Full-Text Search at FamilySearch

by Kathleen Williams

What is Full-Text Search?

- Introduced in early 2024 by FamilySearch
- Uses AI to transcribe handwritten documents
- Allows users to search an entire digitized document

Records Progression

- March 2024: 100 million records
- Dec 2025: 2 billion records
    - (more than ¼ of total images at FamilySearch)
- Goal: To include all unindexed images on FamilySearch

Full Text Search Limitations

- AI handwriting recognition is currently trained in English, Spanish, & Portuguese.
- FamilySearch recently announced that they will start working on handwriting recognition for Chinese, French, German, Dutch, and Italian.
- Not everything will be transcribed correctly. You must think creatively.

Availability

- Not every state, county, or country is represented in every collection.
- Some records are only available at FamilySearch Centers or the Family History Library.

- If it's not digitized, it's not available.

Search the Catalog First

- Full Text Search cannot search what FamilySearch does not have. It will also not display locked records from home.
- To search on the catalog—go to "search" and then "catalog"
- Make sure the images are in Full Text Search—this is now listed in the catalog.

Catalog Icons

- Magnifying glass—index created by FamilySearch volunteers
- Camera—browsable; may also have original indexes
- Locked—only available at a FamilySearch Center or the Family History Library in Salt Lake City
- Paper—available on full-text search

Before You Get Started

- Have your family tree ready
- Compile a list of name spellings & variations & locations where your family lived
- Use a research log to track your searches & results
- Have a place to save what you find
- Name digital files in a descriptive way

When you find something…

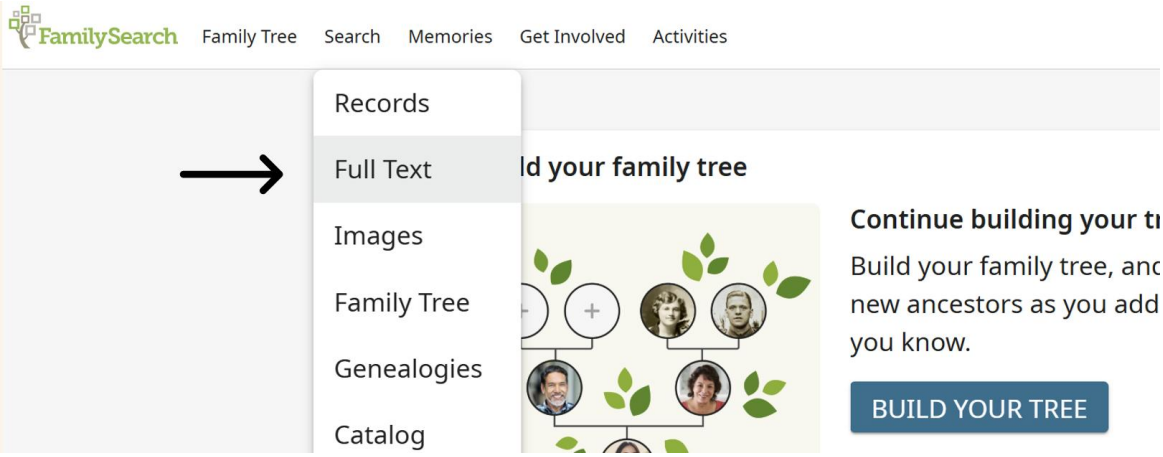
- You need to figure out exactly what you're looking at.
- Browse the film to see where the image is coming from. Remember, there can be multiple books on one film.

- Click on the Information button to obtain the details about the item, including the Image Group Number. You can also search the FamilySearch Catalog for the Image Group Number.

