

Becoming a Professional Genealogist

by Jenny Rizzo Irwin

What constitutes a “professional” genealogist? Is it starting a business and accepting clients? Is it attending professional institutes, conferences, and study programs? What about achieving certification or accreditation—is that required in order to be considered a professional? If a genealogist’s work consistently meets the Genealogical Proof Standard, is he/she/they then considered a professional?

I doubt there is a single answer that the genealogy community agrees on in terms of what it means to be a professional genealogist. What is clear, however, is that anyone who wishes to become a professional will benefit immensely from joining the Association for Professional Genealogists (APG).

In the summer of 2020, amid a global pandemic, I took the plunge. I launched my genealogy business and enrolled in my first institute course—Following Your Ancestors in Time and Place—through the Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh (GRIP). I felt like a fish out of water, unsure whether I was qualified to study alongside so many experienced genealogists and insecure about my experience strictly as a hobbyist. My two previous careers—ten years as a public policy analyst and fourteen years promoting community-based tennis—seemed so far removed from whatever it meant to be a professional genealogist.

The pivotal point that I will always look back on occurred during a break between virtual lectures at GRIP. One of the more seasoned genealogists asked if I was a member of APG. I (wrongfully) assumed that I somehow needed to become a professional genealogist before joining. When I expressed this, I was

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immediately assured that joining APG would be the most beneficial step I could take at that point in my genealogical career. I heeded this advice and joined that very day during the afternoon break.

APG Membership Benefits

To join APG, a person must affirm that they agree to the “APG Code of Ethics and Professional Practices” and commit to a minimum of twelve hours of annual continuing education.¹ Being a member of an organization with a clearly defined code of ethics gives a genealogist credibility with clients. Savvy clients also appreciate the value of mandatory continuing education.

1. “Join,” Association of Professional Genealogists, apgen.org/join.

One of my favorite membership benefits is access to more than forty webinars archived behind the membership paywall. Topics are presented by experts in the field and range from business and client management to legal considerations, marketing, and more. One particularly helpful recorded webinar and associated handout for new professionals is “Transitioning to a Full-Time Professional Genealogy Career” by George G. Morgan. He gives comprehensive, practical advice to help the transitional genealogist understand the necessities of running a successful genealogy business. Be prepared to come away from it with a useful to-do list!

Member benefits include discounts on a variety of genealogy-related publications, online databases, educational opportunities, and even translation services. I use my APG member discount for newspaper database subscriptions and at genealogy booksellers. The APG member discount came in handy when I enrolled in Boston University’s Genealogical Research Certificate program.

Members can download sample documents, such as client contracts, permission forms, and research logs that other APG members have generously shared. The client contracts were especially helpful when I obtained my first client.

Also of value are the APG member discussion groups. Topics include business practices, methodology, and professional development. There is even a member group for job postings and members seeking on-site research assistance.

One of the most helpful benefits is being listed in the APG directory. Below ads, the top result of a Google search for “where to find a professional genealogist” leads to the APG website. Being listed in the directory gives members the opportunity to highlight their qualifications and research specialties. I have been happily surprised at the number of prospective clients that have reached me through the APG directory. The directory has also helped me locate specialists in other areas when I’ve needed to subcontract work.

APG members are informed of current issues relevant to genealogy through this publication, the *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly* (APGQ), as well as a monthly electronic newsletter and the APG blog. Past issues of the APGQ are available behind the member paywall on the APG website. The APGQ subject index covers the period 1979–2020 and is broken down by topic to make it easier to find exactly

what you’re looking for. Many of the older articles are still relevant decades after publication.

I encourage anyone who has not fully taken advantage of all that APG has to offer to take a trip to the website and check out the variety of available resources.

New England APG Chapter

Networking is a big part of membership in any organization. Looking to connect locally with others passionate about genealogy (my dear husband tries, but his eyes glaze over when I talk about dead people), I decided to join the New England Chapter of APG (NEAPG). One week after I joined, I attended my first NEAPG meeting via Zoom. At the meeting, the chapter president welcomed me personally and asked me to share a bit about myself and my areas of interest. I soon received a private message from another member with the same areas of interest (forensic genealogy and Italian research), saying she would be happy to help if I ever wanted to connect. I’d found my first friend in the genealogy community.

That weekend, my new friend and I spent four hours on Zoom. She has become a mentor as well as a dear friend.

