

## Genealogical Evidence

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This document is a revision of a series of four articles previously published by genealogical societies in Pennsylvania and Colorado; it is not a list of notes to parallel classes or presentations.

### Beware of Errors in Published Material

During the Cold War an arms control treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union was based on the widely-touted principle of “trust - but verify”. An appropriate tag line for published genealogical material could be “don’t trust - verify”.

#### Examples of Errors

Wrong place: A family tree published on Ancestry.com claimed a Pennsylvania farmer and his wife were the parents of children born in these years and places: 1741 Penna., 1743 Penna., 1745 China, 1747 Penna., 1749 Penna.

Wrong date: The Findagrave.com index record for Adam Trout shows he was born in 1511 and died in 1890.

Inconsistent claims: One page of a family tree published on Ancestry.com says Martha Brunskill was born in 1730, had a child in 1740, married the child’s father in 1761, and had a child in 1782.

Impossible claims: Several trees published on Ancestry.com claim Richard Whitehead was born in 1763 and had a son Benjamin born in 1740. Some of those trees claim he had two sons Benjamin born that year, both of whom lived past fifty years of age but died more than forty years apart.

Improbable claim: A published tree said Joseph Francis Lee was born in Johns, Iceland. There is no such place and never was. His parents were born in South Carolina and died there. JFL died in South Carolina. His family lived on the coast of South

Carolina, and a mile offshore was a place called John’s Island.

#### Causes of Errors

Misreading source data: Threes and eights can be mistaken for each other on eroded tombstones. In script of 150 years ago capital S and capital L look remarkably alike, and writing of that time wrote a double s with a single letter that looks like a modern f. Alphabets in other languages don’t always match our modern English alphabet and sometimes we misread foreign letters (such as the German ü mistaken for the English ii, especially in script). Sometimes poor or faded handwriting is just plain hard to read.

Writing or typing errors: Everybody makes mistakes once in a while. The most common typos are one letter away from the correct letter on a keyboard. This often is noticeable in the spelling of a word or name, but is harder to detect in dates or other numbers.

Entangling similar people: In extended families who didn’t move over several generations and who have strong traditions, it is common to find people with the same name born in the same area at nearly the same time. Information about such people is easy to mistake for information about a single person. Once entangled, it is very difficult to separate one person from the other. If a “Sr.” and a “Jr.” in a household usually are not labeled as such in source documents they can be mistaken for each other easily, especially if the son died before the father.

Jumping to conclusions: This happens when two source records contain the same name and somebody assumes they are talking about the same person. It can happen even when all other facts in the two records disagree. This is caused by eagerness to find “an answer” no matter what.

Forcing a result: This can happen if there is a powerful desire to prove a relationship to a famous person, and is done by linking two or more people incorrectly. Sometimes this happens in spite of information to the contrary. At other times forcing can be the result of having no evidence and therefore simply choosing an attractive idea. (This happened with William English who was born in 1803. He had to be the son or grandson of one of the three English brothers who pioneered the West Branch Valley. Various people claimed he was descended from each brother but nobody had any proof, circumstantial evidence, family tradition, or line of reasoning. The puzzle was solved only in 2015 by this author.)

### **Detecting Errors**

When thinking about the following questions, consider names, dates, and places. Consider each person as an individual, as a member of a family group, and perhaps as a member of a community or social group.

1. Is the information consistent with itself? In one of the examples above, a person was claimed to have become a parent at the age of 10. At least one of the birth dates was wrong and/or that person was not the parent of the claimed child.
2. Is the information reasonable? In another example above, a farmer was described as having children in Pennsylvania, then China, then Pennsylvania. China must be wrong.
3. Is the information consistent with facts already known to be true? A line of descent from George Washington must be false because he never had children of his own. A line of descent from his wife might be correct because she had four children during a prior marriage.
4. How solid is the source you are using? The best evidence comes from primary documents created at

the time of the event by a well informed person close to the subject.

