

## BACK-DOOR RESEARCH BREAKS THROUGH BRICK WALLS

by STEPHEN KENT EHAT<sup>1</sup>

*You have hit a brick wall. What do you do? You perform research on others, such as neighbors and those named in records in reasonably close proximity to the names of your relatives. This type of research helps you break through brick walls. Learn how to do it. Be amazed!*

### OVERVIEW

If you have searched all available records for a person—vital records, family bibles, state and federal census records, land and property records, declarations of intention and other naturalization records, parish and other church records, biographies, passenger lists and ship manifests, court records, tax records, probate records, military records, county histories, oral histories, letters, police records, business records, cemetery records, newspapers, voting registers, school records—and have performed exhaustive research on all of the Internet Web sites you can find and contacted as many living researchers as you can find to learn as much as possible about that person and have now reached a “dead end,” you now should apply the “back-door approach.” This entails, in essence, conducting a more detailed analysis of the records you already have discovered. It amounts to performing a more thorough evaluation of the information you already know and gleaning hints from documents you may not have studied as well as you could.



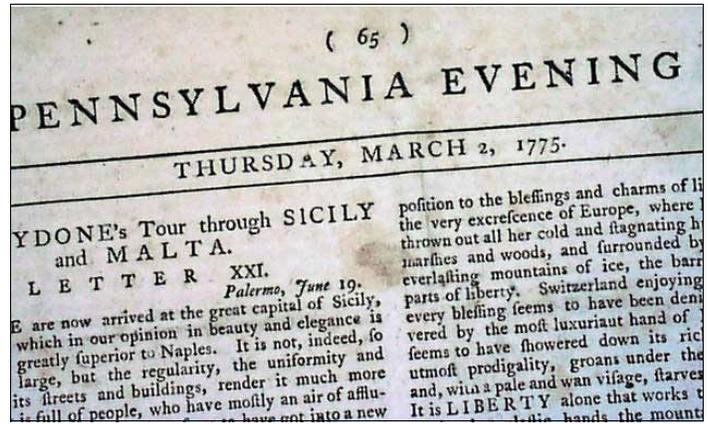
Suppose, for example, that it has been mentioned in **your family** only that your ancestor was “from Germany” (or “from Delaware”) and that **your family** knew only that regarding the earliest place of origin of your ancestor. If you were to find out through the “back-door approach,” for example, that some **other living descendant** of your ancestor’s cousin—or a deceased descendant of your ancestor’s nearby neighbor of the same surname—knew that his or her ancestor was “from Neuburg an der Donau” (a town in Germany) or “from Laurel” (a town in Delaware), you would want to seek out the name of your ancestor in the records of that town or its county, having assumed, by the “back-door approach,” that your ancestor came from the same place as the cousin or neighbor. Similarly, therefore, imagine the delight you would experience if you were to find that an 1880 **history** write-up or an 1860 **census** entry or an 1810 **property record** for your ancestor’s cousin (or of a nearby neighbor of the same surname) gave some hint that he or she earlier had lived in the town of “X” just after arriving in the United States (or just after leaving Delaware); you would, by the “back-door approach” see if your ancestor or if any possible relatives of your ancestor may also have lived at that place at that time. If you found others (and found better records on them than you have on your ancestor), you would say that the “back-door approach” was perhaps bearing fruit. And if some descendant of your great grand uncle had a copy of an 1888 obituary that mentioned the town of origin or the names of the parents, you of course would be delighted.

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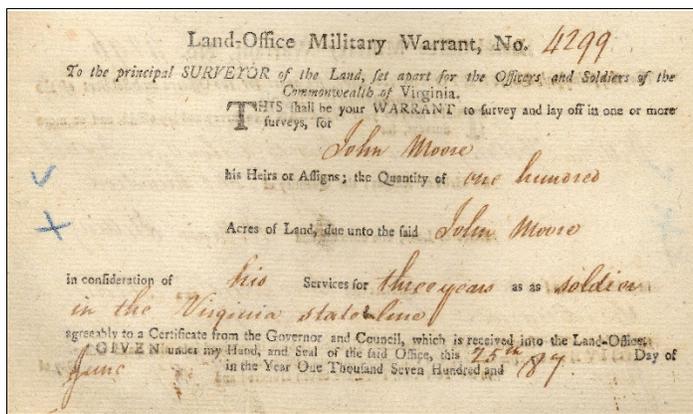
## EXAMPLES OF THE “BACK-DOOR” APPROACH

