**[Turn any Smartphone into a Scanner and Document Management System with OCR Capabilities](http://eogn.com/wp/?p=33888" \o "(+) Turn any Smartphone into a Scanner and Document Management System with OCR Capabilities)**

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Let’s say you are at a county courthouse looking at old land records, and you find what you have been looking for: the transcription of your ancestor’s deed showing his purchase of property. Of course, you need a copy; but the only available copy machine doesn’t handle oversized documents. Even more important, you always prefer a digital image whenever possible as it is easier to store, copy, and include in your reports. However, there is no scanner available. What to do?

Use your cell phone’s camera!

Here is an example of a book image made by my iPhone’s internal camera:



Click on the above image to view a larger version.

Most modern-day cell phones include cameras of 5 megapixels resolution or more. In fact, the current iPhone includes an 8-megapixel camera while most of today’s Android cameras include the same or even higher resolution. (Beware of cameras claiming 20 or more megapixels. Those claims are technically correct, but those cameras take pictures that are usually “digitally enhanced” with the result being an 8-megapixel image.)

An 8-megapixel image—assuming it was created by properly-focused lenses and a high-quality sensor—will produce a BETTER image than does the typical photocopy machine. Cameras also easily handle oversized documents. Finally, a digital image can easily be saved anywhere, copied, sent by email, or used in almost any imaginable manner. You won’t be required to insert quarters into a machine, either.

To be sure, my favorite method of digitizing paper is to use the desktop scanner I have at home. However, that isn’t very useful when I am someplace else. My second-favorite method is to use my tablet computer and a stage stand that I described recently in the Plus Edition article, *(+) Convert Your Tablet Computer into a Document Camera and Stage Stand*. You can read that article at[http://eogn.com/wp/?p=33784](http://eogn.com/wp/?p=33784" \t "_blank) if you have a Plus Edition user name and password.

One drawback of the tablet computer and stage stand is that I do not carry them with me everywhere. If I find myself in need of a digital copy at other times, I revert to my third-favorite method: use my cell phone’s camera.

With appropriate software installed, a smartphone becomes a pocket photocopier and scanner. Of course, you can always take a picture of any document at any time without using any extra software. However, if you take hundreds or even thousands of such pictures, you may find some difficulty when searching for the one image you need months later. Use of a document management program will make those images more useful and easier to find and retrieve.

I digitize most everything worth keeping. I digitize copies of ancestors’ deeds, my insurance papers, prescriptions, bills, vegan recipes, magazine articles, motor vehicle registrations, my driver’s license, my passport, receipts for income tax purposes, receipts from the automobile’s last oil change, and anything else that I wish to keep. I typically use my iPhone’s camera several times a day to digitize various pieces of paper. Once digitized, I throw away about 99.9% of the paper. (I don’t throw away my driver’s license or passport!) I store all my documents in the cloud as well as copies on the desktop and laptop computers. In addition, I can quickly retrieve any document at any time, even on my cell phone, wherever I am, as long as I have a decent cell phone signal. That can be handy when at the doctor’s office, the motor vehicle department, or most anyplace else.

At this time I have digitized more than 3,000 documents, and all of them are available to me within seconds as long as I have my cell phone with me. I would hate to travel with all those documents on paper as the briefcase would be very heavy! Using digitized documents is faster and easier than using paper. Using proper backup techniques, digitized images also will last much longer than paper copies. That is especially true of those cash register receipts that seem to start fading away within weeks after being printed. Electronic images of the same documents, however, can remain readable for centuries. Assuming you have multiple digital copies stored in multiple locations, you no longer have to worry about fading ink, fire, flood, burst water pipes, mold, mildew, rodent damage, or any of the other things that easily destroy paper.

As soon as you start using a cell phone camera regularly to digitize documents, you will run into a document management issue: how do you quickly and easily find the one document you seek from the thousands you have stored?

In fact, there are dozens of document management programs to choose from for Windows, Macintosh, Android, iOS, Linux, and probably some other operating systems. Prices vary from free to thousands of dollars for some of the document management programs aimed for corporate use. It is impossible to define any one product as “the best one” for all genealogists. However, once you have your needs defined, you typically can narrow the choices to a handful.

My favorite candidate for the title of “the best document management program for you” is **CamScanner**. It uses the camera in your Android, iPhone, iPod Touch, or iPad device to digitize any documents you wish, to save them securely in your desktop or laptop computer or in the cloud, and to catalog and quickly retrieve any document when needed. It is available in two versions: a free or low-priced Basic Account that has some limitations or a full-featured Premium Account that costs $4.99 per month or $49.99 per year if you pay for twelve months in advance. In addition, the Premium Account will also automatically upload copies of your scanned documents to Box, Google Drive, Dropbox, or Evernote.

The Basic Account serves as a great introduction to the product. It is available as a free app, or you can pay $1.99 to remove ads and watermarks, edit OCR results on a page, and increase cloud storage space. As of this writing that app is on sale for $.99. I would suggest you always start with the free version, then purchase the paid version if you decide you like CamScanner; you can then move up to the Premium Account if you want the extra features and plan to continue with it. I did just that and have been using the Premium Account of CamScanner now for more than a year. I am quite satisfied with it.

