

REVIEW

Genbox Family History

reviewed by Mike Armstrong

Most genealogists have settled on a favorite software program to manage all the documents, digital media and facts that accumulate during that relentless search to discover all the family relatives. A familiarity with our current program doesn't just mean that we are comfortable with its use and satisfied with its capabilities. We have also accepted its limitations.

No one genealogy program will do everything. There can be occasions where we sorely miss a particular feature or wish for an ability to manipulate our data in a manner that simply isn't available. Is that the time to switch over to a new program? That is not likely to happen.

A sensible alternative may be to utilize those features of another program that are absent in our present one. Looking at our database in a new way may reveal voids in our data, specific areas in need of further research, or patterns that need closer scrutiny.

This is a review of Genbox Family History, a somewhat lesser-known product among more widely used and familiar genealogy programs. Past reviews of Genbox mention it is "a flexible, yet powerful program for the beginner to advanced genealogist . . . a complex, unique and evolving genealogy database program . . ." and that "it had all the capabilities that an experienced genealogist would need."

While this review of Genbox won't directly address the suitability of this program as a genealogist's principle software choice, by no means would I dismiss it from that consideration. The primary focus here will be on those aspects that set it apart from its competitors. Generally, these features are more appealing to the user who is going beyond the basic data management capabilities and looking for greater, more flexible data handling and output.

Genbox offers many data handling and formatting options, charting styles and chart flexibility that are not available in the other leading genealogy software. This review will take a closer look at those unique features rather than a more generalized overview of the program. Making Genbox your full-time genealogy program is an option that you will have to examine in depth before deciding. But in the alternative, should

you consider importing some (or all) of your data into Genbox to utilize some of its powerful features? Absolutely!

Thoughtful Creations of Cincinnati, Ohio, first released Genbox 1.0 for DOS, a genealogy chart utility, back in 1992. Version 3.0, a full-featured Windows version, was released in February, 2003. The current version is 3.7.1. William Flight, of Thoughtful Creations, told me that work on "a major upgrade," version 4, is continuing. No release date for that upgrade has been announced. The current version, at \$29.95, as well as a fully-functional free 30-day trial version, can be downloaded from the Genbox web site, www.genbox.com. The current version is compatible with Windows versions from 98 through Vista.

The Genbox website provides a detailed comparison of the program with most of the leading competitors, including The Master Genealogist (TMG), Legacy (LEG), Personal Ancestral File (PAF), Roots Magic (RM) and Family Tree Maker (FTM). This comparison was made in June 2008, using current versions of these programs.

Note: In many instances, one or more of the other programs in the comparison did not have a feature equivalent to one in Genbox, as discussed below. Where one or more of those programs *does* have that feature, it will be noted in the description of the Genbox feature by including the other program abbreviation(s) in square brackets.

Database Data Limits

The data limits of Genbox are on a par with other programs, allowing the entry of limitless names, families, events, and images. It also allows unlimited place names per location [LEG: 2 place names per location].

Advanced Database Structure

Genbox permits linking places to higher-level places and sources to higher-level sources. This feature is

beneficial for formatting complex place and source citations. It increases the number of data fields available for listing places and sources, creating a place/source hierarchy and providing more formatting flexibility. As an example, without this feature, all the identifying information regarding a particular complex source (or place) would have to fit into the fields of a single template. Instead, with this hierarchy capability, the information can be entered into two distinct templates, where one template might list an article by “Document Title” and other relevant data, and is then linked to a separate template for the book or publication by “Source Title” and other related information.

The program recognizes same-gender family relationships [TMG, FTM] and multiple genders—Male, Female, Unknown and “Other.” Genbox also permits adding event witnesses [TMG].

With Genbox, during the entry of “place” items, a “place type” is assigned to the entry. This makes it clear whether a place is a town, township, county, etc. There can be multiple connections between different types, e.g., one town can be connected with multiple counties.

Templates

While all programs have customizable event templates, Genbox accommodates directional event templates and customizable source citation templates [TMG].

