

The Genealogy Essay (A Website with Meaning)

by Thornton and Marty Gale

Note – This article explains how to publish a genealogy essay as a single-purpose website. For a complete explanation of creating a genealogy website, see the book “Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website” available from the www.genealogyhosting.com website.

As genealogists, we feel deeply about our family heritage. We marvel at the hardships our ancestors experienced. We admire their courage and tenacity. We cherish every story, every reminiscence, every anecdote that we have heard in the family. These are the treasures that drive us as genealogists. Knowing our ancestors and understanding their lives is the main reason many of us started our genealogy quest in the first place. We long to tell others about this heritage especially to members of our family many of whom we have never met not to mention the future generations that haven't been born yet. If we don't try to preserve this heritage we fear it will be forgotten and lost.

A common response to these feelings is to write what we call the “genealogy essay.” This is a high quality piece that you write to capture the meaning of your family heritage. Such a literary work is not factual genealogy per se (although genealogy facts are almost always included). Rather it is an essay about your family and often features a particular episode or interesting story in your family's history.

In fact, it is common to find these types of writings in our family heritage archives already. The scenario might go like this: you have inherited a big pile of genealogy papers from your Great Aunt who has recently passed-on. In these papers, you are delighted to find a beautifully written composition that your Great Aunt wrote decades earlier. It is an essay about your great grandmother and grandfather. It consists of a handful of typed pages stapled together with a rusty staple attesting to the decades since it was written. It is a perfect example of the genealogy essay. Your Great Aunt was deeply moved by her (and your) family heritage and wanted to explain it to future generations. The scope of her piece was limited and she did not attempt to take on the family's whole history. Rather, she focused on a few family stories that she had personally experienced and gave the background of the family structure at that point. But she had accomplished a very important goal – to capture the “meaning” of a segment of the family history. It is this meaning that is the essence of the genealogy experience. That is, genealogy is not only about researching the dry facts found in family group sheets or historical documents. Genealogy is also about discovering and recording the meaning of the lives of our ancestors. The genealogy essay is the perfect way to accomplish this.

In our humble opinion, the genealogy essay represents the most important type of genealogy writing and deserves to be published as a literary work in its own right. The perfect way to publish the genealogy essay is to make it a website. That is, it should be put on the internet as a single-purpose website containing just the genealogy essay. This is very feasible! Not only is it simple, it is also cheap and can be done for a few dollars a year (the cost of registering a domain name explained in a moment).

In this way, the genealogy essay gets published to the world. As a website, the genealogy essay has the maximum exposure at a minimum cost. As a website, fellow family members and friends spread around the globe can read it and be moved by its contents as you are moved. Also, it is the perfect starter genealogy website – a fully functioning website that consists of just the essay. Later, the genealogy essay website can be expanded into a full, multi-web page website as the website author’s technical skills grow.

In this article, we will explain in detail how to put the genealogy essay on the internet as a one-webpage website. We will use as an example, a genealogy essay we wrote telling the story of our Great Grand Father J. J. Poill. We created the website www.poill27.org to tell his story.

Website Plumbing

Before you can put your genealogy essay on the internet, you have to obtain some technical products to implement your website. We call these technical products “website plumbing.” You will need two products: a domain name and a hosting plan explained in this section.

Domain Name

The first product you must obtain is a domain name for your website. The domain name is used to access the website on the internet. The domain name is actually the last two nodes of the website name. For example, the domain name for our genealogy essay website www.poill27.org is “poill27.org.”

Your domain name is unique in the world and thus must be registered in a universal registry. You obtain a domain name by registering it with a domain registrar such as www.genealogyhosting.com and paying a small yearly fee. A domain name is an asset and can be sold, purchased or passed on to your heirs like any other asset.

The domain name you select should reflect the family heritage that is the subject of your genealogy essay. For example, a typical domain name is the surname in question (i.e., the subject of your essay is a particular surname in your ancestry so your domain name is that surname). Unfortunately, many domain names corresponding to common surnames have already been taken (i.e., registered by someone else). However you can always append a serial number to your surname to form a unique domain name. In this way, you can always register a domain name that is close to your base. This is the strategy we used for our genealogy essay when we registered the domain name “Poill27.org” (i.e., we appended 27 to our base surname of “Poill” to obtain a unique domain name that still conveys the subject of our website).

Note – we have included a detailed explanation of domain names in the article “Stake your Claim with a Domain Name!” available on the www.genealogyhosting.com web site. In particular, this article suggests several approaches to finding a meaningful genealogy domain name.

Here is a summary of how to register a domain name at www.genealogyhosting.com.

Setup an Account (if necessary)

1. Open <http://www.genealogyhosting.com> in your web browser.
2. Click "My Account."
3. Click "setup a new account" and fill in the account information (there is no obligation and all this does is establish a logon for you to purchase products and services later if you desire). Don't forget to write down your account logon name and password.

