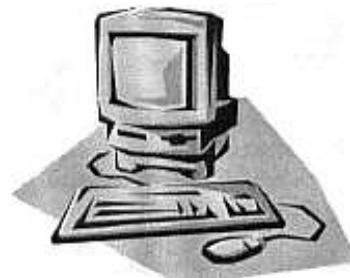# COMPUTER
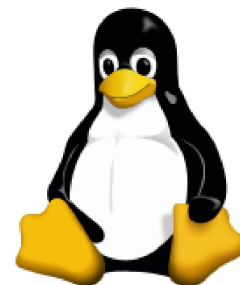## CORNER

Free Software

By Mike Blackledge.com

Question: Is a computer just hardware? Or is it an integrated marriage of hardware and software? And what is more important, hardware or software? Answer: Who cares?!! As a practicing genealogist, most likely you value your computer for what it does for you, how efficiently it does it, and not so much as to what happens behind the curtain. This Computer Corner column examines one important aspect of the age-old question that we really do care about: So how do I get free stuff?

Let's start at the beginning: when you buy a new computer, it's 'empty,' right? Well, not usually. You can expect it to come with an operating system (usually the latest), a copy of Adobe Reader, and that ubiquitous anti-virus software. All that comes 'free,' yes?

The fact is, a new Windows PC usually comes pre-installed with a lot of 'free' software you don't need, will most likely never need, and thus you really don't want. You may still have some of that on your current PC and should probably uninstall it. Computer Corner looked at this problem before [*Quarterly*, Vol 40, Issue 3, *"My Computer is Slow"*]. That was in Nov 2015 and today I'd suggest the PCMag article: *"How to Clean Crapware From a New PC"* by Eric Griffith, Feb 10, 2017 [see Sources]. To be fair, we need to realize that manufacturers install this "bloatware" on new PCs because they're paid to do so. PC profit margins are low, so pre-installing junk gives PC manufacturers a bit of extra money—and thus keeps the cost of your PC below what it otherwise might be. (Whenever I write about the negative aspects of the PC world, I can hear **Lynda Katonak** chuckling over my shoulder, "That's why I transitioned from the PC to the Mac!" I know, I know … *sigh*)

Here is a premise for this article that I am going to throw on the table now, and see if you can dispute it: **Hypothesis**: "As the average George Genealogist from Albuquerque, NM, every type of software package I need, I can obtain for free."

Wait a minute, you might argue, what about the Operating System that makes the entire computer work? I can't get that for free, can I? Well, actually, there is

Linux – a computer operating system that was originally developed for personal computers and has since been ported to more platforms than any other operating system. Linux has been around since the 1990s and was assembled under the model of free and open-source software development and distribution, which we'll hear more about later. If you purchased a **Chromebook** for your laptop needs, then you are running Chrome OS, which Google built on the Linux kernel – thus you are basically running Linux. And Linux even has its own mascot, Tux the

Penguin, which is more than you can say for Microsoft. I'm not advocating that you go Linux, I only want to make you aware that it is available to you for free at Linux.com and it is already in all our lives (in cars, in smart thermostats, in robots, TiVo DVR, Galaxy Nexus,…)

What about the anti-virus software – they give you that free for three months, and then you _have_ to pay for it, correct? Hey, we've talked about this subject before: One of the good "free" things that Microsoft has done is to provide you access to **Windows Defender** – see that Nov 2015 article. This package is already included in your PC and ready to go – however, if you have activated some pay-for virus protection, it has probably disabled Defender.

There are also good free anti-virus packages: my son recommends Avast! which he uses to protect all his home computers – he finds it very trustworthy. My grandson seconds the vote for AVAST! but also suggests **Malwarebytes** as a companion to Avast, as it can catch whatever Avast may miss. Technicaly, Malwarebytes is a virus detector, but you get the warning.   There is some discussion as to whether you can run two anti-virus packages simultaneously – I would suggest not, if for no other reason than it should slow operations considerably. See Sources.