Search vs. Filter

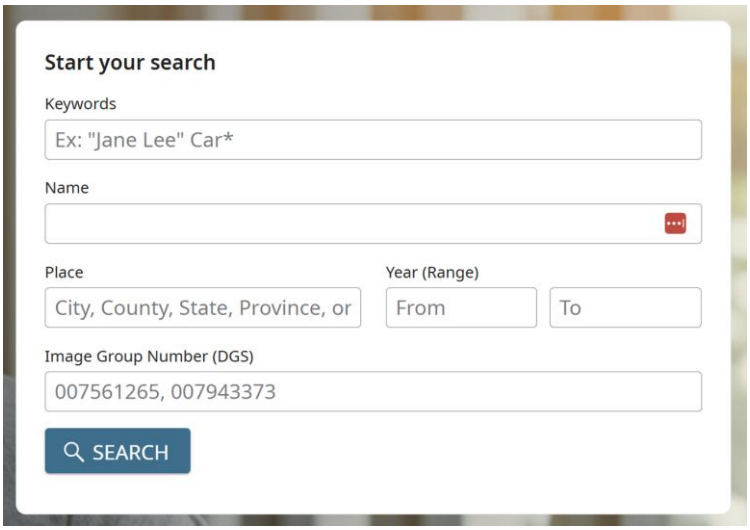
- Search—based on AI finding those words in a document
- Filter—based on where and when a document is created and the card catalog description

How to Access Full-Text Search



Fill out this form to start your search.

During your search, click on "edit search" and this same search box will appear.



Searching

Searching by keyword or name is most useful. Do both—you'll get different results.

Place—from the FamilySearch list of places. This location must occur in the document.

Date range—A date in the date range must appear in the document.

Image Group Number—Use when you are searching a specific set of images. Especially useful for very common names or to break a search into more manageable sections.

Results are ranked by FamilySearch.

Multiple words—at least one of the words MUST be in the document.

- in front of a word—word MUST occur in the document
- in front of a word—word CANNOT occur in the document

" " (phrase in quotes)—phrase MUST occur in the document

Type of Search	Words Searched	# Results
Keywords	Joseph McElrath	113,642,208
Keywords	+Joseph +McElrath	13,638
Keywords	"Joseph McElrath"	672
Name	Joseph McElrath	110,296,758
Name	"Joseph McElrath"	705

Wildcards

Can be used in keyword, name or place box

? replaces one letter

* replaces multiple letters or no letters

- or – in front of a search term

Wildcards cannot be used as the first symbol of a search term.

Wildcards cannot be put inside of quotes.

More than one wildcard can be used in a search term.

Looking for..	Search terms	Results
Joseph	J?s*	Joseph, Josiah, Jos., just, justice…
Joseph	J?s?ph and J?s*f	Joseph, Josef, Joseff
Benjamin	B?n*	Ben, Benny, Benjamin, Benj, bond, bind…
Benjamin	B?nj*	Benjamin, Benj.

Be careful when replacing letters—you could end up with results that contain common words.

Creative Spellings

Search terms	Results
M*lr*th	McElrath, MacElreath, McElraith, McKilreath
L*r?nce	Lawrence, Lowrance, Larrance, Lourence
S*r?nce	Sawrence, Sowrance, Sarrance, Sourence
L?ml*n	Lemlein, Laemline, Limlin, Lamline
Mo?ser	Mofser, Mosser

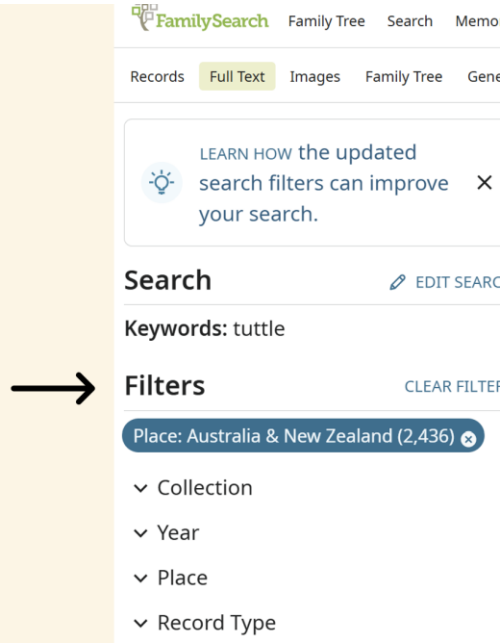
Search by Image Group Number

- Get the Image Group Numbers (DGS) from the Family Search Catalog (make sure they are full-text searchable)
- Separate film numbers by commas
- More effective way to search for common names
- Keep track of your searches!