### **Avoiding Errors**

Each time you add data to your family tree, link that data to its source. Then when you get new information you can compare the reliability of the new source to the reliability of sources you already trusted and used.

As much as possible, limit your trust to original images of primary documents and to eyewitness testimony.

If a source is not a primary source, don't consider it as proof unless you have very good reasons for doing so. Instead, think of the new source as a list of clues that tell you where to look for primary sources. Find those primary sources if at all possible.

Read the original source. If you are reading a transcription, an abstract, an index entry, a description, or someone's interpretation there is a greater chance of error.

Look for direct evidence rather than circumstantial material. Direct evidence is to the point. Circumstantial material requires interpretation and reasoning, thus creating the possibility of errors not present in direct evidence.

### **Standards of Proof**

How do you know when your information is good enough? How can you judge whether your conclusions can be considered proven rather than probable, possible, or unlikely? How can you determine whether your information is solid enough to satisfy another competent researcher?

Answering these and other similar questions requires you to compare your search methods, sources, data, reasoning, and conclusions to the Board for Certification of Genealogists' "Genealogical Proof Standard". Elements of the GPS are explained in the fourth part of this document.

## Checking Published Genealogical Data

Some genealogies, whether published on the internet or on paper, are of very high quality while others are not. Verify that published information is correct before you use it or add it to your own data. How can you determine whether published data is good or not?

### Be Cautious

The first and best thing you can do about verifying data is to be cautious. When you find something wonderful that looks like it fits your genealogy, temper your excitement with caution; it might be true or it might not. Calm down and think about how you might verify or refute the truth of your new discovery. Try all of the following suggestions.

### Look For Obvious Errors

Is the information consistent with itself? For example, a published tree showed a woman's burial date two years before her death date.

Is the information consistent with other facts already known to be true? A claim that a man died in the Battle of Gettysburg on 3 July 1864 is wrong; that battle was on 1 through 3 July 1863.

Does the information make sense and is it reasonable? An example of this is a tree published on Ancestry.com which showed exact dates and places for a man's birth and death, then did the same for his father, then identified the first man as that father's father.

Any errors of those kinds indicate that either the author did not similarly evaluate his or her sources before accepting them, or did not proofread and eliminate typing errors before publishing the information, or both. Such errors guarantee that at least some of the information is wrong. You won't know which facts are right or wrong until you check original sources. Sometimes a published genealogy is so full of errors that you should discard it rather than trying to "sort it out".

### Look at the List of Sources

Sources may be listed in footnotes or endnotes. On the internet they also might be in a link called "sources", "notes", "about", "comments", or "methods" so look at all the links in the item you are reading.

If sources are not given, ask the author what sources were used for the facts that interest you.

If you are very lucky, the author will send you copies of source documents. Sometimes the published genealogy includes images of sources used. If you get the sources this easily, you can judge for yourself the quality of those sources, the information they contain, and whether the author used them correctly or not.

### Locate Those Sources

If you have not been lucky enough to get the sources as above, you need to locate them.

Regardless of what kind of source was used, hunt for it first on the internet. Many books, documents, and other sources are available on the internet as either images of the original, or transcriptions, or abstracts. You might find what you want immediately and for free. These searches might be successful quickly or they might require large amounts of ingenuity and persistence. (If you are not confident of your ability to search the internet exhaustively, get suggestions from a more experienced person. You probably can find books about internet searching at a nearby library.) If you can't find what you want on the internet, try the following suggestions.

Look for books in nearby libraries. If no local library has what you want, search <http://www.worldcat.org/>, which lists holdings of thousands of libraries worldwide. If they show something you want, ask a local librarian to get it for you through the Interlibrary Loan system. If the holding library won't

lend genealogical materials (very few do) request copies of relevant pages.

Look for a microfilm in one of the LDS Church's Family History Centers. (Get information about nearby FHCs at <https://familysearch.org/locations/centerlocator> ) Staff there can show you how to order the film and use it locally. There is a fee. Once you know how, you can order from home; go to <https://familysearch.org/eng/library/fhlc/>

If you need a book in private hands or a document held by a church, government office, business, or individual you need to contact the custodian.

