

But She Died in Upstate New York in the 1850s: How Can I Identify Her Parents?

David Ouimette, CG

10825 North Highland Circle, Highland, UT 84003-9021

ouimetteds@familysearch.org

*Proving family relationships –
the essence of genealogical research –
may seem daunting when the evidence is sparse.
This presentation shows how to solve a difficult
family history problem by applying sound
research principles and practices.*

Common Research Challenges

- *Frontier research*
 - **Lack of vital records.** The lack of a national church and a national system of civil registration introduces challenges in U.S. family history research. State governments took decades to create and effectively enforce the registration of births, marriages, and deaths.
 - **Lack of church records.** Protestant and Catholic churches typically appeared years after pioneers of each faith settled an area, with additional years passing before parish registers were consistently kept and preserved. This paucity of early records complicates genealogical research in frontier communities.
 - **Minimal family details in the earliest surviving records.** New local governments struggled to create and maintain the types of records that the governments of New England had been keeping for decades or centuries previously. The first few decades of a new settlement generally kept scantier records than their more well-established counterparts to the east.
- *Researching a female ancestor who died young*
 - **Only a handful of records.** The shorter a person's lifespan, the fewer records exist documenting the individual. A young woman rarely bought or sold property, paid taxes, or did anything that would leave a financial record, as she would be under the care of her father or husband for those matters.
 - **Maiden name.** Tracing a married woman of unknown parentage is particularly difficult in the United States when the maiden name of the woman is unknown. When she dies young and her husband remarries, she may be essentially forgotten in written records.

- *Researching migrant families*
 - **Unknown origins.** Unknown origins hide the birth and marriage records of immigrants, restricting research solely to documents created after immigration.
 - **The poor left few records.** Poor tenant farmers had little money for property, taxes, tombstones, or probate. Consequently, they may have left a meager paper trail, without deeds, mortgages, wills, administrations, obituaries, or tax records.
 - **Problems spelling names.** Immigrant ancestors had foreign names that were often spelled poorly, anglicized, or otherwise altered, thus obscuring their presence in historical records.

- *Records difficult to access*
 - **Local access only.** A reasonable exhaustive search often includes records only available locally. Accessing local records may require onsite visits or the services of local researchers. Either approach may involve significant expense.
 - **Hidden records.** Some of the best evidence lurks in attics, barns, and the memory of locals. Finding the records and people takes correspondence, time, patience, and a degree of serendipity. Even when the records exist in an archive they might be un-cataloged, in offsite storage, or simply unavailable to researchers.
 - **Inadequate indexes.** Newspapers, diaries, estate papers, private ledgers, and many other records lack basic indexes. Even major record types such as deeds, wills, births, marriages, and deaths may have only principle-name indexes.

- *Short-sighted research approaches*
 - **Superficial name searching.** Quick searches of indexes and focusing on the best matches encourages hasty conclusions without adequate analysis and correlation of the collected information.
 - **Focusing on one ancestor.** Exclusive focus on the end-of-line ancestor usually fails to extend the line. For that matter, focusing on ancestral research may fail if inadequate descendant research is ignored. A broader research plan substantially increases the likelihood of success.
 - **Endless searching for the perfect record.** No single document holds the undisputed answer. Multiple records are a requirement for credible research leading to reliable conclusions.
 - **Expecting direct evidence.** Many challenging research problems cannot be solved with direct evidence alone. Better to plan for an indirect-evidence proof rather than stay entrenched in a direct-evidence mindset.

Sound Research Principles and Practices

- *Expand the breadth and depth of your research*
 - **Family research.** The search for an individual is the search for a family. Work the collateral lines, researching sibling and their descendants rather than simply focusing on your ancestor exclusively.
 - **Descendant research.** To trace ancestors, first trace descendants. Far too many family historians attempt to identify the parents of a poorly researched end-of-line ancestor. The key often lies with descendant research. Study the immediate

family and trace a generation or two of descendants. The wealth of information learned from this preliminary research will likely fill in many biographical details previously unknown about the end-of-line ancestor, providing a solid foundation for ancestral research.

- **Neighbor research.** If scoping the research to include the immediate and extended family fails to solve the problem, expand the research scope to include the neighbors. Research the closest friends, associates, and neighbors as if they were your own ancestors. People married neighbors – seek for clues next door.
 - **Creativity with names.** Learn how your ancestors' given names and family names were recorded in original records and transcribed in original and modern indexes. Learn local naming practices – dit names, farm names, dual surnames, patronymics, translated names, etc. – so that you can readily find your ancestors online and in original records.
 - **Neighboring localities.** Expand the scope of the research to include neighboring towns, counties, and states as needed.
 - **Work the records deeply.** Work the original records and available finding aids thoroughly. Transcribe records fully, reading and rereading the records for clarity. Study the laws or canons governing the creation of records, enhancing your understanding of why the records were kept and how they should be interpreted. Use indexes where available, but go beyond the indexes and search the records directly when needed.
- *Elements of the Genealogical Proof Standard*
 - **“A reasonably exhaustive search.”** Examine a variety of independently created records, including those most likely to help answer the research question.
 - **“Complete and accurate source citations.”** Document the paper trail for yourself and others who may build upon your research.
 - **“Analysis and correlation of the collected information.”** Thoroughly transcribe and interpret the records, comparing information derived from multiple sources.
 - **“Resolution of any conflicting evidence.”** Offer satisfactory explanations for incongruities encountered in the research.
 - **“A soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.”** Document your findings and conclusions in writing, making the results of your research clear for yourself and others.
 - *Develop a firm foundation*
 - **Document the historical setting.** Study the local history, local family histories, local customs, naming practices, laws governing record creation, and historical paleography. Work with members of the local genealogical and historical societies to understand more of the nuances and background necessary to properly approach your research problem.
 - **Document family relationships.** Use the Genealogical Proof Standard to complete the basic family history of the immediate and extended family, including birth, marriage, death, and relationship details. A clear understanding of all close family relationships forms a solid foundation for any proof case.

- **Employ various research methodologies.** Focus on descendant research, expanding the geographic scope as needed. Take into account the various name mutations likely to occur in each locality and record. Rely upon the strength of a family handprint as indirect evidence. Correlate evidence from multiple sources.
- *Census methodology*
 - **View the census with X-ray vision.** Look beyond the immediate family to the dozen families preceding and following your ancestor. Close neighbors and associates formed the family's social circles. The children typically married within these small circles of acquaintances. Best to anticipate this early on.
 - **Get to know the neighbors.** As you find the need to increase the scope of your research beyond the family, document the basic family history of the closest neighbors, seeking for relationships with your ancestral family.
 - **Visit the local cemetery.** Seek out tombstone inscriptions locally and online to build additional family groups for comparison with censuses.
 - **Scrutinize and correlate local sources.** Correlate information gleaned from censuses with your findings from local cemeteries, church records, vital records, tax lists, and other local records.

Case Studies and Other Articles to Review

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