

Cracking the Code on Recruiting New Members, Researching Their Ancestry, And Submitting Their Applications

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As my chapter's registrar, I struggled for the first six years of this decade to recruit, research ancestry, and submit only 26 new members. In 2007, I've already submitted around 60 new applications. Why the difference? I've cracked the code!

For years, I labored the old fashioned way, plying free Internet sites such as Genforum and surname boards at Ancestry.com. I submitted queries, wondering if anyone were reading them or would answer them. I used the U. S. Postal Service to send for documents at county courthouses, again wondering if I would get anything in return. And, I used a twenty-year old electric word processor to type an application, with an ink eraser close at hand. I lost ninety percent of my prospects because of the built-in time delays and not being able to find all the necessary documentation. Sound familiar? Is this how you or your chapter registrar is struggling to get new members?

I found three keys to crack the code on effectively recruiting new members, quickly researching their ancestry, and efficiently preparing their applications.

First, rather than just wearing my Revolutionary War uniform to perform color guard duties, I found out how enormously popular I could become by making myself available as a luncheon or after-dinner speaker, in uniform, of course. You know how your chapter is always looking for speakers at your own meetings? Every other group is also looking for them. Also, members of your chapter belong to other organizations. Have them spread the word that you are available to speak. Just in September and October, I've been invited to speak at two Sons of Confederate Veterans meetings, two historical societies, two church men's breakfasts, the American Legion, and my own chapter to showcase one of my speeches. I've developed three talks: The American Revolutionary War Soldier, Finding Your Revolutionary War Soldiers on the Internet, and The Christian Faith of Our Forefathers. Talk about what you know! (E-mail me for copies of my speeches and outlines.) Talk about the SAR. Have packets of SAR brochures and a sheet for signups. Military groups, heritage groups, and genealogical groups all have members who think they have a patriot ancestor back there "somewhere," and they see you as a way to lock in their suspicions.

Second, because I was soon getting inundated with prospective members wanting to join, I knew I had to become more efficient in tracking these prospects' ancestry. I bit the bullet and paid for a subscription to Ancestry.com. Here's the track to follow: click on "family trees," fill in the blanks, and the search engine will look through something like 40 million names in genealogies that have been submitted. Many ancestries are surprisingly complete and accurate. Print off each generation's page, which will be full of the very names, dates, and locations you are looking for. Then, use this information to go after the census records (found under "historical records" on the home page). Census

records can be used to prove each generation's relationship to the next one. Start with the parent or grandparent of the applicant, usually the 1930 census, and work backwards. Try the applicant's surname line first, so you won't have to go after marriage records.

Exploit the DAR and SAR indexes available on line or on a compact disk. After you've found an ancestor who was the right age to be in the Revolution in the "family trees" section of Ancestry.com, check the DAR members-only web site to see if any DAR member has already claimed this individual as a patriot ancestor. (Contact me for an off-the-record tip on accessing this terrific site, which has digitized DAR applications.) Also, use the *SAR Patriot Index* compact disk (available at www.sar.org, click on "for members," then "SAR merchandise," then "books and other materials"), and check it for the same information. Take note on the patriot's unit and state of service.

Third, whether or not you find success with DAR and SAR indexes, invest in a subscription to www.footnote.com, which has over four million Revolutionary War records on line. You will quickly learn to use its search engine to find muster rolls, payrolls, and pension files. Sometimes, genealogies will be found in these pension files. Often times, you won't even have to send off for DAR papers or use a member's SAR number as documentation. If your prospective member is sitting with you as you find, download, and print the records, I guarantee that he will be astonished and deeply gratified to get his own copy of all this documentation on the spot.

Time for a war story: A 68-year-old came to my home at 3 p.m. one day, having only a copy of his birth certificate and his maternal grandparent's names. He thought his grandparents were from South Carolina, but he didn't know for sure. He knew nothing else of his ancestry. By 5 p.m., I had found his line back to a patriot ancestor, downloaded and printed all the necessary documentation, and prepared his application using one of the electronic forms (available by going to www.sar.org, clicking on "membership," and clicking on "application programs"). I drove to his recruiter's house and had the recruiter sign as co-sponsor by 6 p.m. The application was in the mail to the state registrar that evening. Of course, they don't all work out this easily.

After only eight months work, I have submitted 14 applications to start a new chapter in a town 12 miles away, and am working with 20 other prospects there. Our state will charter that chapter in February. We inducted 26 new members at our chapter meeting in September, and we will be inducting 26 more by the end of the year. I actually don't know how to turn off the supply line of applicants, nor would I want to. I will train at least one, and perhaps more, chapter members to help with the load, using the above keys.

Knowing the cost per member under the Family Plan, it's pretty easy to sell the applicant on bringing in his sons, grandsons, and perhaps his brothers, and nephews. And with an electronic application form, it's easy to bump down generations to add a child on a new application.

Perhaps your chapter or a member would be willing to purchase the on-line subscriptions and SAR Patriot Index for you. If not, dig into your own pockets, and become so much more efficient at processing new applications that you will wish you had all these new techniques sooner.

I'm convinced that the SAR could become as large as the DAR by using our computers to the fullest. You just have to be willing to put out the few bucks to subscribe to a couple of web sites and use the modern tools available. Happy recruiting!