A marriage is a *bidirectional* event. If “John married Mary in 1936” is correct, then it is also correct to say “Mary married John in 1936.” Other events can be directional, such as “John proposed to Mary in June, 1935.” Simply reversing the parties in this case would not work; it requires a different sentence form. In Genbox, you can define separate event templates for forward and reverse directions.

Professional Features

Genbox has the ability to add source citations on portions of notes text [TMG] and for separate source citations on each data item. From the Genbox website:

Each fact, or assertion, stored in Genbox can be separately documented. For events, that means you can have a source citation on just the date, just the local site, just the place, just the reported age, etc. You can also attach a source citation to the event as a whole. Multiple sources can be cited in support for a single

fact. For each source supporting a fact, the support level and credibility level can be specified. Weighing these variables, you can assign an overall surety level to the fact. Genbox even supports storing the individual name variants exactly as they appear in each source, which can be helpful later in resolving research problems. Each source citation can also have associated “lead text,” annotation text, and excerpt text, for plenty of opportunities to accurately record your source citations in the most helpful way.

Genbox accommodates multiple researchers, data entry tagging by multiple researchers and the ability to create a hierarchy of projects, objectives and tasks.

Charts

Genbox’s charting capabilities outstrip the competition, due in part to its roots as a charting utility. It supports several additional charts not usually found in other programs. These include convergent (relationship) charts [TMG, RM, FTM], everyone charts, ancestor fan charts [TMG, LEG], descendant fan charts and timeline charts [LEG, RM].

There is more charting flexibility in the ability to vary box contents [TMG] and vary box styles according to individual groups. Style and content can be assigned to membership in individual groups to visually designate particular genealogical lines, surnames, key individuals, or any arbitrarily defined group. Styles include font, and the shapes and attributes of boxes. Content can be a combination of identifiers, attributes, events, pictures and notes. Flags and icons can be added to further identify groups of individuals. Genbox charting is further enhanced with box widths that automatically size to content, the option of adding source citation footnotes to charts and an option to include customizable legend boxes.

Using the small sample database included in Genbox (data used is not factually accurate), figure 1 shows an hourglass chart with the key individuals—husband and wife, John Smyth and Maria Sauve—in the center of the chart. All the ancestors of Smyth and Sauve are on the left side and all their descendants are on the right side. This arrangement can be changed to an up/down orientation. The hourglass chart can be easily created by merely selecting the two key individuals. The black and white graphic does not display the box color variations that are based on family groups. Joan Lowrey reports that she and others have not seen any other program able to create an extensive chart in this style without making