Purchase Your Domain Name

1. Click "My Account."
2. Logon (if necessary) using your account logon name and password.
3. Click "Domain Names" then "Register Domains."
4. Register your domain name.

Hosting Plan

The other website plumbing product you must obtain for your website is a hosting plan. Hosting means housing the files of your website and providing network access to them. You obtain a hosting plan from the same web hosting company where you purchased your domain name. Normally you must pay a small monthly (or yearly) fee for a hosting plan. However, when you register a domain name at www.genealogyhosting.com, you are granted a free, ad-supported hosting plan. This means you can put your genealogy essay on the internet for the small yearly fee of its domain name! Proceed as follows:

1. Once you register your domain name at www.genealogyhosting.com (explained above), then logon to your account in the usual way.
2. For any product, you can click the "All Products" link near the bottom of the screen to expose a complete list of all the products and services offered by www.genealogyhosting.com. Also note that as you purchase various products or services, the corresponding entries will be made in the "My Products" section.
3. Click the "Hosting Account List" which will take you to the "Manage Hosting" screen.
4. In the "Manage Hosting" screen, you will have one or more free hosting credits (i.e., you will have at least one free credit for the domain name of your genealogy essay that you recently registered). Also, if you did purchase a hosting plan (i.e., so that

your website is not ad-supported) then you will have that hosting credit available too. Click on the "Use Credit" link.

5. On the right hand side of the screen, the "Setup Free Hosting" dialog will be displayed with a pull-down menu listing your domain name(s) that you have registered.
 - Choose the target domain name which will be used to access your genealogy essay website.
 - Also, you must choose the operating system of your web server. Click either the "Free Windows Hosting" or "Free Linux Hosting." If in doubt, just select the Linux option since Linux is part of the "Open Source" movement which provides software for free or at cost. With a Linux operating system for your website, you will always have many more free web applications than the Windows option. Later, these may be useful to you. Also, you can switch anytime (takes 24 hours to complete).
6. This will put you back on the "Manage Hosting" screen with a new entry in the list of hosting accounts labeled "New Account." Click its "Setup Account" button which will take you to the "End User License Agreement." Read it and if you agree then click "Accept."
7. This will take you to the "Hosting Control Center". There are several options you can select at this point. However, you can just use the default values for these options which will do just fine for now. They can be changed easily later.
8. At the bottom of the screen is where you will enter your password information ("User Name" and "Pass Word"). These are very important so write them down. Notice that they are different from your account user name and password used to logon to your account. They will be required to upload files or update your website. Once entered, click "Continue" then "Submit."
9. Click on the "View Account List." Your new account will have a pending status for several minutes. Wait until its status is "Setup" before trying to access it (i.e., keep clicking the "refresh" button on the "Hosting Control Center"). You can continue to the next steps below but return here to check it before you attempt to upload your genealogy essay to it (described in a moment).

Creating the Website

Your genealogy essay will become the single web page on your website. Web pages use the HTML (HyperText Markup Language) format. This means your genealogy essay must be implemented as an HTML file. An HTML file, better known as a web page, is a literary work that has been "marked-up" – HTML tags have been inserted within the content of the document to specify its formatting and structure (e.g., headings, paragraphs, lists, etc.). In this way, an HTML file can be displayed on a computer screen via a web browser as a web page. Most of the files of a website will use the HTML format (but other file formats such as pictures, and movies can also be part of a website).

The question is how does the genealogy author get his or her essay into the HTML format? The website author seldom works directly in HTML but rather makes use of

one of the many fine website authoring applications. This genera of applications includes such stalwarts as Macromedia Dreamweaver, Microsoft Expression Web, or Microsoft FrontPage (which has been replaced by Microsoft Expression Web but is still popular).

Just Use Microsoft Word

While there are many fine website authoring applications, the problem is that most genealogy authors don't have any experience using them and they cost money. Also, the purpose of these applications is to create sophisticated websites and they have their own steep learning curve. All the author of a genealogy essay wants to do is just to write his or her essay without having to continually refer to a technical manual to find out how to satisfy the mysteries of website technology. In short, when attempting to use one of these standard website authoring application, technology hampers the artist.

There is a very easy solution to this problem. Write your essay in Microsoft Word using its native HTML format! That's right! Microsoft Word supports HTML as one of its native formats. While most of the time, when we use Microsoft Word, we just use the default DOC format for our documents, we could as easily select HTML! A document written in Microsoft Word HTML has all the capabilities of a document written in the traditional DOC format. Any formatting, features, or fancy stuff you use in your traditional Microsoft Word documents in DOC format can also be used in the HTML format. But the beautiful thing is that this HTML document is, in fact, a proper web page and can be put on the internet to be accessed by a web browser!

This means you can write your essay in your usual way using all your creative writing skills and not worry, for the time being, about web technology. We will explain the actual details of getting started with a Microsoft Word HTML document in a moment but first let's ask a basic question.

What is a Website?

