

GROWING FAMILY TREES

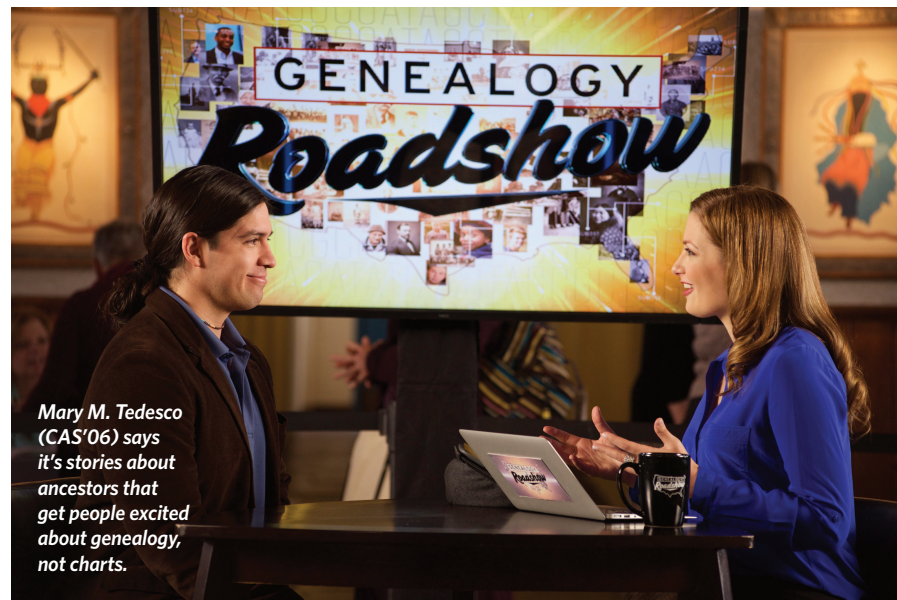
GENEALOGY
ROADSHOW
COHOST MARY M.
TEDESCO HELPS
UNRAVEL FAMILY
HISTORIES AND
MYSTERIES
BY ANDREW
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On PBS' *Genealogy Roadshow*, Mary M. Tedesco and her cohosts investigate colorful tales lurking in the bloodlines of ordinary Americans. They've pursued prized connections to Blackbeard and Pocahontas, tested long-held tales of ties to royalty and Viking raiders.

Professional genealogist Tedesco (CAS'06), a host on the show since 2015, has traced her own line back hundreds of years—though she hasn't found any pirates or royals yet. Her father's family tree winds back to Italy in the 1600s, her mother's through the American Revolution to Northern Europe in the 1500s. Just over a decade ago, she wouldn't have been able to tell you much about her ancestry beyond her immediate family. Then, in 2006, Tedesco and her Italian-born grandmother started digging into the past.

A math major at CAS, Tedesco was working as a financial analyst when a colleague mentioned his new hobby: genealogy. She loved hearing about his every new discovery and decided to give it a shot herself.

"We started writing to Italy, my grandmother and myself, to get Italian records—birth, marriage, and death records, for example—and then we reached the beginning of civil registration



Mary M. Tedesco (CAS'06) says it's stories about ancestors that get people excited about genealogy, not charts.

offices in Italy, which is in the early 1800s for the ones we were writing to."

She asked Italian officials what she'd have to do to go deeper. "They said, 'Well, you have to come over here and research the church records.' And then I did." She flew to San Pietro a Maida, her grandfather's hometown, in Calabria, Italy.

After making that first physical connection to her distant relatives, Tedesco was hooked. In 2011, she signed up for the BU genealogical research certificate program, a course that teaches topics like evidence evaluation and ethical forensic work, which

is often done to support legal cases. She started with the goal of advancing her own research, but "went from needing and wanting more education," she says, "to realizing that this was something I could pursue as a career." She began taking clients, helping them find their own Italian roots.

In 2013, Tedesco launched ORIGINS ITALY. What she describes as a "bespoke Italian genealogical research firm" helps clients find single ancestors or draw entire family trees; some customers just want help with the documentation needed for dual citizenship. Genealogy has become a

big business, illustrated by the bevy of TV shows and professional services catering to family historians: Ancestry.com claims to handle 75 million searches a day and have 90 million family trees in its database; companies like AncestryDNA and 23andMe can uncover your ethnic heritage in exchange for \$99 and a saliva sample.

