

## Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America [book review]

By: [Noah Lenstra](#)

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### **Abstract:**

As François Weil, chancellor of the Universities of Paris and past president of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, uses the term, genealogy refers both to the science of tracking lineages and to “personal interest in one’s forebears” (2). This overlap of science and individual interest produces what Weil calls cultures of genealogy, which span personal and collective identities. According to Weil, understanding genealogy in historical processes helps historians understand Americans: “Genealogy is arguably the element of contemporary American culture about which we know the least” (2). Rather than offering a focused argument about the meaning of genealogy in America, Weil’s book—designed to appeal to both scholarly and popular audiences—presents a descriptive survey of Americans making genealogy part of their culture.

**Keywords:** book review | genealogy | family trees | American culture

### **Article:**

*Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America*, by François Weil. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 304 pp. Notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

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As François Weil, chancellor of the Universities of Paris and past president of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, uses the term, genealogy refers both to the science of tracking lineages and to “personal interest in one’s forebears” (2). This overlap of science and individual interest produces what Weil calls cultures of genealogy, which span personal and collective identities. According to Weil, understanding genealogy in historical processes helps historians understand Americans: “Genealogy is arguably the element of contemporary American culture about which we know the least” (2). Rather than offering a focused argument about the meaning of genealogy in America, Weil’s book—designed to appeal to both scholarly and popular audiences—presents a descriptive survey of Americans making genealogy part of their culture.

Before describing and exploring American genealogical cultures, Weil sheds light on the emergence of distinctively American forms of genealogy in the late eighteenth century. As Americans published and circulated their genealogies, they created a democratized genealogical culture oriented more around the free market than around state-based institutions like England's College of Arms. The independent publication in 1771 by "a middling merchant" in Connecticut of his genealogy represents, for Weil, "a radical departure from colonial and European genealogical cultures" (41). Although genealogy continued to confer status on individuals from prominent families, the cultural practice also increasingly made room for individuals and families outside the elite.

Subsequent chapters explore in more detail how genealogy became American. Chapters two and three focus on antebellum genealogy, with a particular focus on how it oscillated between a concern with the family and a concern with individual status. As concerns with blood entered genealogy, it became both a scholarly pursuit among individuals obsessed with "stock" (94) and a potential route to fortune among Americans seeking to demonstrate scientifically proven blood ties to rich European families. Chapters four and five focus on genealogy between the Civil War and World War II. There Weil shows how modern ideas of race and commerce shaped genealogy. As genealogy became a nationalistic pursuit pushed by organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution, a growing number of entrepreneurs found ways to monetize genealogical knowledge. The final chapter surveys American genealogy after World War II. This last chapter, the least empirically rich in the volume, demonstrates how the themes Weil sketched in previous chapters continue to shape and reverberate in contemporary American genealogy.

The role of commerce in shaping American genealogy constitutes one of the book's principal themes. Weil shows how antebellum New England elites carefully differentiated their family-focused lineages from the emergent mass-market genealogies shaped by entrepreneurs selling blank family registers. Chapter five, titled "Pedigrees and the Market," represents Weil's most sustained analysis of this theme. There Weil argues that interlinked processes of scientism, commercialization, and democratization in the late nineteenth century shaped modern forms of American genealogy. In the final chapter, Weil sketches how genetic ancestry testing continues these linked processes.

A second theme showcases how American cultures of genealogy encompass great diversity. Weil argues that American interest in tracing and sharing lineages has always signified many different things. For example, even as genealogy became absorbed into the eugenics movement, it continued, for many, to evoke and embody a private, family-focused culture oriented more around preserving family traditions than around nationalistic concerns with race and blood. African American genealogy represents another source of diversity. Weil characterizes Reconstruction as "a profoundly genealogical moment" (170) when freed slaves sought to use legal records and genealogical techniques to construct families and genealogical identities. In almost every chapter Weil takes pains to explore how African Americans made genealogy theirs throughout American history. Throughout the book Weil uses case studies to showcase the diverse forms through which Americans have done genealogy.

Weil covers a great deal of terrain in this book. In such a broad and comprehensive overview, not all stories can be told. Although Weil suggests that regionalism profoundly shaped American genealogy as it emerged, there is a notable lack of attention to midwestern genealogical cultures. For example, Weil chronicles how, during the antebellum period, New York City emerged as "the capital of parvenu genealogy" (88), while genealogists in Boston and

the broader New England area used genealogy to bolster extant social statuses, not to forge new ones. Unfortunately, similarly close attention to how placebased identities affected genealogical cultures does not inform Weil's analysis of genealogy in the Midwest (the state of Iowa is not mentioned in the text).

Despite this limitation, the book offers the most comprehensive extant survey of the development of genealogy within American culture. Weil has comprehensively mined the secondary literature on the topic, which helps him synthesize across his archival research in New England and the mid-Atlantic. Historians of many interests and backgrounds will find Weil's text a useful addition to their libraries. Many more stories need to be told about the history of genealogy in America, but Weil has produced the best one currently available.