A website is a confederation of files – that is, a collection of files related by subject matter but yet physically independent from each other. In fact, the internet is physically a vast number of files coupled to the capability of accessing these files over a network. Computer files, whether on your local computer or on a website, are accessed by their file path. The file path specifies the hierarchy of folders where the file is located within the file system of the computer.

The domain name is used to form the file path of a file on a website. For a file on a website, the file path is called its URL (Uniform Resource Locator). In other words, the URL of a file is just a technical term for the file path of a file on a website. For example, the URL of the file of my Great Grandfather's photo on my genealogy essay website is http://www.poill27.org/index_files/image001.jpg. Notice that this URL starts out with "http:" which stands for HyperText Transfer Protocol. This is the designation of the protocol (i.e., conventions used to exchange information) that the computers on the internet will use to access and present the file in question, in this case a web page.

The first file accessed on a website is called the "home page." We will discuss the home page of your genealogy essay website in a moment but for now it should be noted that the file name of a home page is "index.htm" (or "index.html"). By default, this

“index.htm” file is loaded when the URL does not specify an actual file name. Thus, the URL <http://www.poill27.org> actually represents the file path to the file <http://www.poill27.org/index.htm>. This means that the file name of your Microsoft Word genealogy essay must be “index.htm” (or “index.html”). More in a moment.

Working with HTML Files in Microsoft Word

It’s very easy to work with an HTML document in Microsoft Word. After all, HTML is the alternative native format for a Microsoft Word document. One of the first decisions, though, is where to save it on your hard drive. The perfect place is to create a “My Webs” folder (note - if you use Microsoft FrontPage, you already have this folder in your “My Documents” folder). Then create a subfolder with the name of your website. For example, our www.poill27.org is in the folder with a path of

C:\Documents and Settings\thorntongale\My Webs\www.poill27.org\

Then as you add additional websites, you can put them in your “My Webs” folder similar to this.

Creating an HTML document in Microsoft Word

You create an HTML document in Microsoft Word by creating a new “Blank Web Page.” An HTML document in Microsoft Word has two parts (Figure 1): the HTML file proper and a folder containing the various files that make up the HTML document. Thus, our genealogy essay www.poill27.org has an HTML file, “index.htm” and a folder, “index_files.” Within the “index_files” folder are the files that are combined using HTML code to form the web page “index.htm” when it is displayed in a web browser. For example, the picture of J. J. Poill on “index.htm” is the file “image001.jpg” which is contained in the folder “index_files” and displayed on the “index.htm” web page.

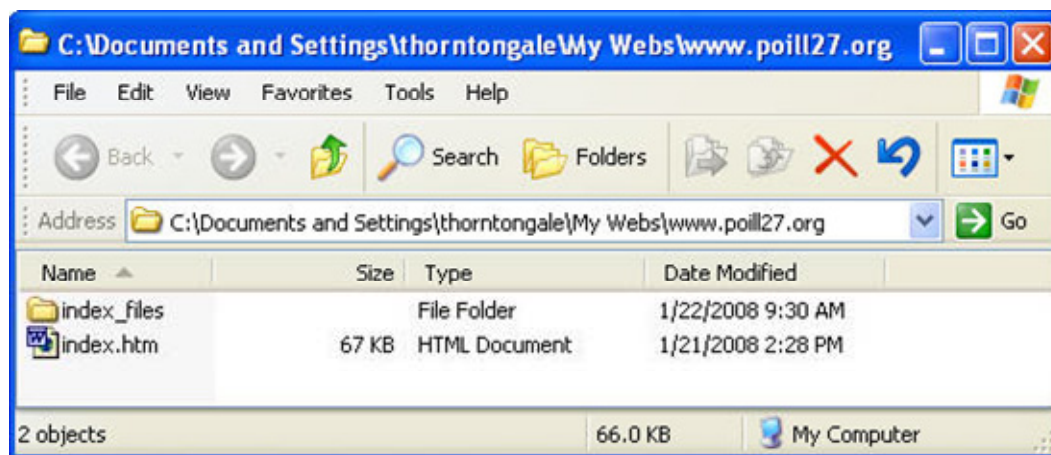


Figure 1 – A Microsoft Word HTML File Has Two Parts

Here’s how to proceed to create an HTML document in Microsoft Word:

1. Start Microsoft Word
2. Click File -> New

3. Select “Blank Web Page...” This will create a blank Microsoft Word HTML document.
4. Click File -> Save As..., navigate to your website folder (described above), and specify a file name of “index.htm”. This will become your genealogy essay.
5. Open a Windows Explorer (e.g., double-click “My Computer”) and navigate to your genealogy essay file. Note that there is an “index.htm” file and a “index_files” folder similar to Figure 1.