### **Verify Information Through Further Research**

If the item you found doesn't list sources and the author doesn't tell you which sources were used, ask yourself what sources might have contained that information and look for them.

If you find a reliable source and it gives the information you wanted, next ask yourself if you are sure the source is talking about the person you are researching. Because you have not done a thorough search of all possible evidence, you might have found information about a different person who has the same name as the person you are researching.

Merely having the same name as the person you want is not sufficient. Other facts in the source must

match what you already know in order for you to believe the source and the target are the same person. If the source at hand does not convince you that you are dealing with the person you want, you might have to do a thorough search just as you would have done without the clue from the published genealogy that you are testing.

For example, Henry Shelton Trout's grave stone indicates he was a Second Lieutenant in Company I of the 28th Virginia Infantry. His third cousin Henry Shaver Trout also is claimed to be a Second Lieutenant in that same company. The company roster, Virginia's pension files, and the regimental history show only one such man; Henry S. Trout. But the regimental history gives additional facts that prove Shaver was the officer and Shelton could not have been. The first source could not be trusted by itself because of the similar names. A thorough search of other evidence showed the first source was partly wrong.

### **Evaluate the Sources and the Information**

Are you using only direct (not circumstantial) evidence in primary sources (created at the time of the event by an eyewitness and accurately recorded)? And are you using the original or a good image of it (rather than a transcription, abstract, or index entry)?

Is the information consistent with itself and with other information already known to be true? Does it make sense and is it reasonable?

## Sources, Information, and Evidence

Creating an accurate and believable genealogy requires a search for and analysis of all credible sources of information related to the question at hand. To judge a source you should consider its provenance, quality, and content.

### Provenance

Provenance is the source's origin. Is the source original or derivative? An original record is "the real thing". A derivative record is a copy, transcription, abstract, or index reference.

Original records are preferred for two reasons. First, any copy might lose detail and be less clear than the original. Second, a transcription or abstract or index is someone else's interpretation and so could include errors.

### Quality

Quality is determined in part by proximity of the record to the event it describes. Is the source primary or secondary? A primary source is one that was created near the time of the event and contained information from a person present at the event. A secondary source is one that was created a significant time after the event or contained information from a person not present at the event, or both.

Primary sources are preferred because they preserve eyewitness testimony unchanged by lapses of memory or by interpretation.

### Content

Content refers in part to the nature of the evidence in the source. Is the evidence direct or indirect or negative? Direct evidence directly answers the question you are asking. Indirect evidence is circumstantial and requires analysis or additional evidence to answer your question. Negative evidence is an inference that can be drawn from the absence of information that should exist.

Direct evidence is preferred because it does not rely on an analysis which might be erroneous.

### Examples

A birth certificate is an original document. It contains primary information such as the baby's name, birth date, and birth place. Those facts are direct evidence.

An ancestor wrote a letter to her mother, saying her baby had been born at home two days earlier. A digital image of that letter is a derivative source. The facts in the letter are primary. Evidence of the birth place is indirect. (That ancestor later said which town they were living in at the time, and the postmark on the letter bore the name of the same town. Census records show that family living in that town before and after that birth.)

A death certificate contains primary information about the person's date and place of death, but usually only secondary information about that person's date and place of birth. (If an infant dies a few days after birth, the birth information on the death certificate probably is primary.)

### Summary

In an ideal world our genealogical conclusions are based only on original sources containing primary information that is direct to each fact we report. In the real world we do our best to hunt such sources, then settle for the best we can find.

## The Genealogical Proof Standard

Whether you are a beginner, a certified professional, or somewhere between, understanding and applying “The Standard” to your genealogical research will help you create better results and will make your results more credible to others.

