



## Are You Your Own Brick Wall?

As you research, don't get so focused on your research, your family, or your family traditions that you ignore or overlook essential clues and resources. This class will identify some common genealogical mistakes and then teach strategies for overcoming them.

### Getting Started

- **Family Stories.** Did you inherit fabulous tales of your ancestors lives which connect them to famous people and historical events? You are not alone. Most families pass on stories about their ancestors filled with intrigue and excitement. However, most of these stories are untrue (or are partially untrue). Don't get caught up trying to prove your family stories. Instead, think of your family stories in the same you would any other record. Consider each story carefully. How likely is it that the events detailed really happened? Extract key dates and places. Compare that information with other sources and learn about associated historical events. In the end, try to disprove your family story instead of working to prove it.
- **Beyond the Internet.** The internet is a wonderful resource for genealogists. Millions (if not billions) of records are accessible right at your finger tips. It's easy to spend all your time searching for records online. However, only a fraction of the all the records ever created are available online. Start your research with the internet. Make sure to also search for smaller websites and resources. But at some point, you will need to get offline and explore the resources available at archives, libraries and societies throughout the world. Reach out to repositories located near the locations your ancestors lived. Determine where the records about your ancestors' life are stored and connected with those archives. The internet is just the beginning of good genealogical research.
- **Online Family Trees.** Many people have published their family information online in the form of family trees. While some of these online trees may be sourced and accurate, most trees tend to be unsourced copies of other online trees. As you begin your research, searching online trees may give you some ideas on where to search for your ancestors. However, do not trust the information in online family trees. And never copy information from an online family tree without first verifying the information by locating original records.

### The Research Process

- **Planning Your Research.** With records so accessible, it is easy to just jump in and start researching ancestors. However, scattered research is often unsuccessful research. Focus your research efforts by planning before you research. Start by choosing which of your ancestors you want to research. Gather what information you already know about that person, including information about his or her family. Next, identify what you want to learn about that ancestor. What is your research goal? A research goal can be a relationship, (parents) an event (immigration), or a place (birth location). Finally, identify which records might help in answering your research goal. This list of records becomes your research plan. Now, when you start searching for records, you will know what you are searching for and why. With a good research plan, you will be more focused and more successful in your research efforts.
- **The Wrong Generation.** It's tempting to start your research with the last known generation on your family tree. However, the end-of-line ancestor is usually the wrong place to start, especially if you are researching in a difficult time period or location. There is usually less known information about end-of-line ancestors. Many times, only a name, approximate birth year, and maybe a location are

known about these ancestors. This makes finding records extremely difficult. Instead, work from the 'known' to the 'unknown.' Move one (or even two) generations closer to you. Choose someone for whom you have a name, exact dates, and specific places. It will be much easier to find records for this ancestor. The records for the 'known' ancestor will, hopefully, lead you back to the 'unknown' ancestor.

- **One Family at a Time.** Filling out your pedigree chart with all your ancestors is seductive. It's easy to focus exclusively on identifying only your direct ancestors (meaning your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc) while ignoring their children and siblings. Though a completed chart can be satisfying, you may be ignoring valuable records with missing information. For example, a child's death certificate may give his or her mother's maiden name. Or an ancestor who died in childbirth and left few records may have been survived by a brother who was a prominent member of society. Instead of focusing only on your direct ancestors, research each ancestor's entire family, including siblings and children, from death all the way to birth.
- **Spelling Variations.** In the 21st century, the way our names are spelled is often tied into our identity. Spellings are an important part of who we are. But the way a name is spelled today is not always the way it was spelled historically. In fact, the spelling of some names varied over time based on the background and literacy of the person spelling it. As you search for your ancestors, consider alternate spellings. Look for longer or shorter variations of the same name. Look for misspellings and mis-transcriptions. Don't get so caught up in the idea that your surname or the surname you are searching for was always spelled the way it is today that you ignore or overlook the records of your ancestors.
- **Tracking Your Research.** Have you ever searched for an ancestor in a record only to realize you already searched that record but didn't find anything? Have you ever found a record and then, when you needed it again, you couldn't remember how you found it? This is why it's important to track your research by keeping a research log or research journal. A log can be a computer-based table or a spiral-bound notebook. As you track your research, make sure to identify each search including where you searched (include the website, title, author, page number) and what you found. Research logs can help you prevent duplicate searches, locate records again, plan your research, organize your research files, and even help you pick up and work on a project after lengthy absence. Though keeping a log takes time now, it will save you time in the future.

