

Our Mission

The AI Special Interest Group empowers NWSGS members to confidently integrate artificial intelligence into their genealogical practice through collaborative exploration and shared learning. We investigate both general-purpose AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity) and genealogy-focused applications (Transkribus, FamilySearch Labs), discovering practical ways to accelerate research, overcome challenges, and preserve family histories. Grounded in ethical AI use and traditional genealogical standards, we build expertise together - making emerging technology accessible to all while ensuring our research remains accurate, documented, and verifiable.

How We Work

- **Monthly meetings:** First Wednesday at 4:00 PM CT
- **Format:** Zoom: Live demos, hands-on practice, group discussion
- **Philosophy:** Collaborative learning—we explore together

MARCH MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

You spoke, we listened!

Thank you to everyone who completed our survey. Your feedback shapes every meeting, and we are grateful for it. Here is what you asked for and what we are doing about it:

- ✓ **Translation & transcription:** That's this month's entire focus.
- ✓ **Include prompts we can actually use:** Every demo prompt from today's session is included in this handout, ready to copy and adapt.
- ✓ **Free vs. paid tool tiers:** Coming in a future session — we will break down exactly what you get for free and when (if ever) a paid plan is worth it.

Focus: Translation and transcription

This month we tackled real genealogical documents together — live, with mistakes included. Three NWSGS members (Donna, Lynn, and Paula) generously submitted their own research challenges, and we worked through them using four tools: Google Translate, DeepL, ChatGPT, and Transkribus. The goal was not to make everyone an expert in all four

tools, but to show what each does best and worst so you know which one to reach for when you need it.

Key Takeaways

- Translation and transcription are two different problems — they often require different tools
- AI can identify a document, not just translate it
- Image quality is not a minor detail — better input means better output
- When one tool falls short, try another — no single tool wins every time
- Staying in the same conversation matters — ChatGPT remembers context across a session
- Verify before you add to your tree — AI gives analysis; you make the final call
- The tools work best when chained — Transkribus to transcribe, then DeepL or ChatGPT to translate and analyze

Today's real lesson: knowing which tool to reach for, and when.

TRANSLATION

The Process

Translating a genealogical document with AI looks like four steps, and they build on each other:

1. Upload or paste the document — either drag and drop an image or paste typed text into the tool.
2. Ask for translation — but don't just say "translate this." Use the four-part prompt framework from February: give it context (document type, language, time period), a clear task, the format you want, and any constraints.
3. Refine — if the first result isn't right, push back. Ask it to try again, explain a phrase, or clarify word choices. AI has infinite patience for follow-up.
4. Extract — once you have the translation, ask it to pull out the genealogical facts: names, dates, places, relationships. Don't just read and hope you catch everything. Make the AI organize it for you.

Tool Comparison

The honest answer to “which tool” is: it depends. Here is what each one does best.

ChatGPT

Most versatile option. It can translate, analyze, identify document type, extract facts, and compare two documents in the same conversation. Use it when you need analysis, not just translation. Works directly from images (you can upload the handwritten document and ask it to read it).

URL: <https://chat.openai.com> • Free tier available

Google Translate

Fast, free, and familiar. Good for a quick sanity check or confirming a single word. Does not analyze, does not handle idioms well, and has real limitations with handwriting. Does not accept PDFs. Use the Images tab to upload a photo, or paste typed text.

URL: <https://translate.google.com> • Free

DeepL

Particularly strong with European languages (German, French, Polish, Dutch). Produces more natural-sounding translations than Google Translate for longer passages. Best used after Transkribus has produced a typed transcription. Pair the two tools: Transkribus to read the handwriting, DeepL to produce the translation.

URL: <https://www.deepl.com> • Free tier available

TRANSCRIPTION: TRANSKRIBUS

What It Is and Why Use It

Translation tools need text they can actually read. For handwritten genealogical documents, that’s often not what you have. Transkribus is specialized software built specifically for historical handwriting transcription — not translation, transcription. Its job is to look at a handwritten image and convert it into typed text.

