Case B (Social History Material Analysis): Uploading an old family heirloom photo or wedding photograph and asking the AI to analyze clothing, badges, or context clues to deduce a likely year or social class.

Perplexity AI

Use Case A (Locating Niche Archives): Querying: *"Where are the physical property tax books for Boone County, Kentucky from 1845 kept today, and are they digitized?"* Perplexity searches the live web and outputs direct, cited links to the specific library or archive.

Use Case B (Tracking Shifting Town Names): Locating historical boundary lines by asking for the modern names and jurisdictions of abandoned European villages.

Transkribus

Use Case A (Deciphering Early Modern European Hand):

Uploading an image of a 17th-century church book written in *Kurrentschrift* or *Schwabacher* script to automatically convert the symbols into readable German or Latin text.

Use Case B (Batch Training for Specific Clerks): Feeding multiple pages written by the exact same historic parish priest to train the AI to perfectly transcribe that single writer's unique penmanship quirks.

Case Studies

Conclusion & Questions

- Embrace AI as your new research assistant
- Try it tonight: Paste one problem into an AI tool
- Questions & Answers

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