

Overcoming Genealogy Brick Walls and Dead Ends

Power Point Presentation

I. Welcome

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II. Introduction

- A. Sooner or later everyone researching their family history will hit a brick wall
- B. Records appear to be missing
- C. Maiden names are impossible to find
- D. Errors in indexes, transcriptions and other records
- E. Changes of spelling of names
- F. Changes of location in residence
- G. Errors in recording of ages and dates of birth
- H. Problems in finding ancestors in foreign countries

III. About This Guide

- A. This is a guide to creative solutions for overcoming those brick wall and dead end dilemmas.

IV. Overview

- A. Step One: Identify Your Brick Wall or Dead End Problem
- B. Step Two: Review What You Already Have
- C. Step Three: Go Back to the Original Source
- D. Step Four: Broaden Your Search
- E. Step Five: Question and Verify
- F. Step Six: Check Name Variations
- G. Step Seven: Learn Your Boundaries
- H. Step Eight: Take A Breather
- I. Step Nine: Ask For Help

V. Step One: Identify Your Brick Wall or Dead End Problem

- A. Seems basic but...
- B. Take the time to identify exactly what your brick wall or dead end problem is

VI. Step Two: Review What You Already Have

- A. Seems basic but...
- B. Many brick walls are overcome using information which you already have in your possession
- C. Check your files, boxes of records and computer disks
- D. Information which you found a few years ago and deemed irrelevant at the time suddenly fits into your current research
- E. Look for names, dates and other clues you might have overlooked
- F. Organize your information chronologically, alphabetically or by locality looking for clues

VII. Step Three: Go Back to the Original Source

- A. Look for errors in transcribing or recording information
- B. Be careful of selectively recording only the information you deem important at the time
- C. Look at **all** of the information
- D. Be careful when reading or interpreting old style handwriting
- E. Where possible, make photocopies of original source documents
- F. When transcribing original information **DO NOT EDIT OR INTERPRET THE INFORMATION.**
- G. Record the information as it appears, complete with spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.

VIII. Step Four: Broaden Your Search

- A. Extend your search to other family members or neighbors
- B. One technique is to use "cluster genealogy"
- C. Use Soundex or other "fuzzy search" techniques

IX. Step Five: Question and Verify

- A. Many brick walls are built from incorrect data
- B. Your sources may be leading you in the wrong direction
- C. Published sources often contain transcription errors
- D. Even original documents may contain misinformation whether purposefully or accidentally given
- E. Evaluate all sources with a critical eye
- F. Just because it is published on the internet doesn't mean it is true or correct
- G. Factors influencing the reliability of genealogical information:
 - 1. The knowledge of the informant

2. The bias and mental state of the informant
3. The motivation of the informant
4. How literate the writer and/or the teller of the information is
5. The passage of time
6. The potential for copying, transcribing and compiling errors
7. The fading of inks and the difficulty of reading handwriting

X. Step Six: Check Name Variations

- A. A brick wall may be caused by simply looking for the wrong name
- B. Variations in the spelling of the last name can make research complicated
- C. Be sure to check all spelling variations
- D. Soundex is a first step but you can't count on it entirely
- E. Some surname variations can actually result in different soundex codes
RHEN = R500 RAMP = R510 RAMS = R520 RAND = R530
- F. Given names can be different as well
- G. Record can be recorded under initials, middle names and nicknames
- H. Get creative with name spellings and variations and cover all the possibilities

XI. Step Seven: Learn Your Boundaries

- A. Town, county, state and even country boundaries have changed over time
- B. Changes in boundaries due to population growth or a change in political authority
- C. Records not always registered in the locality where your ancestor lived
- D. Brush up on your historical geography

XII. Step Eight: Take a Breather

- A. Before you give up in frustration - TAKE A BREATHER !
- B. Especially if you have been dealing with your brick wall for a period of time with no results put it aside and take a break
- C. Take a sufficient break - days, weeks, months...
- D. Can't see the forest for the trees - sometimes a fresh look at your work can yield positive results
- E. Go back to step one and review your work one last time
- F. DON'T GIVE UP

XIII. Step Nine: Ask For Help

- A. If all of your efforts to this point have failed to yield the desired results then it is time to ask for help
- B. Sometimes a fresh set of eyes can often see beyond brick walls
- C. Try bouncing your theories off of other researchers

- D. Post a query to a website or a mailing list which focuses on the locality where your ancestors lived
- E. Post a query to a website or a mailing list which focuses on the surname which you are researching
- F. Check with your local historical or genealogical society
- G. Talk through you problem with someone else who enjoys family history research
- H. You might want to consider engaging the services of a professional genealogist
- I. Be sure to include what you already know as well what you'd like to know and which tactics you've already tried

XIV. Conclusion: Some Additional Resources

- A. If all else fails, here are some additional resources which may be of help in overcoming your brick wall or dead end:
 - Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestor: Special Strategies for Discovering Hard-to-Find Information About Your Female Lineage, 1st Ed.* 1998:Cincinnati, OH. Betterway Books.
 - Family Chronicle. *500 Brickwall Solutions to Genealogy Problems.* 2003:Toronto, Canada. Moorshead Magazines, Ltd.
 - Family Chronicle. *More Brickwall Solutions to Genealogy Problems.* 2004:Toronto, Canada. Moorshead Magazines, Ltd.
 - Family Tree Magazine. *101 Brickwall Busters.* 2010:Cincinnati, OH. Family Tree Books.
 - Mulcahy, Bryan. *Overcoming Genealogical Research Challenges and Dead-ends.* <http://thegscc.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Dead-Ends.pdf>
 - Rising, Marsha Hoffman. *Family Tree Problem Solver: Tried-and-True Tactics for Tracing Elusive Ancestors, Rev. Ed.* 2011:Cincinnati, OH. Family Tree Books.
 - FamilySearch.org. *Solving Tough Research Problems - Overcoming Brickwalls.* www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Solving_Tough_Research_Problems