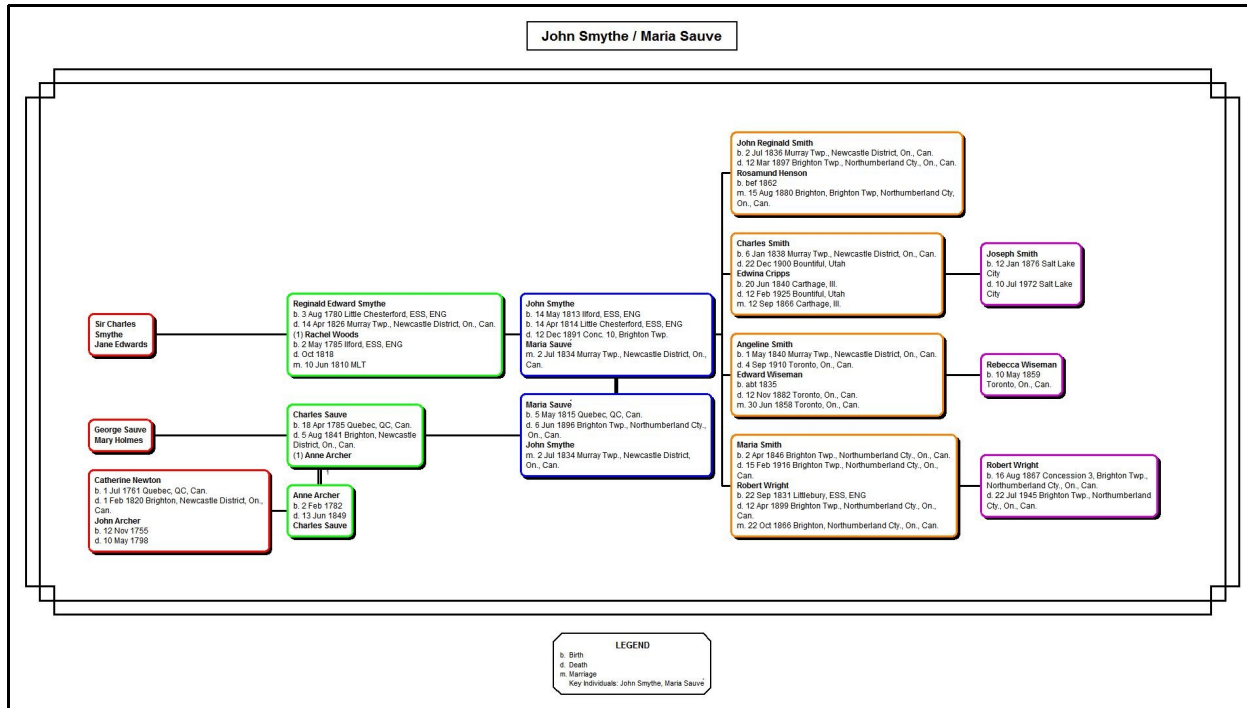


Fig. 1

some serious alterations to the database, for example, deleting and “unlinking” people, in order to get the desired results.

Another example of the charting capabilities of Genbox is shown in figure 2, “Descendants of Henry VII.” (A larger version of this chart can be found in the Sample Chart area of the Genbox website.) It depicts a number of options and features, including:

- (1) both Main and Sub Titles;
- (2) 4 descendant generations shown;
- (3) boxed, drop down layout with single boxes for couples where possible;
- (4) individuals in the list “Tudor Monarchs” are shown with special fonts, pictures, and a crown icon;
- (5) the six wives of Henry VIII are presented, avoiding all crossing lines: first, in Henry’s box, they are listed in order;
- (6) for the three wives who had children, two are shown on the sides and the descendants of the third at the bottom;
- (7) the link lines are labeled with the family number to identify the spouses with the children; and finally,
- (8) Henry VIII’s first wife, Katherine of Aragon, was married first to his brother Arthur Tudor; the chart shows these links without requiring duplicate boxes or crossing lines.

Reports

The Genbox report capabilities are equal to the other programs included in the comparison. Further, individual content on reports can be varied according to the role the individual plays in different parts of the report: primary, preferred spouse, other spouse, child carried forward, child not carried forward. For each of these roles, the identifiers, attributes, events, event detail, contacts, contact detail, parents, general notes, research notes, and media can be separately selected.

Custom reports can be created for individual researchers where more than one person may be working on a database.

Finally, Genbox features an “Advanced Context Processor.” From the website:

For the narrative reports, an advanced context handler has the job of identifying and reducing redundancy in the output, to create a more professional text flow. While simple reductions include the use of “he” and “she” when the subject of the current sentence is the same as the last, and the use of “there” for a repeating place name, advanced reductions include the extraction of a common birth place or death place from a group of child paragraphs and placement into the leading sentence, as in: “John and Martha (Davis) Johnson had three children, all born in Petersburg, Virginia.”

