Genealogy was so important in biblical times that people never left home without carrying a copy of their family tree . “It was like their social security card,” said Esther Johnson, president of the Surry County Genealogical Association, adding that researching one’s ancestry has endured as a popular hobby. “People have always wanted to know who they are and where they come from.”

Johnson will be teaching a series of beginning genealogy classes in February and March for anyone with those same questions. Students will learn how to read and fill out a family tree using correct notation and how to use various resources in the community to do research. The program is run through the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, where the first class was held Tuesday. Spaces are still available in the remaining four classes, which will be held Feb. 16, 23, March 1 and 8 from 6 to 8 p.m. Anyone interested may register for any or all of the classes. The location of the classes — which are free for museum members and $5 per class for non-members — depends on the topics covered that day. The Feb. 16 and March 8 class will be held in the museum’s second floor classroom. The Feb. 23 class will be held at the Surry County Register of Deeds office at 201 East Kapp St. in Dobson. The March 1 class will be held at the Carlos Surratt Genealogy Room at Surry Community College.

Johnson said many beginners have a family tree in their possession but often don’t know how to “read” it or fill one out. “They need to know themselves how to put down names and dates,” Johnson said, which helps even when using computer programs such as Ancestry.com. It makes them more adept at understanding what they might find while researching. “They need to know what is a real source,” from an unreliable one, and how to correctly document sources, Johnson said. “People will tell you anything.” Students emerge from the class better equipped to unlock secrets from their family’s past — the fun part. The teacher recalled an instance from her own genealogical research . Her great-grandfather had been identified as a military deserter in a book about the Civil War. Johnson obtained a war record from Richmond, Virginia, that on the back side listed details of her ancestor’s capture and release. He was no deserter. “He was released on his birthday,” she said. “It’s just those mysteries people love.”

Although it’s not required, those who want to use the class time to actively research their ancestry may bring laptops. Family tree forms will be provided to students. “We always have the best time,” Johnson said. “You will never be depressed. It’s just educational and is really interesting. (Genealogy) keeps you busy, keeps your mind going, it keeps you young.” For more information or to register, call Amy Snyder at 786-4478 ext. 227 or email aesnyder@northcarolinamuseum.org.
Annual memberships to the museum can be purchased for $25 for seniors and students or $40 for an individual.