Editing an HTML Document in Microsoft Word

Once your HTML document is created in Microsoft Word, you will spend many hours, days, even weeks writing your essay. Alternatively, if you start with an existing essay (e.g., that you found in the genealogy papers of your Great Aunt) then you will need to transcribe it into an HTML document. Either way, proceed as follows (refer to Figure 2):

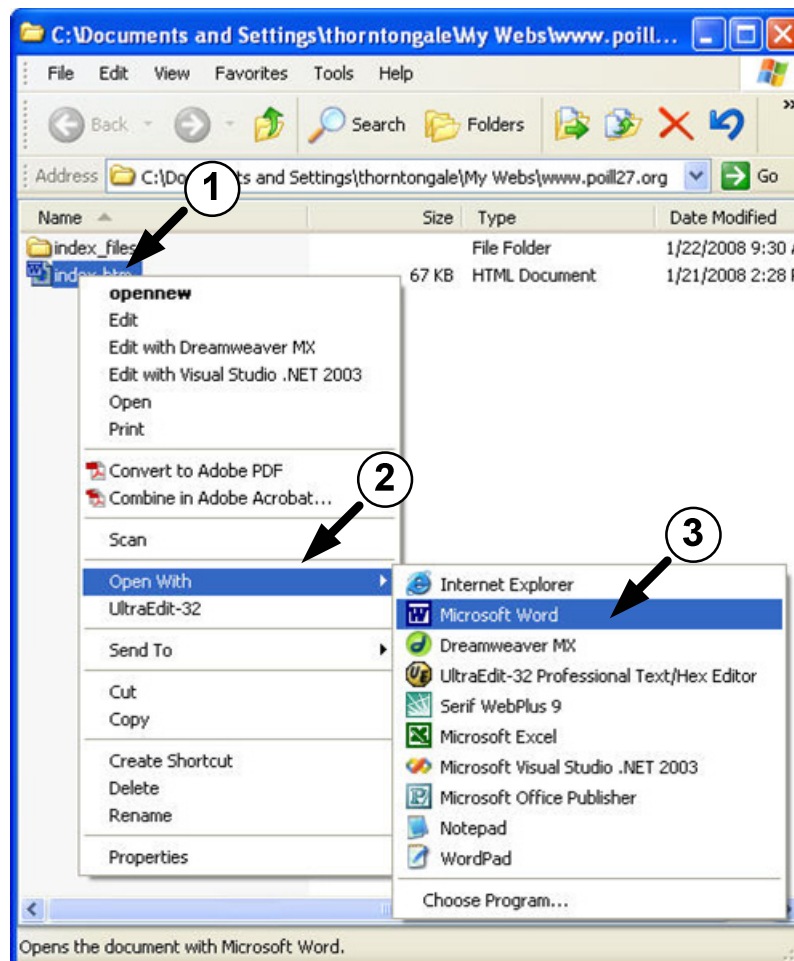


Figure 2 – Opening the Genealogy Essay in Microsoft Word

1. Open a Windows Explorer and navigate to the folder where you stored your HTML document.
2. Right click your HTML document (Figure 2, 1) then select “Open With” (Figure 2, 2)

3. Select “Microsoft Word” (Figure 2, 3) from the list of applications.
4. The HTML document will open in Microsoft Word ready for editing.

Opening an HTML Document in Internet Explorer then Switching to Microsoft Word

If you use Internet Explorer as your web browser then you can open your HTML document in Microsoft Word directly from Internet Explorer. This would be convenient at the start of a work session to view your genealogy essay as a web page then rapidly switch to Microsoft Word to resume editing it. You would proceed as follows (refer to Figure 3):