What makes it different from uploading an image to ChatGPT? Transkribus has been trained on millions of historical documents: old German Kurrent script, Latin church records, English secretary hand, colonial American documents. For dense, difficult, or old-style handwriting — especially in a foreign language — Transkribus will typically outperform a general-purpose AI. Accuracy on good-quality images is reported at 90–95%, which still requires review, but is far faster than starting from scratch.

The free account gives you a limited number of credits to process pages, which is sufficient for occasional use. YouTube has excellent tutorial videos to walk you through every step.

The Transkribus Workflow

1. Create a collection (think of it as a folder) and upload your image or images. If you have a multi-page document, upload all pages together so Transkribus treats them as one continuous document. Accepted formats: JPEG, TIFF, PNG, PDF.
2. Select the model BEFORE uploading. This is the step that trips people up. Transkribus offers models trained on different types of handwriting. For German Kurrent script, select the dedicated German model — it performs noticeably better than the general model. For older English documents, try the English historical models.
3. Process and review. Hit the button and wait a few minutes. You'll see a side-by-side view — your original image on the left, the transcription on the right. Click directly into the text to correct errors; Transkribus highlights each line as you work.

Transkribus vs. ChatGPT for Handwriting

Try ChatGPT first for simpler or cleaner documents — it's faster and you can analyze in the same step. For dense, difficult, or old-style handwriting (especially in a foreign language), Transkribus will give you more accurate transcription results. Then paste that transcription into DeepL or ChatGPT for translation and analysis. The two-tool chain — Transkribus to transcribe, then a second tool to translate — is often the most effective workflow.

PRIVACY & ETHICS

Handling Sensitive Documents

The moment you start uploading real family records to online tools, important questions come up. Before you upload anything, think about who is in the document and whether you would be comfortable with that information being stored on someone else's server.

- ChatGPT — Temporary Chat: Use this for sensitive documents. Your conversation is not saved and is not used to train the model. It takes one extra click and provides real peace of mind. Find it in the ChatGPT interface (see Resources for the link).
- Transkribus — Storage: Your uploaded documents stay in your account collections and do not disappear when you close the browser. Be thoughtful about what you upload, and remember you can delete collections when done.
- Simple habit: Remove or obscure living people's information before uploading. You can paraphrase, redact a name, or describe the document in text rather than uploading the image itself.
- DNA results and other sensitive data: Do not drop raw DNA results into any AI tool without first setting appropriate privacy controls.

Always Verify

AI gives you a very good starting point — but you are still the genealogist making the final call. A 95% accurate transcription still contains errors. A translation can be technically correct but miss the genealogical significance of a phrase. Always check AI output against your original sources before adding anything to your tree.

Document Your Process

If you use AI to transcribe or translate a document, note it in your research log: which tool, which version, and when. This is good genealogical practice and the right thing to do if you share your work or publish your findings.

LIVE DEMOS: MEMBER CHALLENGES

Thank you to Donna, Lynn, and Paula for sharing your real research challenges with the group. Here is a summary of each demo and what we discovered.

Demo 1: Donna's German Records — Verifying What You Have

Donna submitted two handwritten German records from Ancestry related to Margareta Katharina Schmeer (approximately 1827–1863). She believed one was a birth record and one was a marriage record. She could not read German and wanted to verify these were the right documents before adding them to her tree.

What We Did

- Step 1: Uploaded the birth record image to ChatGPT with a structured prompt asking for transcription, translation, extraction of genealogical facts, and a comparison to the known details.
- Step 2: In the same ChatGPT conversation, uploaded the second image — asking it to identify the document type, transcribe and translate it, and compare it to the birth record already reviewed.
- Step 3: Compared results briefly with Google Translate to illustrate the difference in depth of analysis.

What ChatGPT Found

- Birth record: Confirmed entry 103, Schmeer Margareta Catharina, born/baptized 13 February 1827. Good match with Donna's research target.
- Second record: ChatGPT identified this was NOT a marriage record. The column headings — age, illness or cause of death, place and time of death, place and time

of burial, family register page number — appear only in death registers, not marriage books.