**Newspapers**—With the advent of the “digitized newspaper,” we now should be scouring the text of newspapers as never before. In prior years you have learned of an ancestor’s death date and gone to the newspaper(s) published at the place of death, looking for an obituary. Often helpful, sometimes the obituary offers only meager—or perhaps no—helpful information. The same may be true of marriage or birth notices you have found (or not found) in newspapers. Not any more. Your access to newspapers (except for famous people in your ancestry) pretty much has previously been constrained both by your own shortage of time (you normally cannot devote the time to read all available issues of a town’s newspapers for the years or decades your ancestor lived in a place, hoping to find a mention or two of your ancestor) and by the few dates you have to work with (a death date, a marriage date, a birth date). But now, with digitization, you can do a roughly comprehensive, global search for a person’s name (or for other identifying information about a person) in the scanned, full-text versions of newspapers and often come up with helpful newspaper entries that otherwise you may never have found.



For example, research about “Sophia Christ” reveals she was born in “Germany” (1850, 1870, and 1880 U.S. Federal Census reports); that specifically she was born in “Hannover” province (1860 U.S. Federal Census report); that she was born on 6 Jan 1820 (extrapolation from 29 July 1898 death and 31 July 1898 burial information, including obituary, stating her age at the time of death was 78 years, 6 months, and 23 days—which is consistent with the census records and with an 1889 Petition for Probate of Will); that her soon-to-be husband and his family came to America through Baltimore in October of 1839; that her husband’s father’s family was enumerated in New Derry, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania in the 1840 U.S. Federal Census; that her husband’s married brother moved from New Derry, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania to Ft. Madison, Lee County, Iowa, in October of 1843; that her first child was born in the state of Iowa in 1844; that she cannot be located in any Pennsylvania or Iowa record; and that her second through fourth children were born in 1845-1853 in Iowa County, Wisconsin. Searches for references to her marriage and for pre-1844 records mentioning her have been unsuccessful. Her first child (a son) was named after her husband and her second child (a daughter) was named “Johanna Wilhelmina,” hinting that her father (who may or may not have come to America) may have been named “Johann Wilhelm.” She had a strong German accent (according to an early-20th-century letter that mentions her), from which it is surmised she came to America after infancy. These searches have included, among other things, research in records of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania; Lee County, Iowa; and Iowa County, Wisconsin, as well as in records of all counties surrounding those three counties and in records of all counties bordering on both sides of the Ohio River and Mississippi River (on which her husband’s brother’s family traveled from Pennsylvania to Iowa, according to a Lee County historical source—which travel also may possibly have involved her husband and maybe even her, though there is no mention of it). The result of research in all these other records? Nothing.

What is a sample “backdoor approach” to this research task in which newspapers come in handy? Sophia came to California between 1860 and 1870. Even though no pre-1844, pre-Wisconsin record has been found concerning her, why not check the digital versions of the newspapers of El Dorado County,



California? Traditional research in the Mountain Democrat newspaper years ago revealed an 1870 obituary for the husband and the 1898 obituary for Sophia, as well as marriage notices for one of the four children. Performing such a search in the now-digitized versions reveals that the 25 January 1896 issue of the Mountain Democrat, col. 2, supplies a 15 January 1896 report from El Dorado which states that Sophia “has been making a visit to her friends the Kramp’s, of Diamond Springs.” In col. 3 of that same issue a 16 January 1896

report from Diamond Springs states that “Mr. A. L. Kramp returned Sunday [12 January 1896] from a pleasant visit to relatives and friends at St. Louis, Mo.” While the word “friend” is usually not synonymous with “cousin” or “relative,” it is worth a try to search St. Louis, Missouri records for any references to the Kramp family. Such searches show that the Kramp family was from Linter in Hessen-Nassau province—near (but not in) Hannover province. Had they been from Hannover province, research in the records of the Kramp town-of-origin in that Province would have been important to do. But one woman who married a Kramp in St. Louis did come from Hannover (Karoline Vogt, who married Frederick Krampe). Why not do research on her? Perhaps she was Sophia’s relative. It’s worth a look.