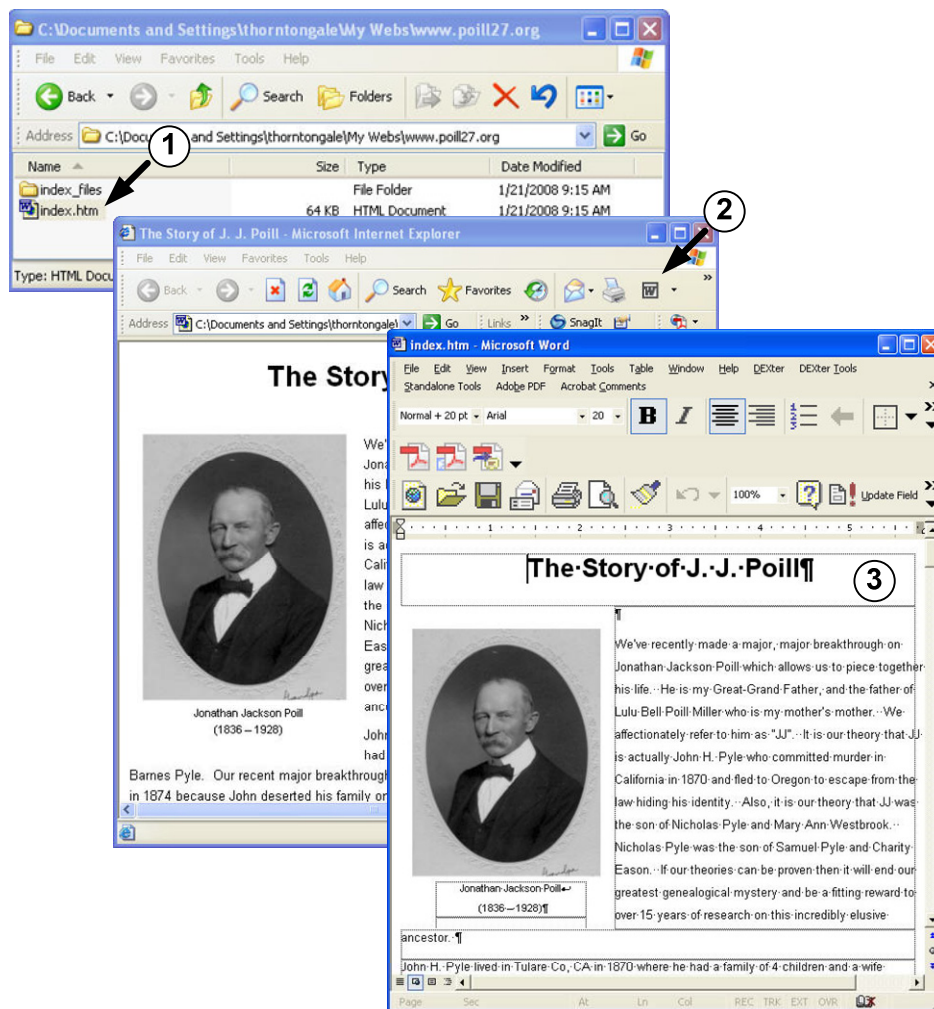


Figure 3 – Opening an HTML File in Microsoft Word

1. Open a Windows Explorer and navigate to the folder where you stored your HTML document and double click the “index.htm” file (Figure 3, 1).
2. Since the file is an HTML file, this will result in the file being opened as a web page in an Internet Explorer web browser window (Figure 3, 2).

3. Notice that once Internet Explorer is opened, there is a “W” in the menu bar with a down arrow beside it (Figure 3, 2). When the “W” is clicked then the web page will be opened in Microsoft Word (Figure 3, 3) where it can then be edited. Alternatively, when the down arrow beside the “W” is clicked, a list of applications on the local computer will be displayed which are capable of editing an “.htm” or “.html” file. When Microsoft Word is selected from the list, then the web page will be opened. Either way, the HTML file will be opened in Microsoft Word ready for editing.

Accessing Your Website on the Web Server Using Windows Explorer

At www.genealogyhosting.com, the files and folders of a website on the web server can be managed using standard file management techniques. File management primarily means copying files or folders from the local computer to the website (a process called “publishing” the website – more later). But also, from time-to-time, you may be required to delete or rename files in your website on the web server. We note immediately that the same skills used to manage the files and folders on the local computer are used to manage the files and folders on the web server.

This is because the principal tool used to manage files and folders on your local computer is Windows Explorer. However, the website is on a web server, a remote computer in a faraway city! Can you use this same tool (Windows Explorer) and the same skills and techniques to manage the files and folders on the web server that you use on your local computer? The answer is yes! By following a slightly different startup sequence, you can open a Windows Explorer on the files and folders of your website located on the remote web server and once the Windows Explorer is opened on the website, the same skills and techniques are used.

So how do you access your website using Windows Explorer? You make use of a special feature of Windows Explorer called FTP (File Transport Protocol). FTP is a standard protocol for two computers to communicate in order to maintain (i.e., copy, rename, or delete) files or folders over a network. With Windows Explorer, you use FTP to manage your file and folder on your website on the web server.

Here are the details of how you would open a Windows Explorer on the root folder of your website on the web server and use FTP to maintain your files or folders. In this example, we will use the www.poill27.org website.:

1. Open a Windows Explorer by double-clicking “My Computer” on your desktop or from the “Start” menu (Figure 4). Actually, any handy Windows Explorer already opened will also do just fine.
2. In the address bar of the Windows Explorer, enter the website name but use the FTP protocol: Thus, we would enter `ftp://www.poill27.org` in the address bar and hit the “enter” button (Figure 5).
3. You would then be challenged for your user name and password (Figure 6). Enter your user name and password as shown in the figure leaving the “Log on anonymously” unchecked. Note - you will have selected your username and password at the point in time when you setup your web hosting plan described above. Notice that these are not the same as the username and password of your hosting account.

4. A standard Windows Explorer window will be opened listing the files and folders of the root folder of your website on the web server (Figure 7).
5. Once the Windows Explorer is opened on the website, you can work with the files and folders there using all your file maintenance skills that you use regularly on your local computer (e.g., opening folders, copying files/folders, renaming files/folders, deleting files/folders, etc.). In particular, you will use these techniques to publish your website (copy your files/folders from your local computer to your website) as we'll see in a moment.

