

## Are You Your Own Brick Wall?

---

Many genealogists get so focused on their own research line, their own family, or their own family traditions that they often ignore or sidestep essential research clues and resources that may help break their brick walls. During this class, we will discuss some of the common mistakes made by genealogists of all skill levels and introduce ways to overcome these problems.

### THE BASICS

---

#### Family Stories

Most people begin their genealogy by inheriting stories. These stories are full of interesting tidbits and connections to historical people and events. Unfortunately, most of these stories are untrue (though some stories do have an element of truth). When you research, treat these stories as you would any other source. Look for discrepancies and compare the pieces of the story with the records you find. Try to disprove them instead of trying to prove them. If you find no evidence that they are true, compile a proof summary listing your evidence.

#### The Internet

In a digital age, people rely on the internet to learn information, including information about their ancestors. But the internet doesn't have everything. What's online is actually just a small percentage of the records of genealogical value available throughout the world. Make sure you get off the computer, check out the resources of the Family History Library (which are also available at your local FamilySearch Center), and check out what can be found in your local library and the libraries, and societies local to your ancestors. The internet is just the beginning.

#### Using Microfilm

For some people, microfilm seems outdated and unnecessary. For others, the constant scrolling of microfilm tends to make them sick. Either way, they've given up on using microfilm as part of their genealogical research. But so many resources are available on microfilm. Original records are usually only available onsite or on microfilm.

FamilySearch alone has more than two million rolls of microfilm. Some repositories no longer let you view original records if they have a microfilm copy. Though the goal for some repositories is to digitize everything, that day is a long way off. Make sure you are not avoiding microfilm when you research. If you have problems reading the microfilm or get dizzy when you scroll, find a friend to help you out. Microfilm is well worth the effort.

#### Genealogy Costs Money

Some people try to avoid spending money when they do genealogy research. Though many records are available online or are free at the Family History Library, many records are still only available onsite. Ordering copies of these records will cost money. For example, to order a death certificate in the United States will usually cost between eleven and seventeen dollars. But a death certificate often gives details about a person's birth and parents. Other onsite records have the potential to answer many research questions. As you do your research, identify the records you need that aren't available for free and save up to order copies. Or make friends with researchers in other localities so you can trade record lookups. Genealogy, like other hobbies, costs money.

### THE PROCESS

---

#### Direct Ancestors Only

Many people research only their direct line, their parents, their grandparents, and their great grandparents. But researching only the direct line creates a single tenuous thread between generations. Once these people get back far enough, a single thread connecting generations may mean they are headed down the wrong family line. Instead, research each family as a complete and independent unit. Start at the end of each person's life and work backwards. Research each child until their death. After all, a child's death records might give you clues about his or her mother's maiden name or father's place of birth.

Researching the entire family provides a solid foundation of evidence between generations.

### **The Wrong Generation**

Many people are researching the wrong generation. They have run backwards through their family and settled on the last generation in their family line. But they might not have built a strong enough foundation researching later generations first. This leads to unfocused, scattered research on possible relatives and half connections. The last known generation is usually the wrong place to start. Build solid generational links. Make sure you have enough information including specific locations and dates for a generation before you begin researching. If this is your first time researching, the last generation might also be the hardest. Either way, move down a generation or two (or three) until you find a family whose information you are more confident in and start your research with that family. Working from the known to the unknown will make you a better researcher and give you stronger conclusions.

### **Spelling Variations**

Some people only accept records for their ancestors if the surname of the ancestor is spelled as it is today. But spelling is a modern construct. In the past, some people spelled their name differently on different documents. Or they had their name spelled differently by the enumerator, government official, or ship's captain who wrote it down. Many of our ancestors were illiterate and had no idea how to even write let alone spell their name. As you search for your family, be open to spelling variations. Also watch for nicknames, initials, maiden names, the foreign equivalent of an English surname (and vice versa), and longer or shorter variations of the same name. When you find a family you think is yours, the names and ages of family members, occupations, and other details will let you know you have found the right family. Allowing for spelling variations will make finding your ancestors just a little bit easier.

### **Research Logs**

Genealogy is so fun and so exciting that many people forget to record their sources as they search them. Keeping a research log, or a listing of each source you look at and what you find, is one of the

best things you can do as a serious researcher. Research Logs let you plan your research, identify what you find and where you found it, sort through and keep track of your documents, and prevents you from looking at the same source more than once (especially when it doesn't mention your family). When life happens and you take a break from genealogy, a good research log can help you pick up right where you left off. If you aren't keeping research logs, start today. It will make a difference to your focus and your ability to organize your research.

---

## **THE RECORDS**

### **Using only Derivatives**

Some people build their conclusions on derivative sources. A derivative is a copy or an analysis of an original record. Published family histories, online trees, databases, abstracts, and indexes are all derivatives. Derivatives may be incomplete or contain errors. Though locating derivatives is a good way to begin your research, always locate a copy of the original records. Track down original sources mentioned in compiled family histories. View original images when searching an online database. Locate an original copy of a record abstracted in a published work. Using the original gives your work and conclusions more credibility and may provide clues that will help answer your research question.

### **Other Record Types**

People often start doing genealogy by locating records with the most genealogically value and that are easiest to find. In the United States, this includes vital records and census records. But vital and census are just the beginning of a good search. These record types are only available for the last few hundred years. In order to really find your ancestors in the records, you will need to learn about and make use of a variety of different types of records.