What about Adobe Reader? No problem, this reader for all PDF files usually comes with your computer, but you can always download the latest version (currently XI) for free. I'm not talking Adobe Acrobat here, just the Adobe Reader.

What other software packages might genealogists use almost every day? Internet browser, internet search engines, email, Microsoft Office, scanner/OCR, and genealogy software such as Legacy or RootsMagic. Anything free in there? Let's take a look.

Internet Browser: Back in the 1990s when Netscape Navigator was the dominant browser, they charged five dollars per copy of their software. Microsoft broke Netscape's hold on first place by offering its browser for free, and all browsers have been free ever since. You can use anything you want – Microsoft Edge, Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox – at no cost. But not Netscape Navigator – gone and buried.

Internet Search Engine: Google still dominates, partially because they are good and partly because they pay some of the browsers, like Firefox, to have Google as their default browser. But again, you can use Yahoo, Bing, even AOL or Lynda's favorite, DuckDuckGo – it's all free.

Email: Believe it or not, there are many people out there – perhaps a few in our own Society – that continue to pay AOL every month for their email 'service.'[i] Email is free, folks – this is another subject we have discussed at some length, as in [_Quarterly_, Vol 40, Issue 3, "Gmail for Genealogists"].

Microsoft Office: For me, personal computers first demonstrated that they were something more than a hobby when Lotus 1-2-3 came out – the "first" (after Visi-Calc) spreadsheet package and arguably the first killer app – in Jan 1983. Each Spring, I would work for hours in Lotus 1-2-3 to create the tax forms for the current tax year. I know, I know, I had more time than money back then. Then Lotus was purchased by IBM, and TurboTax and its low cost competitors made my yearly work not worth the time.

In Nov 1990, Microsoft introduced the first Office package, which bundled Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Every few years, Microsoft would release a new version of Office – thus we had

Office 3.0 (also called Office 92) containing Word 2.0, Excel 4.0, PowerPoint 3.0, and Mail 3.0. The release process continued with Office 4.0 (1993), Office 95 and 97, Office 2000, Office XP, etc. Then, in 2013, Microsoft changed its sales policy. David Pogue described the new Office choices in 2013 which we excerpt as follows:

> *For the last few versions, Microsoft has mostly shuffled around existing features. This year [2013], the biggest news isn't the software, but how you pay for it.*
> *Way 1: buy the Office suite as you always have, for $140 [one time] (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote) to $400 (those programs plus Outlook, Access and Publisher).*
> *Way 2: buy an annual subscription to these programs for $100 a year. That plan is called Office 365. Microsoft argues that this subscription offers all kinds of benefits. First, you can download and run the Office programs on up to five computers, including Macs and PCs. You can change which five they are at any time. If your home or office has a bunch of computers, you could save money; buying five copies outright would set you back $700. That's more economical only if you plan to use that increasingly ancient version for at least seven years.*
> *With a subscription, you'll always get the latest version — Office 2015, Office 2031, Office 2119 — but, of course, you have to pay $100 a year forever. (If your subscription lapses, you can open or print your documents, but you can't edit them or create new ones.)*
> *You might be appalled at the notion of paying Microsoft an annual fee forever to get something you used to own outright. Or you might like the idea of a fixed, knowable fee that keeps you up to date.*

When I worked for the military or for Sandia, and you taxpayers paid for it, I loved the idea of always having the latest Office software. Now that I'm retired with a wife, a genealogy habit, and two cabins in the woods to support, I find myself in the appalled category.   Is there a way to obtain these services without paying the big bucks? Absolutely! Here are a few possibilities:

Older versions: You probably really don't need the latest versions of any of the Office suite of products. All those older versions worked just fine, they just didn't have the bells and whistles that Microsoft kept adding each release. And perhaps they are no longer supported – but do you care? Take a look at Ebay: today I see you can buy Microsoft Office Professional 2007 Full Version [Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, Access, Publisher] on a disc for $19, which includes shipping. Install on any operating system from XP to Windows 10. One price, you own it forever, with an install key that works on 5 PCs. Need more? Buy another one.