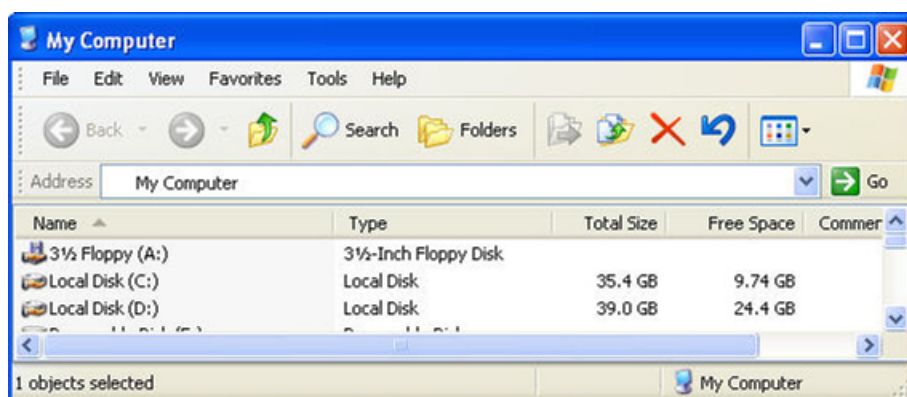


Figure 4 – First, Open a Windows Explorer (e.g. My Computer)

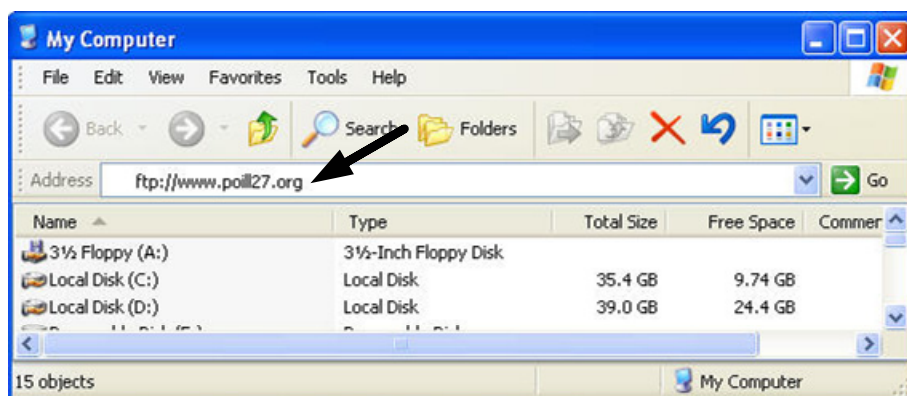


Figure 5 - Next, Enter the FTP address in the Address bar



Figure 6 - Then Respond to the FTP Password Challenge

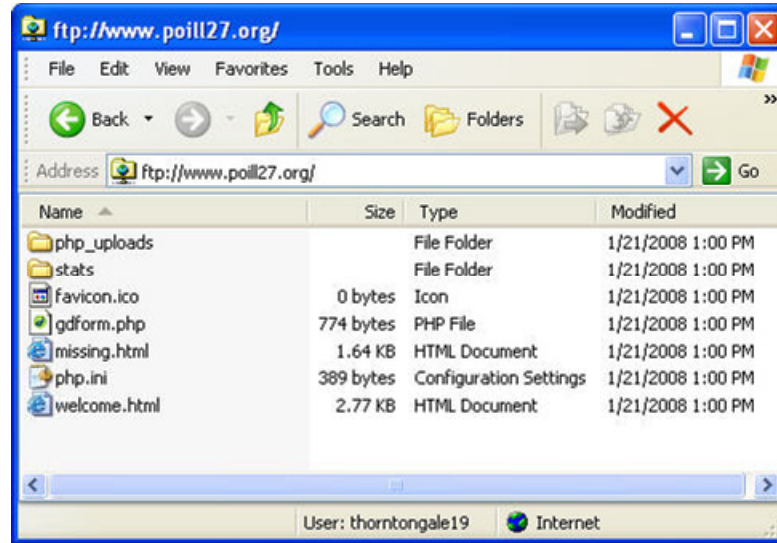


Figure 7 – The Result is a Windows Explorer on [www.poill27.org](ftp://www.poill27.org/)

Publishing Your Website

Once your essay is reasonably complete, you can upload it to your website to see what it looks like there. This process is called “publishing” the website because once executed, you will have published your work to the world! Publishing basically means copying files and folders from your local computer to the website. Notice that this really means nothing more than copying files and folders from one computer to another. You can do this in the usual way you copy any files or folders by dragging and dropping them from one folder to another folder on your desktop. The only difference from the norm is that the other folder happens to be on a computer located in another city. Refer to Figure 8.