## Working with Records

- **Only Using Derivatives.** When looking for records, there is a difference between a derivative and an original record. A derivative is a copy of an original record, such as an index to an original record. Derivatives tend to be readily available and it's easy to just rely on the information found in the derivative copy. However, derivatives are rarely complete copies of the originals and derivatives often contain errors. Use derivatives to lead you to the original. This includes online record collections. When you search an online database, always look at the original image, even if that image is not located online. Using originals will give your conclusions more credibility and help you avoid missing key information and details about your research goal.
- **Collecting vs. Analyzing.** Do you have a stack of papers you have collected while working on a research project? Have you ever gone through and really read through and analyzed the records you have collected? It's possible that the answer to your research question is hiding in the records you have already collected. Spend time analyzing your documents. Read through every column, line, and field. Find definitions for words you don't know or don't understand. Transcribe or abstract each record. Use the information from your documents to create tables and timelines that compare information across multiple documents. Don't leave valuable information hiding in your pile of collected documents.
- **A Written Conclusion.** It can be satisfying to feel like you've reached the end of a tough research

project. You've done the research and know the answer to your research goal. However, just because you've finished researching does not mean you are finished with the research project. The final element of the Genealogical Proof Standard (or GPS) is a "soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion." (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genealogical\\_Proof\\_Standard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genealogical_Proof_Standard)). Once you think you have solved your research problem, write out a proof summary explaining what you believe and why. Include your research objective, which sources you reviewed (include footnotes) and acknowledge any conflicting evidence. Also attach copies of your research log, timeline, source documents, and anything else you used to reach your conclusions. A well written conclusion is the final piece of a research project.

## Advanced Concepts

- **Thinking Historically.** In the search for who your ancestors were and where they lived, it can be easy to forget that your ancestors lived within the context of history. Politics, war, recessions, culture, and geography impacted the world of your ancestors, influenced their decisions, and molded their actions. As you research your ancestors, make sure to place them within the historical context of where and when they lived. Pay attention to common migration and immigration routes. Consider the laws and acts that may have created certain records or framed your ancestors' decisions. Explore historical geography and consider how it may have impacted where your ancestor lived, or who they interacted with. Use this same historical perspective when evaluating online or published family histories. Individuals are usually not born in an area before it was settled. After all, what we call history, our ancestors called current events.
- **The Meaning of Everything.** With difficult brick walls and tough research questions, it is important to find everything for your ancestor. For some people, finding 'everything' about an ancestor means finding a birth date/place, a marriage date/place, and a death date/place. This is just the beginning. When researching your ancestors, make sure to locate everything, including:
  - **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** – locate records from 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** – search for records from every town or city government, 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
- **The Stories We Tell.** As we research, it's easy to invent stories about our ancestors, who they were and what they were like. We often start assigning attributes and personality traits to our ancestors such as rich, poor, kind, mean, religious, drunk, even outlaw. These stories and attributes help us connect to our ancestors and flesh out the details of their lives. However, these stories can sometimes take on a life of their own and may start to limit what records you are willing to search when trying to locate an ancestor. (For example, an assumption that Great Grandpa was poor may lead to an unwillingness to search for probate or land records because he "didn't have money.") As you research, don't let your stories prevent you from looking at every record type and alternate locations. Consider every possibility. Think outside the box. Search surrounding localities and for alternate names. Don't let the stories you tell about your ancestors limit your research.
- **Researching the Community.** Usually, researching recent ancestors is quick and easy with one record leading to another. However, at some point, you will reach brick wall ancestor where records

are scarce and finding the next generation is no longer simple. Tougher research problems require the use of advanced research strategies, specifically researching communities instead of just families. Your ancestor's community consisted of their friends, associates, and neighbors. These people were part of your ancestor's lives and may be relatives or even share a common origin. You can find these people in your ancestors' records listed as neighbors, witnesses, godparents, executors, or bondsmen. As you solve tough research problems, collect the names of your ancestor's community and research their lives. Your ancestor's community may hold the clues you need to solve your research goal.

## Additional Tips

- **I Didn't Bring It with Me.** Have you ever gone on a family or business trip to a location with an ancestral connection and discovered yourself with unexpected free time? Were you prepared, with notes and family information in hand, to take advantage of local research opportunities? Carry your research with, either on your phone or a flash drive, or by uploading it to the cloud. Be ready to take advantage of these unexpected research opportunities. Carry copies of your research with you.
- **Resuming a Research Project.** Genealogy research often happens in pieces. You may work on a project for years, only to put it aside when life happens, or another project takes its place. When it's time to continue an older research project, it can be easy to go right back to searching for records. However, this can be a mistake. You may not remember what records you have already searched or what you have already found. When you pick up an older research project, start by reviewing your earlier research. Go through all your research notes, documents, and other paperwork. It may even be helpful to take notes on your previous notes. Evaluate what you have already found and consider what's missing. You are probably more experienced now than the last time you worked on this project and may be able to spot new clues. A review of your old research will ground you in what you have done and help you move forward on your research project.
- **Ask for Help.** Have you ever asked for help with a research problem? If not, you are missing out on a lot of shared knowledge. Ask for help. Archivists and librarians often know records and record groups and can help you identify and locate unknown record sets. Members of your local genealogy society or other genealogists may give you ideas and suggestions on how to further your research project. Friends can give you a new perspective on your research and help you identify holes. Don't feel like you have to complete your research all alone. Ask for help.
- **A Genealogical Education.** Are you taking advantage of the education opportunities offered by the genealogical community? Attend classes offered at your local library or society. Read publications to see how others solved their research problems. Follow blogs and newsletters to learn about newly digitized record collections. Some new piece of information may help you break down your brick wall.