Filtering Tips

- Use the checkboxes to choose multiple filters.
    - You can select more than one filter in each category.
- Click "Apply" each time you modify the filters.
- Active filters will appear at the top of the search pane.

Use filters to narrow your results:



Filter by Collection

- Over 6600 Collections
- Collections are AI-generated groupings of historical records.
- Collections are fluid. Titles, descriptions, and included records may change.
- Unique to Full-Text Search
- No subcategories to filter by.
- Multiple collections can be selected.
- Make sure to hit "Apply" at the bottom after selecting your filters.

Filter by Date

- Filter by the century, then the decade, and then the year.
- Multiple dates can be selected.
- Make sure to hit "Apply" at the bottom after selecting your filters.

- The filtered date must be in the catalog description of the result.

Filter by Place

- Filter by continent/country.
- For the USA, drill down by state and then county.
- Multiple places can be selected.
- Make sure to hit "Apply" at the bottom after selecting your filters.
- The filtered place must be in the catalog description of the result.

To find federal records…

- Filter by place: United States of America
- Choose United States of America again
- You might find:
    - Land patents
    - Military records
    - Passport applications
    - Marriage records
    - Directories
    - Family histories/genealogies
    - Southern Claims Commission records

Filter by Record Type

- No subcategories to filter by.
- Most helpful when you have MANY results and/or common search terms.
- Make sure to hit "Apply" at the bottom after selecting your filters.

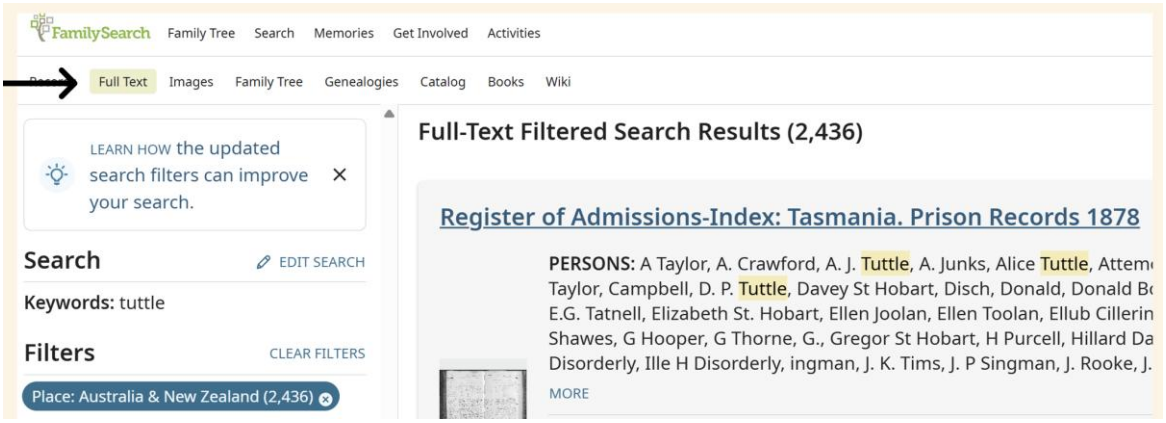
Keyword Search	Location Search	Filters	# Results
m*c*lr*th			96,036
+joseph +mcelrath		Hunt County, Texas	45
+J?s?ph +m*c*lr*th		Hunt County, Texas	92
+J?s?ph +m*k*lr*th		Hunt County, Texas	1
+J?s?ph +m*c*lr*th	Hunt County, Texas		119