The Board for Certification of Genealogists established “The Genealogical Proof Standard”, which is defined by the five elements described below. A conclusion that satisfies all five elements can be considered “proved”. The conclusion might not be perfectly accurate, but it is believed to be as accurate as possible given all the sources available at the time.

The five elements of “The Standard” [1] are:

1. Reasonably exhaustive search.
2. Complete and accurate citation of sources.
3. Analysis of all the collected information.
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
5. Soundly reasoned and coherent conclusion.

### Element 1 - Search

“We conduct a reasonably exhaustive search in reliable sources for all information that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question.” [2]

The manual goes on to say that a reasonably extensive search goes beyond the information source which has the most direct impact on the subject, and expands to discover all information that might further illuminate information already collected.

“Reasonably exhaustive search” assumes examination of a wide range of high quality sources that are or might be relevant to the question at hand. It minimizes the possibility of later discovery of conflicting information that might change the conclusion. [3]

Think; “Every possible record.”

### Element 2 - Citation

“We collect and include in our compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source or sources of each item of information.” [2]

As you collect each piece of information record the kind of source, who created it and when, where it is located and what details are needed to go to that exact source again. At first, doing this seems to be a burden but soon it will become an easy and quick habit. For samples and guidelines, do an internet search for “citing genealogy sources” without the quotes.

“Complete and accurate citation of sources” shows the extent of the research and the nature and quality of sources used. [3]

Think; “Can somebody else go to this?”

### Element 3 - Analysis

“We analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence. [2]

Consider provenance (is the record original or derivative?), quality (is the information primary or secondary?), and content (is the evidence direct or indirect or negative?). Also consider whether or not the information is consistent with other credible sources you’ve already discovered.

“Analysis and correlation of the collected information” interprets data in every source and ensures that conclusions reflect all the evidence. [3]

Think; “Original, primary, direct, clear and unambiguous, consistent.”

### Element 4 - Resolution

“We resolve any conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to

a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question.” [2]

Which sources provide which information? Which sources are more reliable? Can a single fact lead to all the different interpretations? If you identify an error, can you explain how that error occurred?

“Resolution of conflicting evidence” substantiates the credibility of each conclusion drawn. The BCG says, “If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible.” [3]

Think; “Preponderance of reliable sources.”

### Element 5 - Conclusion

“We arrive at a soundly reasoned and coherently written conclusion.” [2]

You don’t always need to create a written report. However, after completing a difficult research project you may find that creating a report helps you clarify and justify your thinking. Reading and polishing the report until it is “just right” will help you clarify the explanation. This is called “learning by writing” and is highly valued in many disciplines. The final product will help you convince others that your conclusion is correct.

In your written report you should:

1. Describe the background situation.
2. Specify the research question or problem.
3. Describe how you approached the issue, what sources you searched, and what you found in each source.
4. Explain how you analyzed the data, and what conclusions those efforts led to.
5. Throughout the report, cite your sources.
6. Perhaps include copies of important documents, maps, photos, and so on.

“Soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion” explains how the evidence led to the conclusion. It eliminates conclusions that might have been based on bias, lack of information, or not considering all the evidence. [3]

Think; “Sequential logic. Prove your case.”

### For Further Information

An example of applying the GPS to a real problem:

<http://www.oocities.org/wirepaladin.geo/c-Genealogy-CourseDocuments-doc4-GPS.htm>

<http://www.bcgcertification.org/> has links to the *BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*, the standards, work samples, skillbuilding, and several other useful items.

*Mastering Genealogical Proof* is part of the National Genealogical Society’s Special Topics Series. See details about the produce and order it at [http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/mastering\\_genealogical\\_proof](http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/mastering_genealogical_proof)

The standards in more detail, examples of their application, and links to other useful sites are at <http://shawgenealogy.blogspot.com/search/label/GPS>

### Sources

[1] BCG, “Element of the GPS”, <http://www.bcgcertification.org/resources/standard.html>

[2] *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*

[3] BCG, “Contribution to Credibility”, <http://www.bcgcertification.org/resources/standard.html>