**Tax Records**—Tax records, like census records, sometimes list names of taxpayers in a way that reflects the geographical proximity of property owners (such as those records created by the tax assessor as he travels from home to home or from farm to farm). The same may be said, of course, of **Land and Property Records**. One “back-door” approach that might be helpful with these records is to simply assume, for research purposes, that a person listed in the tax record in proximity to the name of your ancestor just might be a neighbor and, therefore, perhaps a relative or at least someone who just might have come to the present residence place from the same place your ancestor might have come. Doing research on that other person just might prove fruitful to your search for information on your ancestor. Often we will search such records and take note of another person who shares the surname of the person we are researching; that is one aspect of the “back-door” approach. But searching those whose names (whatever the names are) appear in the record next to or near the name of our ancestor sometimes can lead to the same helpful results.

**Family Bibles**—Because family bibles often recorded names and vital dates (births, marriages, and deaths), often we limit our interest in those records to the information about those who are listed whose names we can readily identify as relatives, ignoring those we cannot identify. Perhaps we should look again, make an effort to identify the ones we do not recognize, and see if research about those persons possibly leads to information helpful to our own research.

**Parish and Other Church Records**—Godparents often, but not always, may be relatives of the godchild and thus if research on the parents named in a christening record does not lead to the information you desire, perhaps research on the ancestry and origin of the godparents will. The same is generally true of witnesses at a wedding; often, but not always, marriage witnesses may be relatives, friends, or colleagues. If research on the husband or wife leads nowhere, do not overlook the “back door” approach of seeking out further information about the witnesses named in a marriage record; sometimes a witness may be a brother-in-law or cousin or a former neighbor from the same town of origin as the wife or husband.

**Military Records**—Soldiers listed in regiment lists and muster rolls presumably fought together in the same group. But members of the group most often were recruited together at the same location as at least a few of the other members of the group. If research on your ancestor does not produce helpful results, do not overlook the possibility that someone else who fought side-by-side with your ancestor (and whose name may appear in the list of soldiers next to the name of your ancestor) may, in fact, either be related or be a former neighbor. Those who apply for pensions after a war and who live near one another when they apply for their pensions may possibly have acquired the lands they are living on by means of land grants from the government and thus their applications made in the same location might hint at military service together.

**Declarations of Intention and Other Naturalization Records**—While most all declarations of intention do not include the names of other person (witnesses or the like), the fact that many such records are now indexed leads to the possibility that if your ancestor's declaration does not mention a specific place of origin, that of another person who applied for citizenship in roughly the same location might lead to such information (or at least that research on that other person might bear fruit if research on your own ancestor does not).

**Biographies**—Often overlooked is the fact that published biographies usually mention numerous persons other than the main subject of the biography. This is true both of single-person biographies and also of biographical sketches that appear in **county histories**. If, for example, a county history reports five paragraphs of information about John Doe—someone not on your pedigree—you still might possibly glean helpful information about your ancestry if the biography about John Doe also, for example, mentions that John Doe's mother had a surname that does appear in your lineage. If the biography of John Doe shows he lived in the same place where your ancestor lived, perhaps a “dead end” on your particular ancestral line may not exist on that family's ancestral line; in other words, research on that other person's line might lead around the “brick wall” that you otherwise have run up against in research on your own line.

**Probate Records**—For research purposes, if you have hit a “dead end” and have someone's probate record, it should not hurt to attempt genealogical research on all persons mentioned in a probate record, even on those mentioned in the record whose names make it appear they are not related. The same may be true of those mentioned in **wills**. Simply assume, for a research hypothesis, that anyone mentioned in a will or probate record just might be related (or be a close friend who possibly shares a geographical origin common with your ancestor) and perform research on that other person.

**Cemetery Records**—Though differing surnames of persons buried adjacent or near to one another might otherwise signal they are not related, it is often the case that relatives and close relatives purchased or acquired burial plots near one another. Do not overlook the fact that the proximity of plots just possibly might hint at blood or marriage relationship. This might especially be true in smaller cemeteries. Do not limit your use of cemetery and burial records to those who share the surname of interest; look, too, at the plots and gravestones of those buried to the side of your ancestor of interest.



In short, remember that people often moved from place to place, not only with close relations but also with cousins, neighbors, and former neighbors. Do someone else's research and often you end up doing your own. “Immigrants often traveled as groups and settled together in the new country [or state or county]. Others joined friends or relatives already there. Finding a neighbor's place of origin may reveal your ancestor's as well.” *Tracing Immigrant Origins* (©1998, 2001 by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.), p. 8.