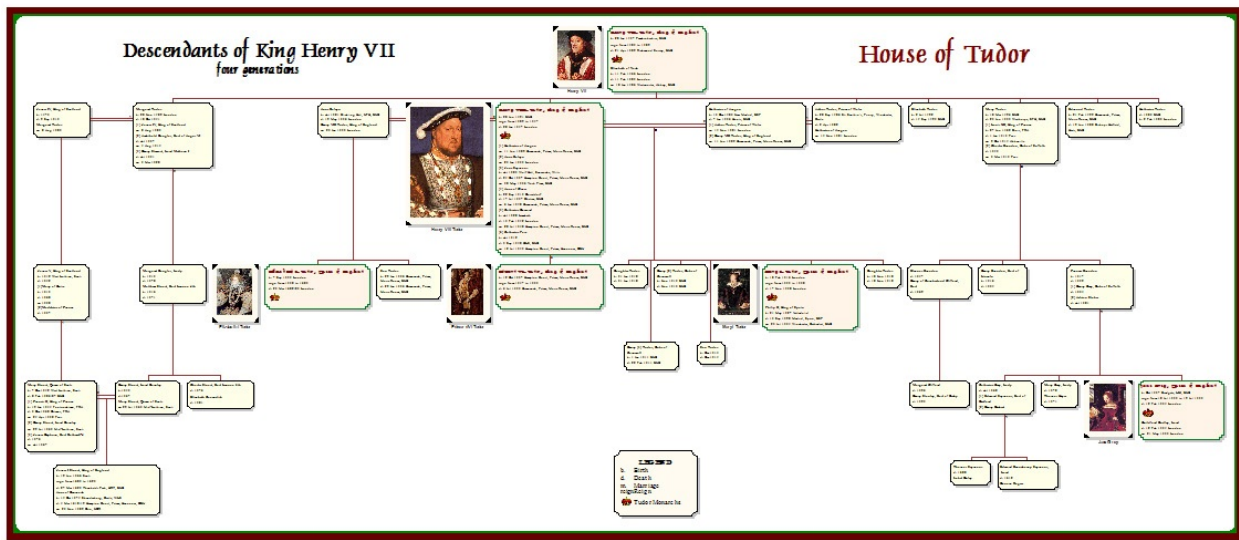


Fig. 2

Another reduction occurs when certain events occur in pairs; Genbox will create a compound sentence joining them with “and.”

Another job of the context processor is ordering sentence parts by their surety levels, so that the parts with higher surety appear first. Surety levels can be automatically qualified. Suppose the selected event part order for a narrative report was “date first followed by place.” Then, suppose for a given event, the surety on the date is lower than the surety on the place. Genbox will reorganize the sentence to show the place first. It will produce a sentence like “George died most likely in Handlebrook, Maine, perhaps in 1842.”

Again, refer to the Genbox web site for more sample reports and charts with detailed descriptions.

User Support and Assistance

For those users who need or are used to generous support options in the form of tutorials and training CDs, DVDs, or videos, readily accessible user forums and groups, and online assistance, Genbox will fall short in this area. There apparently are no training CDs or DVDs available. There is a reference on the Genbox website to an independent website for “excellent tutorials on common Genbox tasks, complete with screen shots, arrows, and step-by-step instructions.” That website indeed has many useful tutorials, but it appears the site has not been updated since 2006, when the current version was 3.6.4. Genbox’s own minimal

FAQ page shows the most recent article is dated April, 2006.

On the positive side, questions and comments posted in the Genbox website forum area, though sparsely used, will get a quick reply from Bill Flight, the program’s creator. My experience is that the same is true for e-mail inquiries. A 520-page User’s Manual can be downloaded from the website. So while the options for assistance may not be as pervasive as with other programs, adequate resources are definitely available to assist users with questions at any level.

Summary

Bill Flight of Genbox sums it up well:

Genbox has some advanced features not seen in other programs that are sometimes overlooked by new users. Genbox tries to give the user more control over how data is displayed, both in the program and on charts and reports. Version 4 will extend this approach to an even greater degree.

Genbox is a deceptive program that may appear at first to be a small player in the software market. But it is a real powerhouse, loaded with very extensive capabilities and innumerable options that can be customized and tweaked to satisfy the most demanding user. While it may take some work to wring out the maximum benefits from all its features, it will pay off with pleasing results that would be difficult or impossible to duplicate in other genealogy programs. □