You download and install CamScanner Free in the same manner as most all other programs for iPhone, iPad, or Android products: visit the iPhone/iPad App Store or visit Google Play. Installation is free and simple. Once installed, tap the camera icon and your camera will open, ready to snap a picture of a document.

Make sure you have decent lighting. Sunlight is best, so place the document near a window if possible. If not, the CamScanner software will use the built-in flash in your device whenever it needs to make a scanned image of something in reduced lighting. However, sunlight always produces the best results.

**NOTE:** Never use the flash when at a library or archive before checking with the folks managing the place. Some libraries and archives do not allow the use of flash photography. A very few do not even allow the use of cameras.

After the photo is taken, you can align the image to the borders of your document. The CamScanner does a rather good job of automatically finding the edges of the document and making the needed adjustments. However, it isn’t perfect. Some documents may need a bit of manual adjusting. Even so, this is still much better than just snapping pictures with the cell phone’s camera alone, without extra software to enhance the results.

One feature not found in some competitive document imaging applications is CamScanner’s lighting adjustment option after cropping. While some apps offer this, few work well. In every test that I made with CamScanner, the final image always looked great as long as there was sufficient light available when I snapped the image and made sure the camera was not being moved at the time..

Once captured, any document can be printed directly through AirPrint, sent via Fax, sent via e-mail, or saved internally as a PDF file. Of course, all files can be copied to your desktop or laptop computer at a later time either by using iTunes on iPhones and iPads or by using the USB cable on Android devices. I find it easiest to simply email the document to myself, a function already built into CamScanner. There is no need to exit the program, launch the mail app, and then poke around looking for the file to send. CamScanner will do all that for you easily from within the program.

When you sign up for a CamScanner account and install the software into your handheld device, you immediately receive 200 megabytes of file storage space for free. You can then access all the documents stored in the cloud anytime on any devices, wherever you are.

Free users only receive 200 megabytes of storage space in the cloud, enough for perhaps 100 documents or so. Buying the $1.99 app gains you another 200 megabytes. Premium users receive 10 gigabytes of file space. If you need more than 10 gigabytes, you probably need a more robust (and expensive) document management solution than CamScanner!

Once again, I suggest that you use the free version or low-priced app for a while, but only to evaluate the software. If you like CamScanner and decide to use it often, then you can upgrade to the Premium version.

You can see a side-by-side comparison of the free versus the Pro version at[https://www.camscanner.net/user/upgrade](https://www.camscanner.net/user/upgrade%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

CamScanner does more than simply take pictures, it also allows you to manage your documents:

* Access, edit and manage documents anytime and anywhere as you need. Want to quickly find some docs? CamScanner enables quick search in seconds.
* Add notes to any documents
* Add tags to any document for easy search
* Multiple viewing modes: list view & thumbnail view
* Copy and move documents to other locations
* Easily search for any document by OCR tech
* Merge documents’ content
* Set passwords for important documents
* Backup and restore documents to/from an SD card (on Android devices)

You can also easily share document scans in PDF or JPEG with collaborators via email, or you can save them in the cloud, fax, and print out those documents

* Fax scans via network
* Send PDF files via email
* Print files wirelessly with Google Cloud Print
* Upload files to almost any of the cloud storage services

The biggest drawback that I see with CamScanner is that it is a document management program for use on handheld devices only. If you have a mix of images with some stored in a desktop computer, others stored in a laptop, and still more stored in a handheld device, you will want to use some method of organizing things besides just using CamScanner alone. In my case, I send all scanned documents to my desktop or laptop computers, then store them in the computer, in my local backups, in Evernote, and in at least two different file storage services in the cloud. I have plenty of copies! I am not concerned with losing a document.

I doubt if CamScanner will ever replace a good desktop scanner. It cannot compete with Scansnap or any of the other scanners designed to scan paper when at home. Then again, CamScanner doesn’t have the price of a desktop scanning package either. You also probably won’t be carrying the Scansnap or any other desktop scanner when shopping at Ikea! In contrast, most people keep a cell phone camera with them at most all times.

I find CamScanner to be an excellent solution for genealogy purposes and for myriad other uses. You can learn more about the CamScanner Basic and CamScanner Premium at [https://www.camscanner.net](https://www.camscanner.net/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). The software can be found on the iPad and iPhone app stores as well as on Google’s Play Store.

**2 Comments to '(+) Turn any Smartphone into a Scanner and Document Management System with OCR Capabilities'**

[**Carmel**](http://librarycurrants.blogspot.com/)
January 17, 2015

I’ve been using CamScanner for a couple of years and find it very useful. Recently I have discovered the new Scannable app that does a great job and integrates with Evernote, unfortunately at this stage only iOS.

**Alice Gedge**
January 17, 2015

Dick,
I took your advice and purchased a Belkin Stage and am very happy with the results. I ended up using just the camera on the iPad because I couldn’t get the remote shutter to work with CamScanner. When I click on the remote, I just see a Volume icon, but it doesn’t click the camera. Do you have any suggestions?

When I just use the camera, I get the Stage in the picture as well.