1. Open a Windows Explorer window (Figure 8, 1) on the local folder on your hard drive which contains the file and folder of your genealogy essay (i.e., by double clicking “My Computer” and then navigating to the folder in question).
2. Open another Windows Explorer window on the website on the web server (Figure 8, 2) using FTP as explained above. At this point, you would have two Windows Explorer windows open on your desk top (i.e., the local and the web server).
3. Next drag the file and folder of your genealogy essay from your local folder and drop it in the top (root) folder of your website (Figure 8, 3). In other words, select your “index.htm” file and “index_files” folder in the Windows Explorer window of your local folder and drag them to their place on the Windows Explorer window on the web server. When using drag and drop be very careful to drop them in the top root folder on your website. Once you release the mouse button, the selected file and folder will be copied. Since they are being copied over the network, it will take a lot longer to complete than a similar copy on your local computer. If you make a mistake (e.g., drop them in the wrong folder on the web server) you can always just delete them in the usual way using the Windows Explorer opened on your website (i.e., by dragging them to the trash) then repeat the copy operation.

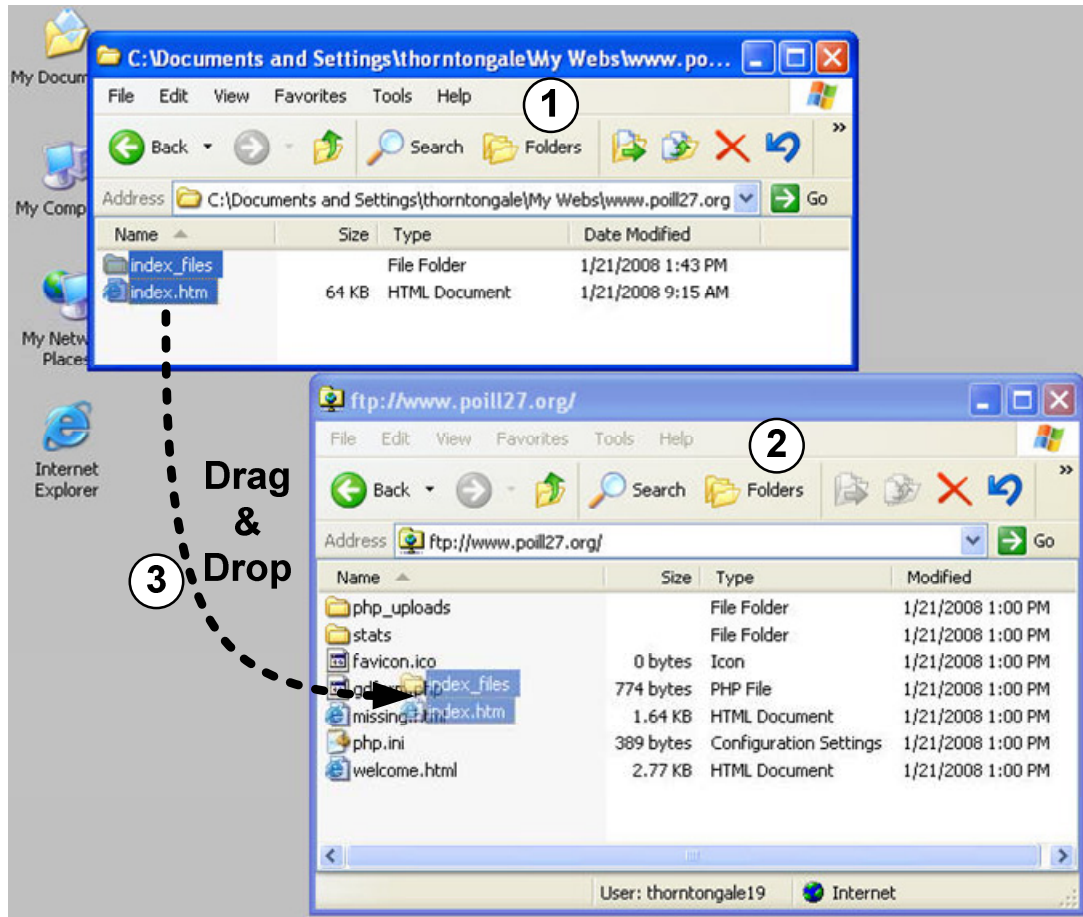


Figure 8 – Drag and Drop the Genealogy Essay to the Website

Keep an Eye on the Future

The genealogy essay website is a special-purpose website which captures the meaning or significance of family heritage. As such, it is short on facts or supporting information which fellow genealogists will demand before they will use the information on your website. This means that once you complete your genealogy essay website, you will naturally want to expand it into a full genealogy website. This can be done in a straight-forward project. The author would simply create additional web pages to support and expand the presentation of the essay. The essay will provide the meaning but what is missing is the supporting information.

This is what we have done with our www.poill27.org genealogy essay. We have expanded it into the multi-page genealogy website www.poill27.info. Notice that we registered a new domain name for it since the two websites are for demonstration purposes and must co-exist. You wouldn't have to do this in your own case (i.e., you would just use your same domain name for your expanded website). Here is a summary of how a genealogy essay could be expanded into a, multi-page genealogy website:

For a complete explanation of creating a genealogy website, see the book "Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website" available on the www.genealogyhosting.com web site.