- Donna had been sent a death record. AI caught this before it was added to the tree.

The Learning

AI did not just translate — it identified what the document actually was. Always ask the AI to confirm the document type before assuming what you have been told.

Prompt Used: Birth Record

I am researching Margareta Katharina Schmeer, born approximately 1827 and died approximately 1863, from Germany. I found this handwritten German record on Ancestry. Please:

1. Transcribe the handwritten text as accurately as you can
2. Translate the transcription to English
3. Extract and organize: full name(s) mentioned, all dates, location, parents, and any other identifying details
4. Based on what you find, tell me whether this record is consistent with a person named Margareta Katharina Schmeer born around 1827

Prompt Used: Second Record (in the same conversation)

This is a second handwritten German record from Ancestry — I believe it may be a marriage record for the same person. Please:

1. Transcribe and translate this document
2. What TYPE of record is this? Confirm whether it is a marriage record or something else
3. Extract all names, dates, locations, and relationships
4. Compare what you find to the birth record we just reviewed. Do the details point to the same individual — Margareta Katharina Schmeer, born approximately 1827?
5. Give me your overall assessment: based on both documents, should I be confident these records are for my ancestor?

Demo 2: Lynn's German Obituary from Archion

Lynn submitted a PDF of a German-language obituary from Archion (archion.de), a German church records archive. The record was from a collection called Heilig Geist (Holy Spirit), which appeared to be an old people's home or hospital. Lynn was looking for information about Carl Wilhelm Fischer and expected the entry to contain biographical details beyond just dates.

What We Did

- Step 1: Attempted Google Translate with the PDF — it could not accept the PDF format.
- Step 2: Used Transkribus Quick Text Recognition with the German model — successfully transcribed the handwritten text, though with some errors.
- Step 3: Pasted the Transkribus transcription into Google Translate for a quick read-through.
- Step 4: Demonstrated pasting the transcription into ChatGPT with context (Berlin, 1800s hospital death record) for a cleaner translation and extracted genealogical facts.

What We Found

Carl Wilhelm Fischer, formerly a merchant, most recently a protocol keeper. Died December 13, 1813, age 63, at the Heilig Geist hospital — not as a resident, but as an attendant. Born August 30, 1750, in Danzig (now Gdańsk, Poland). His father was a merchant who had married into the Conat family. Fischer's wife died in Elbing (now Elbląg, Poland) in 1785, leaving no surviving descendants from that marriage. Additionally, apart from a brother and a sister, no other relatives were living at the time of his death.

Key Practical Notes

- Archion currently exports records as PDF only — no separate image download option.
- Google Translate cannot accept PDFs in its image upload tab. You can convert the PDF to an image file using Adobe Acrobat or a free online conversion tool, then upload the image.
- The recommended workflow for documents like this: Transkribus to transcribe the handwriting, then DeepL or ChatGPT to translate and extract genealogical facts.
- Screenshot quality is typically lower than a direct PDF download — when possible, use the file download the archive provides.

Prompt Used: ChatGPT Translation with Context

Please translate this death record from 1800s Germany. The record is from the Heilig Geist hospital in Berlin. The text below was transcribed from a handwritten German document. Please:

1. Provide a clean English translation
2. Extract all genealogical facts: full names, dates, places, relationships, occupations
3. Note anything that would help me find related records

[Paste Transkribus transcription here]

Demo 3: Paula's 1724 Virginia Land Patent

Paula submitted a screen capture of a 1724 Virginia land patent. She was looking for her fifth great-grandfather Cornelius Bryan, whose name she believed appeared on the fifth line following six other names. The image quality was poor — two screenshots pasted into a Word document — and she had already attempted an extraction but wanted it verified.