Tedesco flies to Italy at least once a year for extended trips delving into local archives. Then, she shares the stories she's discovered. "A lot of clients love what they've seen on the *Genealogy Roadshow* television program and want almost a similar kind of presentation."

Tedesco joined the show before its second season after its cohosts—she'd met Josh Taylor and Kenyatta Berry at genealogy conferences—recommended her for the job; she auditioned and got the part.

When she tells the story of a family's past on TV, Tedesco typically begins with a single historical document, zooming in on a key relative, then charting their story through document after document to build a rich tale of their life, as well as the world they lived in; the tour continues through that ancestor's parents, then their parents.

"Folks don't necessarily want to look at a chart with names and dates. They want to hear a story," she says. "And that's what really gets people hooked."

In the second season of *Genealogy Roadshow*, Tedesco traveled to Italy to bring a guest's family history to life and give viewers an expert's guide to finding original records. The short segment was part of the team's look into the roots of a family eager to learn if they were descended from seventh-century Italian royalty. In an ornately pretty church, Tedesco carefully studied a parish history etched on animal skin 500 years ago; in a functional *municipio*, a government building, she gingerly lifted worn town records from a shelf. "Holding an actual document that our ancestors might've touched is one of the coolest parts about on-site research," she says in a voice-over. "Nowhere else can you actually do that, except if you come to your ancestral town."

It turned out the family didn't have any noble connections—they came from

an honorable line of Sicilian fishermen. They're not the only ones to be told a story they weren't expecting. When she takes on a new client, Tedesco starts by letting them know that not everything may match family folklore.

"There are also many discoveries of black sheep in the family, say for example, you had an ancestor who committed a crime," she says. "This can be hard to process, even a couple of hundred years later, because we all want to have positive impressions of our ancestors."

In a *Genealogy Roadshow* episode filmed in New Orleans, Tedesco helped a family chase down a mysterious forefather, a former state senator who supposedly went hunting for gold in Alaska and was never heard from again. "His life," Tedesco told the expectant family, "was certainly worthy of a motion picture." She showed them how her team had tracked him through a life of misdemeanors (vote rigging, assaulting a police officer) and she explained how he'd fled the Big Easy for California, where he ran an opera house; then New Mexico where he faced gambling charges; then Nevada where he started a second, bigamous, family. Tedesco suggested his biopic could be called, "Catch me if you can."

For the mysteries that have stumped others—the missing ancestor, the stubborn gap in a family's history—she calls on skills learned as a math major at CAS, finding solutions from the thousands of bits of data on a family tree. "When you think about all the events—birth, marriage, death, residence—we could have hundreds of data points for just one thing," she says. "The genealogy I love is taking all of this data and analyzing it and making sense of it."

Tedesco says the *Genealogy Roadshow* team is laying the groundwork for future seasons (you can apply to be on the show at genealogyroadshow.org). She's also working on adding detail and depth to her own family tree. Much of that will require more trips to Europe, but some of it can happen in the United States. A proud member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Tedesco has found—so far, she emphasizes—20 patriots on her



TRACING YOUR FAMILY TREE

Genealogist Mary M. Tedesco's top-three tips for amateur family history sleuths.

1 START AT HOME "See what documents and things are inherited from an aunt or grandma. Do you have original birth certificates? Do you have old letters and information? Try and fill in as many details as you can from home; interview your older relatives."

2 GO ONLINE "After you've filled out a pedigree chart with the information you have, you want to start searching for these folks online. I would recommend starting with the United States census, which can be great to frame your family's journey every 10 years. From the census, you'll get approximate years, even months, of birth."

3 GET OUT THERE "Track down those vital records—birth, marriage, death—whether it be at local repositories here in the US or abroad. I think the statistic is that 90 percent of genealogical records are not online, so after you've exhausted everything online, you can spend many, many years of wonderful research in local repositories."

mother's side, including privates serving in Pennsylvania and two Virginians, Samuel Pitchford and Seth Perkinson, who donated beef to the cause in 1780.

"The beauty of genealogy is that the work is never done," she says. "There's always another line to research and when you find one ancestor, there are two more behind them." **a&s**



Watch Mary M. Tedesco show how she puts the pieces of a family puzzle back together at bu.edu/cas/arts-sciences.