The Three-Layered Structure

Most genealogy (and other websites) have a multilayered structure. A multilayered structure is a way to organize the web pages of a website so that they are highly logical and visitors to the website can easily understand its structure. A multilayered structure is created by placing the information of the website into logical layers. This is done by separating the information into packets which we call "information elements." An information element is just the logical grouping of information into a whole so that it can be placed on a web page. In other words, a web page consists of information elements. An example of an information element on a genealogy website is a family group sheet.

We have included a complete explanation of the multilayered structure in the article "Using the Multilayered Structure to Design a Genealogy Website" available on the www.genealogyhosting.com web site.

In a multilayered structure, the information elements are placed on web pages of the website and each web page is placed into a particular layer. A layer is a group of one or more web pages that fit together. The resulting layers are stacked like bricks to form the logical structure of the website. The resulting multilayered structure of the website is designed by the website author to have the following characteristics:

- The web pages of the various layers tend to go from the general to the special. That is, the web pages on upper layers tend to be general and the web pages on the lower layers tend to be specialized.
- The web pages of a particular layer don't overlap. That is, they contain information elements representing real world entities that are independent from each other. Usually, the series of web pages with their information elements on a particular layer cover the entire topic of the website at their particular level of detail in the whole-part sense.
- The web pages of the upper layer tend to be dependent on the web pages of the lower layers in some sense based on the criteria used to categorize the web pages into layers. However, the reverse is not true: the lower web pages are logically independent of the web pages on the upper layers.

Expanding the Genealogy Essay into a Three-Layered Structure

The natural way to expand the genealogy essay is to use a 3-layered structure shown in Figure 9.

- At the top is your genealogy essay.
- At the bottom are historical documents which you have scanned to prove or support the statements made on the website.

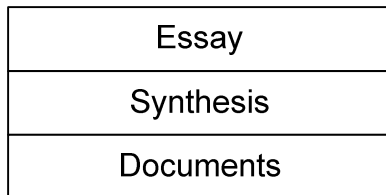


Figure 9 – Expanding the Genealogy Essay

- The middle layer is where the expertise of the genealogist enters the project. This is where the genealogist synthesizes the facts of the bottom documents layer. That is the genealogist combines the facts into meaningful generalizations forming the knowledge of the website. In this way, the web pages of the middle layer can be referenced (linked to) from the top genealogy essay layer to support the generalizations made there.

We have included a detailed explanation of the three-layered genealogy website in the article “The Three-Layered Genealogy Website (Simple and Very Effective)” available on the www.genealogyhosting.com web site.

The author would interlink the web pages using hyperlinks. For example, the expanded genealogy essay might resemble Figure 10 when it is expanded into a multi-web page website.

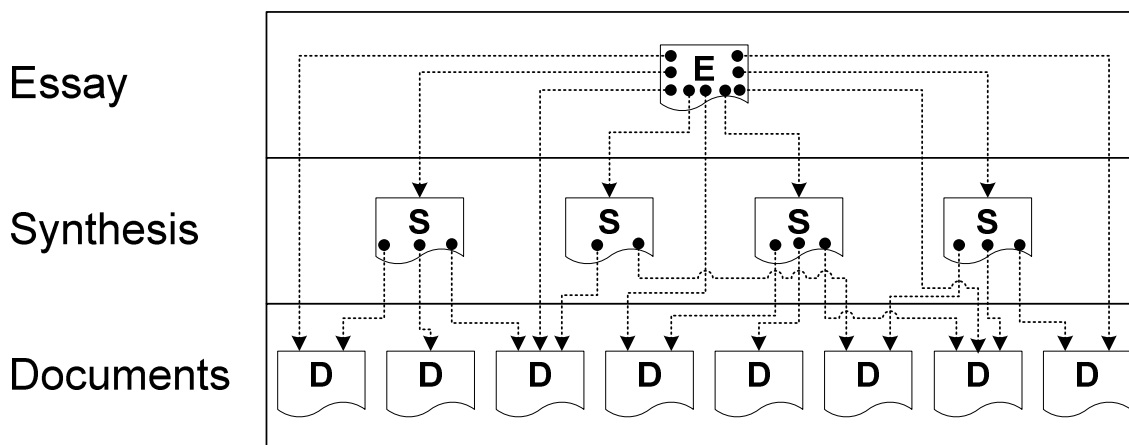


Figure 10 – Interlinking the Web Pages Using Hyperlinks

Conclusions

The genealogy essay provides a way to publish a very meaningful essay about your family heritage. Not only does the essay have the maximum exposure, its cost of publication is minimal. Also, it is the perfect starter website for the budding website author. The genealogy essay is the perfect way to learn web technology and it can be expanded naturally into a proper, multi-web paged genealogy website.