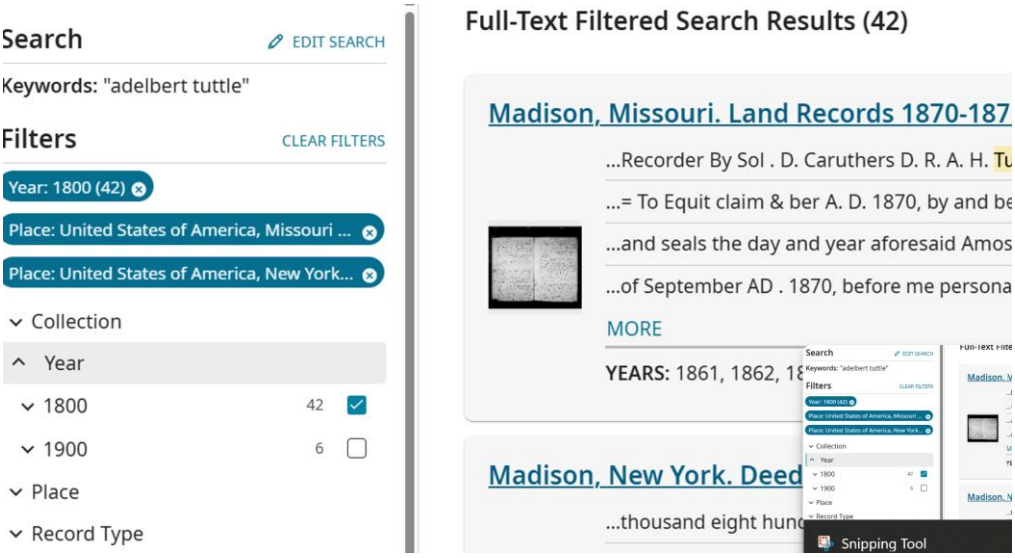
Unlike human transcribers, AI doesn't try to make sense of a word—it just transcribes it letter by letter.

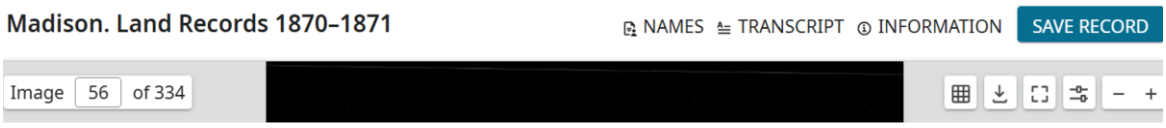
Transcript

38 Galveston Clarke & Courts , Ma - WARRANTY DEED , WITH VENDOR ' S LIEN . -- Joint Ack . THE STATE OF TEXAS . KNOW III MEN BY THESE PRESENTS : County of Soleman THAT Willie Williams , Joined by my husband J. A. Williams of the County of Collman State of Texas for and in consideration of the sum of Fifty & $ 50 0 0) wo , ad DOLLARS . to paid ancupaidby Robert Ashford _ _ as follows : Fifty Dollars cash the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged have Granted , sold and Conveyed , and by these presents do Grant , Sett and Convey unto the said Robert Ashford of the County of Coleman State of Lexus all that certain

To start a new search, click "Full Text" in the menu.







Record Details View

- At top of page:
    - Specifics of record
    - Image number

- Names—images that have been indexed (not available for all records)
- Transcript—can download, copy, or edit
- Information—more about record: film (DGS) number, generic citation
- Save—attach to person in Family Tree, save to source box

- Grid view—view all images in the set of images
- Download—as PDF or JPG
  - can include transcription and citation for PDF only
- Fullscreen mode
- Adjust image (brightness, contrast, invert colors, rotate)
- Reduce/enlarge

Advanced Keyword Searching Suggestions

Multiple surnames (can only enter one in name field)

Both spouses' names

FAN club names with person of interest

Nicknames, middle names & reverse order of name

Titles (Dr, Rev, preacher)

Names of geographical features

Boundary descriptions to locate deeds

Occupations (ex. cooper, doctor)

Locations associated with your family

Addresses (particularly after 1850 in urban areas)

Avoid common words

Using Known Migration Patterns

- If you have a known migration pattern…
    - Search using one location
    - And filter using the other
- Search for "Coleman Texas"
    - Filter by Coryell County, Texas
    - This will give you all records created in Coryell County that mention Coleman, Texas.

Remember!

- List surname spelling variations, misspellings, and transcription errors:
    - AI will misread names:
        - Q.H. Vann read as L.H. Vann
        - Williams read as Wiiiiams
        - James read as Jawes
- List locations where person lived or may have been mentioned in records.
- Keep track of your searches in a log.
- Repeat your searches in a few months.