Two years later, we continue to Zoom every couple of weeks. She has helped me navigate starting a business, dig deeper into records, and polish my work. We have gotten to know each other personally and have even met each other’s spouses. The relationships that we build help enrich our lives on so many levels. I will be forever grateful to her and to NEAPG for giving me such a warm welcome to professional genealogy.

The chapter is active, with monthly speakers and a handful of in-person events each year. The Zoom meetings are open for thirty minutes before and thirty minutes after each meeting to allow for networking.

Wanting to become more involved with NEAPG, I reached out to the chapter president in early 2021 to see if any volunteer gaps needed to be filled. I am detail-oriented, organized to a fault, and have event planning experience. I was invited to join the program committee, which meets monthly to select speakers and work out the logistics. Serving on a committee involves a relatively minimal time commitment with a big impact on our members.

NEAPG offers a formal peer mentoring program. Members volunteer to serve as mentors in their area of interest. Mentees

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select from a range of topics that cover business initiatives such as networking and transitioning to full-time, as well as local research in the New England states and New York. Mentorship opportunities are available for genealogists focusing on different ethnic groups, including Irish and Jewish, and different specialties such as DNA, translation, and genealogical society building. There truly is something for everyone!

Through the NEAPG mentorship program, I was matched with a mentor for New York State research. We discussed different repositories, record groups, and types of research. My mentor encouraged me to try researching an object. I had an old calling card with an unfamiliar name tucked away in a family Bible. My research led me to write a blog post, which in turn led to a connection with the great-niece of the owner of the calling card (she even sent me a photo of her great-aunt)! I've learned a lot through my New York mentor. He has taught me things that I would not have been able to learn through courses or webinars alone. I am grateful.

I encourage everyone to join their local APG chapter and/or the chapter(s) where your research interests lie. For many of us, working from home can feel isolating. This is especially true for those transitioning from a career in a traditional office environment. Joining a chapter will help you build relationships and feel more connected to the profession.

Forensic Genealogy Special Interest Group

APG members with an expertise or interest in certain specialties are welcome to join special interest groups, colloquially known as SIGs. There are currently two SIGs—the APG Forensic Genealogy SIG and the APG Writers SIG. Joining a SIG is as simple as filling out an application form and paying a nominal \$20 annual fee. The Forensic Genealogy SIG meets monthly on the fourth Tuesday, and the Writers SIG meets monthly on the third Wednesday. Both SIG meetings are scheduled at 8:00 p.m. EST/EDT. Expert speakers present at each SIG meeting followed by the opportunity for questions and answers. Meetings are sometimes recorded and available for a limited time to SIG members unable to attend the meetings.

The SIGs include seasoned professionals as well as those just starting out. Members share best practices, interesting cases, accomplishments, and expertise. The SIGs provide a community for genealogists with shared interests to inspire, educate, and support each other. Membership in a SIG provides excellent networking opportunities in addition to the expert-led monthly presentations.

Like the NEAPG chapter, the Forensic Genealogy SIG also offers a formal mentorship program. Mentors and mentees with a shared interest are paired for a minimum of three meetings over a ninety-day period. The opportunity to work one-on-one

with a practicing forensic genealogist enhances your skills and fosters new professional relationships that may lead to other opportunities. As a mentee, I worked with a mentor on military repatriation cases. One year later, after also completing institute courses in forensic genealogy and other educational activities, I work on military repatriation cases and probate and real estate cases for attorneys. I am looking forward to my first experience serving as a mentor this fall.

Both SIGs offer networking time thirty minutes before each monthly meeting. There are also opportunities to become involved with committees and serve on the boards of each SIG. In 2022, I was elected to the Forensic Genealogy SIG board as an at-large member. I also serve on the Forensic Genealogy SIG mentoring committee. I enjoy giving back and hope that my small role in the leadership of the SIG will help aspiring forensic genealogists as much as the SIG has helped me.

Final Thoughts

Joining APG has been rewarding. I have developed relationships with others who share and understand my passion for family history. The genuine willingness of other genealogists to share their knowledge and to support one another makes me proud to be a member of this professional community. I am inspired on a daily basis.

Everyone in the world has been affected by the events of the pandemic. I will look back on this time and remember not only the fear and sorrow but also the hope and change that came out of it. That seemingly insignificant inquiry during GRIP 2020 about joining APG has made a significant impact on me, both professionally and personally. I am forever grateful for the colleagues I met when I began my journey as a professional genealogist.



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