Apache OpenOffice: Apache Software Foundation is non-profit and believes software should not be sold, that even source code should be free and open to the public. Their products are produced by a consensus-based collaborative development project. They tout their product Apache OpenOffice as "the leading **open-**source office software suite for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, graphics, databases and more. It works on all common computers [and has been around and used for years].[ii] It stores all your data in an international open standard format and can also read and write files from other common office software

packages. It can be downloaded and used completely free of charge for any purpose". (If you want it mailed to you on a disc, that's about $11.)

HOWEVER, I didn't realize the competition/backstory/squabbling between OpenOffice and LibreOffice - the reference [see **Sources**] makes it sound like you should definitely go with

LibreOffice, which considers itself the spiritual successor to OpenOffice – see the **Sources** for PCWorld's explanation and comparison of these two free Office products.   They both want you to choose them! Note that your resulting file extensions and formats will be ISO-based, not Microsoft file formats, but they can be easily converted and changed to a .doc file, etc.

Google Docs: Google Docs, Google Sheets and Google Slides are a word processor, a spreadsheet and a presentation program respectively, all part of a free, web-based software office suite offered by Google within its Google Drive service since 2006. Thus Google Docs offers similar features to Microsoft Office – on the cloud and for free. Teachers and schools have assigned their students projects to work entirely in Google Docs.   The suite allows users to create and edit files online while collaborating with other users in real-time. All files created with the apps are by default saved to Google Drive (i.e., in the Cloud). Recall Eastman's article on Cloud Computing [*Quarterly*, Vol 41, Issues 2 and 3] – Google Docs is a prime example.

Scanner/OCR: Many of us have printers that can serve as scanners. But **Lisa Kindrick**, our Genealogy Center Librarian, tells us that the New Mexico Genealogical Society has donated a **KIC Click Mini Scanner** to the Genealogy Center, and the Charles Dibrell Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution paid for the first year of maintenance. It can scan up to 30 pages per minute and the scanner bed can hold documents up to 12.25" x 19.2". The highest resolution available is 300 dpi. Located in the Genealogy Center Computer Lab, you can scan a document to a USB drive as a PDF, JPEG, PNG, Searchable PDF (can be opened in Adobe Reader) , or Rich Text (can be opened with a word processing program). You can also save the document as a QR code and then use an app to open it on your handheld device. Editing options include the ability to crop, adjust brightness and contrast, adjust scanning resolution, and rotate. Just bring your flash drive and what you want to scan. And once again, it's FREE! Plus the staff is happy to show anyone how to get started.

Scanning into Rich Text Format (.rtf files) introduces another valuable piece of FREE software: OCR [Optical Character Recognition] software has become more accurate over the years with a niche specialty: converting a picture of words into computer readable text. This capability comes for free as but one of the scanning options with the **KIC Click Mini Scanner**.

Genealogy Software: Note that any of the several commercial genealogy software packages today provides a free trial, or a limited feature version, that you can download for free and use at no cost. You probably already have a genealogy program that you're quite happy with, most likely Legacy or RootsMagic. Even though your developer comes out with a new version, don't feel compelled to buy the latest! What feature can you not live without?

Are you familiar with Gramps? No, not the old man with the tobacco stains on his tie, I mean the Dick Eastman publicized cloud computing product. **Gramps** is a somewhat forced acronym for Genealogical Research and Analysis Management Programming System; more importantly, it is a stable, free, and opensource genealogy software program. It has been around for 15 years. It is now completely cloud based, and its Users Manual is available on the Internet. See **Sources** below for a link to one of several Dick Eastman articles on Gramps.

Summary: For your genealogy research, compilation, and publication, almost all software resources can be obtained for free – or almost free – if you're willing to forego the latest features or the brand names.

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