What We Did

- Step 1: Uploaded the poor-quality images to ChatGPT with a prompt asking for names, dates, and an explanation of the document. ChatGPT found the patentee (James Christian) but missed Cornelius Bryan entirely.
- Step 2: Located a higher-quality version of the same document from the Library of Virginia Archives Online and downloaded it as a TIFF file, then converted to PNG for Transkribus.
- Step 3: Ran the PNG through Transkribus using the English historical model. Transkribus produced a transcription that included Cornelius Bryan — though slightly garbled.
- Step 4: Fed the Transkribus transcription plus the images into ChatGPT for analysis and extraction of all names and the legal description.

What We Found

The land patent was issued to James Christian by Hugh Drysdale, Lieutenant Governor of Virginia. Seven men — including Cornelius Bryan — were named as head rights, meaning James Christian had paid for their importation to Virginia. The patent appears to record the arrival of these seven individuals into the colony, which suggests Cornelius Bryan immigrated to Virginia around 1724. The other six names also appear in the patent alongside Bryan.

The Learning

Garbage in, garbage out. The poor-quality screenshot produced a near-useless result. The high-quality download from the Library of Virginia changed everything. When a tool fails, check your image quality before assuming the tool cannot handle the document.

Prompt Used: Poor Image — Initial Attempt

This is a 1724 land patent from Virginia. I have attached an image of the document. The image quality is poor. Please:

1. Extract all names mentioned in the document
2. Extract all dates
3. Explain in plain English what this document is about for genealogical research

Prompt Used: Better Image + Transkribus Transcription

This is a 1724 land patent from Virginia. I have attached two images of the document and also pasted a transcription below that was generated by Transkribus. The image quality in the original was poor and I believe the transcription may be incomplete. Please:

1. Extract all names mentioned in either the images or the transcription
2. Note any names you can see in the images that do NOT appear in the transcription
3. Extract all dates and the legal land description
4. Explain in plain English what this land patent means for genealogical research

[Paste Transkribus transcription here]

MEMBERS HELPING MEMBERS

What Did You Try Since February?

Claude AI for Transcription

A member mentioned trying Claude AI for transcriptions. It's worth experimenting with — Claude is particularly strong for analysis and writing tasks. For handwriting transcription specifically, Transkribus remains the specialized recommendation, but any tool is worth testing on your own documents.

Google Gemini and NotebookLM

A member asked about Google Gemini, which she had heard was strong for research. Janet noted that Google Gemini is an excellent tool for looking things up on the internet, given Google's search expertise. The standout recommendation was NotebookLM, a Gemini-based tool that lets you create a project and feed it your own documents — family history narratives, research notes, a draft ancestor book. You can then ask questions and get answers grounded in what you have provided, not what is on the internet or in a family tree someone else contributed.

Metes and Bounds Visualization

A member mentioned a webinar that demonstrated using AI to convert a metes and bounds property description into a diagram. AI can help illustrate concepts that are difficult to visualize from text alone. If you give ChatGPT a property description from a deed, it may be able to generate a diagram of the parcel — particularly useful for state-land states.

A Hallucination Warning — From the Real World

A member shared a cautionary experience using Google Gemini to research an immigrant ancestor. She asked which ships arrived in the United States on a specific date in 1905 with passengers from Poland. Gemini confidently provided ship names, ports, dates, and NARA microfilm roll numbers — all of which turned out to be fabricated. When challenged, Gemini shifted its answer repeatedly (suggesting new roll numbers, different ports) and eventually used the word “confabulation” to describe its own behavior.

The takeaway: when an AI provides specific, verifiable information — roll numbers, microfilm citations, ship names — verify every item against the actual records. ChatGPT, when asked the same question, acknowledged it could not access the microfilm and gave only general guidance. Honesty about limitations is more useful than a confident wrong answer.

"I said, why are you lying to me? And Gemini said, well, it was more confabulation."

Prompt suggestion to reduce hallucination: add a line such as “If you are uncertain, say so. Do not guess or invent citations.” This does not eliminate the problem but encourages the model to flag uncertainty.