---

## **THE STRATEGIES**

### **The Meaning of Everything**

For some people, finding 'everything' about their ancestor means finding a birth date/place, a marriage date/place, and a death date/place. But

this is just the beginning. When doing research, make sure to find everything. Everything includes:

- Every record – vital, census, land, probate, court, military, immigration, naturalization, newspapers, directories, voter registrations, tax, published histories, funeral home records, sexton records, family bibles, family letters, pictures, maps & gazetteers, church records, manuscript collections, government records, and much more; use the topics listed on the state and country pages of the FamilySearch Research Wiki as a checklist
- Every locality and every jurisdiction – every town, parish, county, province, state, and from the national or federal government for every locality; also collect records for all neighboring localities and their jurisdictions
- Every repository – town or city government, the town or county libraries, local historical societies, county courthouses, county archives, county libraries, regional libraries or archives, state libraries, state historical societies, university libraries, specialty libraries, and the national archives

### **Genealogy and History**

Many people forget the role historical events played in the lives of their ancestors. What we call history our ancestors called current events.

Remember that history defined the decisions made by your ancestors (e.g. your ancestors followed existing roads and trails when migrating). History dictated the creation of records (e.g. your ancestors are named on census records because the U.S. Constitution mandated a decennial enumeration). History can tell you, based on borders, where records of your ancestors' lives can be found. Also watch for historical inaccuracies in published family histories or family pedigrees. Individuals usually aren't born in area before the first settlers arrived.

### **Researching the Community**

People often get so focused on the lives of their ancestors that they forget to notice their ancestor's community. Every person is part of a community. For your ancestors, this community included family, associates, and neighbors and appeared in their records as witnesses, neighbors, guardians,

sureties, executors. Research the entire community your ancestor lived in. You might find clues to your ancestor's life, his or her parents, or even his or her place of origin. Researching the whole community might also help you identify possible conflicts, such as two people with the same name in the same locality. Research the entire community and see what you find.

## **THE REVIEW**

---

### **Collecting vs. Analyzing**

In order to solve a research problem, people often collect records for years, searching out and locating every document naming their ancestor. Despite the time spent collecting, these same people sometimes fail to spend time reading through, analyzing, and understanding what each of their collected documents can tell them. Part of the research process requires that you analyze each record you find, collate the evidence, and come to a sound conclusion. As you research, make sure to spend time reading through and discovering what each document has to tell you. Create tables, timelines, abstracts, and other documents to help sort through all of the evidence. Understanding what evidence each document contains and how that evidence works together can help you answer your research question.

### **The Stories We Tell**

As they research, many people construct stories about their ancestors. They assign attributes to their ancestors: rich, poor, kind, mean, religious, drunk, even outlaw. They then use these stories, these attributes, to evaluate each new piece of evidence as well as the record types they have not yet searched. They then discard these ideas or records because they don't fit their constructed story. These stories are often incorrect or incomplete. Don't let the stories you tell about your ancestors prevent you from looking at every record type and evaluating every piece of evidence. Review these assumptions. What is your source? Why have you assigned these attributes to your ancestor? Don't limit your research because you don't think your ancestor will be listed in a record type or the evidence doesn't support your previous conclusions. Really consider every

possibility and every record before coming to a conclusion.

### **Write a Sound Conclusion**

Many people compile records, evaluate evidence, and make conclusions but fail to write down those conclusions. As you complete your research and answer your research objectives, write a proof summary or research report. Use the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) as a guide to evaluate your conclusion. A sound conclusion includes:

- A reasonably exhaustive search
- Complete and accurate source citations
- Analysis and correlation of the collected information
- Resolution of any conflicting evidence
- A soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion

In your research report, include information about your research objective, the sources you looked at (with complete source citations). Include suggestions for further research. You may even want to attach copies of your research log, timeline, and documents to make later evaluation easier. Once you come to a sound conclusion and write out that conclusion, you will be ready to move on to the next research question.

## **GETTING HELP**

---

### **“I didn’t bring it with me”**

Many people ask for help answering their research objectives without bringing any of their previous research with them (often because they didn’t know they were going to be in a position to ask for help). Without specific details about the family and the research that has already been completed, it can be hard to determine what research will be most helpful. Find a way to carry your research with you no matter where you go. Upload research logs and timelines to cloud storage, copy your files to a flash drive, build a website for your research and pedigree chart, or bring notes. You never know when the opportunity to do onsite research might arise. Make sure you are ready to take advantage of those situations.

### **Following Through**

People often ask for help from a friend, an online forum, or a professional genealogist when they hit a brick wall. But sometimes they fail to follow through on the ideas and suggestions given by the person whom they asked for help. When you ask for help, write down their research suggestions and ideas. Then, try them out and follow through. It’s possible that their perspective might just be what you needed to break your brick wall.

### **The Genealogy Community**

Some people tend to get so lost in their own research that they don’t keep up with the exciting changes happening in the world of genealogy. Keeping up with the genealogy community will let you learn about new records, new databases, and can also teach you about records and localities with which you have no experience. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Read periodicals (ask, ‘how did they solve their problem,’ ‘what resources did they use?’), books, the Research Wiki on FamilySearch, Blogs
- Attend Classes and Conferences
- Join Facebook, Skype, or Google+ Research Communities
- Post to Forums
- Join local Genealogy Societies (local to you and your ancestors)
- Index for FamilySearch

## **CONCLUSION**

---

It can be easy to get so focused on researching your family in the records that you are comfortable using that you might be preventing yourself from tracking down your ancestors. Make sure to be open to new ideas, suggestions, databases, classes, and more.

© May 2014 by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this document may be reprinted, posted online, or reproduced in any form for any purpose without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Send all requests for such permission to:

Copyrights and Permissions Coordinator  
Family and Church History Department  
50 East North Temple Street  
Salt Lake City, UT 84150-3400  
USA