Genealogy Research Methods

Genealogy research is not easy despite how some television commercials portray it. No matter who you are researching, everyone will face challenges along the way. Learning what Genealogical Proof Standard is as well as how to use it, will inevitably improve genealogical research skills.

**What is the main goal of genealogy?**
The main goal is often to discover the stories of our ancestors. We want the narrative version of our history. In order to build that narrative we need to discover the relationships and identities of those we are studying. The ULTIMATE goal of genealogical study is to PROVE our conclusions about these relationships and identities. We can prove the identities and relationships of ancestors by utilizing strong and reliable EVIDENCE.

**The Five Steps of Genealogical Proof Standard**
1. Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search.
2. Produce complete and accurate source citations.
3. Complete an analysis and correlation of sources, information, and evidence.
4. Resolve any conflicting or contradictory evidence.
5. Produce a written conclusion based on strong, available evidence.

**The Research Process**

Start with a research question about a particular person, relationship, or event. By narrowing the focus of your search it allows you to consider what sources might be the most helpful in answering that question.

After developing your question, it is time to gather evidence from the sources you decided would be most relevant to your research question. Because you spent time developing a narrow focus with your question your time will be used VERY efficiently.

Next, you must reason from the evidence by analyzing and correlating what you have found and resolving any inconsistencies or conflicts you uncover. Resolving conflicting evidence isn't just a matter of picking the answer with the most documents supporting it, but rather analyzing the findings in order to determine which answer is most likely to be true.

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Once any of these inconsistencies and conflicts are resolved, what should remain is a conclusion supported by evidence.

BUT you are not done. Once you have reached the conclusion you must still explain your conclusion in writing and include the sources. This allows you--and others--to build on the work you have done, confident in the knowledge that further research has a firm and reliable foundation.

**Sources, Information, and Evidence**

When analyzing the results of your research for reliability and validity, you must look at what you've gathered on three levels.

First--The Quality of the Source (What type of record, document, book, website, certificate, wills, or “container” of information have you consulted?)

- Is this an ORIGINAL RECORD? An original record is one that is created at the time of the event, i.e. a death certificate, birth certificate, or marriage certificate.
- Is this a DERIVATIVE RECORD? A derivative record is created from other records, i.e. a transcribed index to wills and deeds.
- Or is this an AUTHORED NARRATIVE? An authored narrative is created from many other sources, i.e. a family history published in 1960 compiled and edited by your great-great aunt.

Original records are technically the most reliable (though not guaranteed) to be free from error.

Second--The Quality of the Information (On what level did the informant participate in an event or have knowledge of an event?)

- Is this PRIMARY INFORMATION? Primary Information is reported by an eyewitness to the event, i.e. a diary or doctor's signature on a death certificate.
- Is this SECONDARY INFORMATION? Secondary information is reported by someone who learned it from someone else, i.e. a published genealogy, obituary, or biographies.
- Is this UNDETERMINED INFORMATION? Undetermined information is information that cannot be attributed to a supplier; i.e. census information prior to 1940

Primary evidence is considered the most reliable by researchers (though not guaranteed) to be free from error.

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Third--The Quality of the Evidence (How well does the information answer or helps to answer the research question?)

- Is it DIRECT EVIDENCE? Direct evidence provides an answer to the question; i.e. date of death on a death certificate.
- Is it INDIRECT EVIDENCE? Indirect evidence only provides an answer to a research question when combined with other evidence; i.e. the date of birth on a death certificate.
- Or is it NEGATIVE EVIDENCE? Negative evidence answers a research question by its absence; i.e. a member of a household “missing” from a census record.

Any of these types of evidence will give you an accurate and reliable answer to your research question.

**Reasonably Exhaustive Research**

As a researcher you may often wonder “how much is enough” to answer your research question. In *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, Thomas W. Jones offers six criteria to help you judge whether your research has been reasonably exhaustive:

1. At least two independently created evidence items in agreement.
2. All sources competent genealogists would examine.
3. Some primary information.
4. Some original records.
5. Relevant authored works, derivative works, and secondary information replaced by findable corresponding originals and primary information.
6. All fniable sources that relevant sources and indexes suggest.

**Resources**


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