

# Family trees

Jennifer Cote helps people get to the roots of their history

by Alicia B. Smith  
Managing Editor

**T**he path Dr. Jennifer Cote took to discover her family roots began when she was a child and developed a love of history. This started with her reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder Little House series, which eventually led her to earn a degree in American Studies and later a Ph.D. in American History and Women's Studies.

When her own mother talked about researching her side of the family, Cote was willing to help.

"It's addictive," she warned.

"For me it's the thrill of the hunt. I like solving mysteries," she said.

Cote knew her family had immigrated from the United Kingdom to Canada before coming to the States. She learned her ancestors had initially settled in Vermont before they went west to Wisconsin.

While her family had some information about their relatives, when her mom decided to purchase an ancestry.com subscription, Cote assisted to ensure the research was done correctly.

The pair discovered family members who had divorced, a

a service to others," she thought to herself. "I hung out my shingle."

That is how her Summer Sleuth Genealogy Consulting business began.

Her clients often come to her after they have begun the research on their family and have found information on their own but are looking for more.

"They come to me to solve a mystery or they are stuck or need help with the massive data they have," Cote said.

As Cote states on her website: "I'm a research[er], a tenacious digger, and scrupulous citer of sources. Further, as a professional historian, I offer plenty of context for the details I dig up."

A client will usually share with Cote what information they have found on their own, from names and dates to possible sources such as photos or copies of marriage licenses and death certificates.

A common theme for many of the families she has researched is to have family members clustered in one geographic area for generations and to suddenly find a relative that shows up out West.

**"For me it's the thrill of the hunt. I like solving mysteries."**

**-Dr. Jennifer Cote**

surprising experience for the late 19th and early 20th centuries; some had been in an institution and one had been diagnosed with melancholy.

"I was hooked," Cote said.

After discovering more details about her own family through the research she and her mother had done, she began to wonder. As an associate professor in the Department of History and Society at the University of Saint Joseph, she had time in the summers, and she had the interest.

"What could I do that would be

Cote said that depending on the dates, it could be this family member was caught up in the Manifest Destiny phenomena that struck the country in the early-1800s or it could be a relative went out West during the Gold Rush.

"For me, when I get into these family histories, my mind is like a steel trap," Cote said. "It can be really personal work."

When working with Donna Blair Morrison, Cote discovered a relative of hers, a great-great-grandfather who was an officer in the



Photo by Alicia B. Smith

**Dr. Jennifer Cote enjoys a good mystery and has solved a few genealogical puzzles for her own family as well as others.**

Confederate Army who died in a Union Army prison camp.

"That was a surprise," Morrison said.

"I was so blown away when I found out he had a horrific death in an Union prison camp," Cote said.

Morrison has had an interest in her family tree from the time she was a teenager and would work on gathering information off and on through the years.

"It's very overwhelming," she said of the volume of information that can be found.

She hired Cote, she said, to help her sort through all the details.

"She knew how to do it quickly and efficiently," Morrison said. "I knew a great deal more about my father's side, I wanted to learn more about my mother's side."

Cote is currently helping her learn more about where her family originated.

"That would be nice," Morrison said of knowing this information.

"It's fascinating," she said.

Morrison's advice to others is to gather as much information as they can on their own. This includes talking to relatives and taking notes and asking them if they have any family records they could share.

Increasingly, more families are looking to the past to see who might be there.

Cote credits this popular interest, in part, to the Baby Boomer generation, many of whom are retired and now have time to spend on such a project, which sometimes can include traveling to do research.

"I think it comes with a stage



Jennifer Cote's great-great-great grandmother Maggie Gonyea (seated) is shown here with her husband, Nelson. Standing behind them are Charles DeRosier and Gertrude King.

in life," Cote said. "They have time, their grandmother did it, when they were raising kids and had a job they had no time, that might explain part of it," Cote said.

There is also the fact that in America so many families originated from elsewhere due to high numbers of immigrants throughout the 19th century, and even earlier, that can inspire a curiosity of who these relatives might be.

Then there is the easier access to information through both digitized records and websites such as ancestry.com.

Finally, these types of searches have been featured prominently on shows like the PBS series "Finding Your Roots" with Harvard educator Henry Louise Gates Jr.

When working with a client, Cote begins by reviewing all the material they have at the time. She then organizes the information before delving into looking for more.

One client had three family trees on ancestry.com and Cote

helped to consolidate them into one.

Some of the roadblocks that she may stumble upon are families who use the same given name repeatedly and it can be difficult to sort out which person is which. There are also different name spellings recorded for the same person. In some instances, women get lost once they marry and there is no record of them with their maiden name.

Fortunately for Cote, she worked as a fact checker while in graduate school and learned how to

uncover information that may not otherwise be available.

"If you have some Internet skills it can be overwhelming but it doesn't have to be," Cote said.

Another source that can be very helpful is a family Bible. Often they contain names, dates and places of births, deaths and marriages.

"When you have one of those it's like gold," Cote said.

Sometimes information may be found in an old attic; there might be a trunk or filing cabinet that has details that can be useful, too.

"If you have older people in your family, talk to them," Cote said. "They can give you a lot of information." **WHL**

For more information on Summer Sleuth Genealogy Consulting and the work of Dr. Jennifer Cote, visit [drjencote.com](http://drjencote.com).

# Declare your independence.

Set your own pace—whether you're retired or working—and enjoy all the amenities and services you could ever want. And if the time ever comes when you need assistance with daily living, levels of care are available right on campus.



Call 860-380-5006 to schedule your complimentary lunch and tour.



 [Duncaster.org](http://Duncaster.org) | 40 Loeffler Road, Bloomfield, CT

**Don't wait.** The Fed announced seven interest rate increases for 2018 and 2019.



## Consolidate Your Home Equity and Mortgage Payments and *Save.*

**Simsbury Bank's Rising Rates Protection Program is the answer.**

We're helping homeowners consolidate their mortgages, home equity loans and credit lines into one easy fixed-rate loan. So you're protected from the uncertainty and cost of rising rates.

**And now you can save even more with \$200 off the application fee.**

[SimsburyBank.com/savenow](http://SimsburyBank.com/savenow)



 Member FDIC NMLS #441327