READY-TO-USE PROMPTS

For a Handwritten Foreign Language Record (Full Workflow)

I am researching [ancestor name], born approximately [year] in [place]. I found this handwritten [language] record from [archive or source]. Please:

1. Transcribe the handwritten text as accurately as you can
2. Translate the transcription to English
3. What TYPE of record is this?
4. Extract and organize: full names, dates, location, relationships, occupations
5. Is this record consistent with what I just told you about [ancestor name]?

For Comparing Two Documents in the Same Conversation

This is a second document I believe may be related to the same person. Please:

1. Transcribe and translate this document
2. What TYPE of record is this?
3. Compare it to the first document we reviewed. Do the names and dates point to the same individual?
4. Give me your overall assessment of confidence that these are the same person.

For a Poor-Quality Image with a Transcription

I have attached an image of a [document type] from [place, year]. The image quality is poor. I am also pasting a transcription below that may be incomplete. Please:

1. Extract all names from both the image and the transcription
2. Note any names visible in the image that do NOT appear in the transcription
3. Extract all dates and key details
4. Explain in plain English what this document means for genealogical research

[Paste transcription here]

YOUR MARCH CHALLENGE

Try translating OR transcribing one of your own documents using two different tools. Compare the results. What did each tool do well? What did each one miss?

Suggested Approaches

- For a typed foreign language document: try Google Translate first, then DeepL. Compare the translations.
- For a handwritten foreign language document: try Transkribus first, then paste the transcription into DeepL. Then try uploading the image directly to ChatGPT. Compare what you get.
- For an English handwriting document: try Transkribus, then try ChatGPT directly with the image. See which produces the more complete and accurate result.

Bonus

Submit a research log or a specific research strategy question for April's meeting. Send it to ai_sig@nwsgs.org by March 25, 2026. April's topic is Research Strategy and AI-Powered Research Logs.

Come back in April with your results, your questions, and your best discovery!

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Next Meeting: April 1, 2026 — 4:00 PM CT

Topic: Research Strategy & Keeping AI-Powered Research Logs

We will explore how AI can help you develop and maintain research strategies, build and organize research logs, and think through brick-wall problems. Bring your own research questions — the more specific, the better.

Register here: <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/RdwavR7wQrmDa3UJq5bBOw>

- Submit your research logs or strategy questions by March 25 to ai_sig@nwsgs.org
- Your March challenge results are welcome too — what did you translate or transcribe?

RESOURCES

Tools Used This Month

- [ChatGPT](#) Free tier available • Best for: document analysis, context, comparisons
 - Privacy: Settings > Security > also see Temporary Chat option
- [Transkribus](#) Free tier (limited credits) • Best for: historical handwriting, German Kurrent, old English script
 - YouTube tutorials available — highly recommended for getting started
 - Accepted formats: JPEG, TIFF, PNG, PDF
- [DeepL](#) Free tier • Best for: typed European language text, especially German, French, Polish
- [Google Translate](#) Free • Best for: quick phrase checks on typed text
- [Archion \(German church records\)](#) • Subscription • German Protestant church records; exports as PDF

Standing Resources

- [RootsTech 2026 AI sessions](#) – make sure to click all three days
- [CRAIG — Coalition for Responsible AI in Genealogy](#) • Ethical guidelines for AI use in genealogy research
- [FamilySearch Full-Text Search](#) • Free • AI-powered search through handwritten and indexed records
- [Steve Little: Crafting Better Research Prompts](#) Genealogy-specific prompt guidance from NGS AI Director
- [Family Tree Webinars AI Library](#) Multiple expert presenters; these are the free ones

REMEMBER

- ✓ You can't break it — experiment freely
- ✓ Weird results? Try a different tool, a better image, or a more specific prompt
- ✓ Always verify AI output against your original sources
- ✓ No single tool does everything — the best results come from chaining tools together
- ✓ Document your process in your research log
- ✓ We are learning together — questions are always welcome

AI is a tool, not a replacement. You are the genealogist. AI is your assistant.

Questions? Discoveries? ai_sig@nwsgs.org • See you at the next meeting!

This handout generated with AI help and human oversight.

Howard Cameron and Janet Blake