

Understanding Sources, Citations, Documentation And Evaluating Evidence In Genealogy

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Introduction

This article is based on an on-line genealogy class in soc.genealogy.methods. Its purpose is to provide an introduction to the class topics for beginners and perhaps some augmentation for more experienced researchers. Original class modules were written by Richard Pence and reviewed and augmented by Cheryl Singhal and Lesley Robertson. Editor for the series was Margaret Olson.

In recent months there have been a number of discussions in various genealogy-oriented newsgroups dealing with these general topics. This material draws on those discussions and is intended to organize those thoughts and others in a way that will create additional positive discussion that will benefit both beginners and more seasoned genealogical researchers. The content herein is largely based on my own experiences in researching and writing genealogy. I make my apologies to the international community for the inevitable contradictions and omissions concerning research in other nations, but this material will necessarily concentrate on research in the U.S., because that is where my experience lies. Lesley Robertson, however, did provide some insights into research in Scotland, the Netherlands and South Africa, the areas of her experience.

Part One: Source Citations and Documentation

Sources vs. Documentation

While "sources" and "documentation" can both be "citations," most often they are quite different things. Every item in your database has a source and you will do yourself a great favor if you record that source when you enter that item, either electronically or in another medium.

I can state from dreadful experience that you will come to regret it if you don't. When I first started into genealogy, I didn't always note where I got the information. I wrongly believed that I could remember where the information came from or I could return to the source if it turned out I actually needed it at a later date. I was in such a hurry to collect and record so many bits of data that I just skipped doing some of the essentials. I was, unfortunately, a bit lazy besides being unduly optimistic about my "great memory" - not to mention that I didn't dream I'd grow old doing it! Now that I am compiling a rather extensive book, I spend about as much time answering the question, "Where on earth did I get *that* information?" as I do in writing or doing follow-up research. If I had attached even a brief note at the start, such as "letter from Joyce Green, April 6, 1977; see file on Jonas Green," how much easier the job would now be!

Our first lesson is this: The person who will most appreciate your having source information in your genealogical materials is ... (drum roll) ... YOU.

Keeping in mind the adage that every bit of information has a source, the form and content of a "citation" can vary widely. The nature of the source, the purpose of the citation and the audience for which the material is intended are all factors. Examples:

- Personal knowledge (i.e., "I know when I was born").
- Grandma told me this. (Or, more formally: Information from my maternal grandmother, Mrs. Elsie (Smith) Jones, during an interview 13 March 1966. Elsie Jones was a niece of [subject of note].)
- Dates from a tombstone inscription in Restview Cemetery, Brown Twp., Lyon Co., Ia., sent the author by Mrs. Robert (Ruth) Johnson, 1133 South Main, Balderdash, Ia. 6xx02, in a letter dated 2 June 1990.
- This date was given without a source in Tree #1043, World Family Tree Vol. 34 (Fremont, Calif.: Broderbund, Inc., 1996).
- Champaign County, Oh., Will Book B, 176: Will of Samuel Arnold, written 4 May 1844 and proved 19 Nov. 1844. In this will Susan is called "my daughter Susan, widow of Abner Barnes, dec'd."

As you probably noted, only the last of the above citations can be considered as actual "documentation" for the event or relationship described. The rest are merely sources,

some perhaps more reliable than others, but in and of themselves they do not necessarily establish the validity of the "fact" they reference.

A "citation" or "note" can serve several purposes, such as:

- It can remind you where you acquired the information.
- It can give you and your reader an indication of the relative "quality" of the information.
- It can be a pointer to where additional information might be located. (Example: reference from a census index.)
- It can provide a springboard for an analysis or conclusion regarding the information itself or with regard to conflicting information: "This date is one month earlier than that given in a family record found among the effects of ...," etc.
- It can be a simple explanatory interjection: "The tombstone was badly worn and it is possible that the day of the month could be '8' instead of '3'"; "We did not find a tombstone for his second wife during our search of the cemetery."

All of the above can be important in satisfying yourself about the correctness of your genealogical research. And it is equally important to those you share with, either formally or informally.

Documentation

As opposed to a "source," "documentation" can be considered a more reliable "proof" of the stated information. For example, even though you know when you were born, you may want to add a citation to your own birth certificate to your work. Or you may want to visit a cemetery and verify that Cousin Ruth correctly copied the stone. Or you can contact the submitter of the WFT entry to determine where that person acquired the information - and then follow through by checking the original records.

In the absence of any conflicting information, "documentation" generally satisfies both you and your potential reader that what is stated is factual and substantiates the inference you made. For example, the above citation to a will can be used to "document" your statement that Susan, the daughter of Samuel Arnold, was the Susan Arnold who married Abner Barnes. This particular citation also establishes some additional points, namely that Susan was alive and Abner was deceased when the will was written. It also gives an "after" and a "before" date for the death of Samuel. Note, however, that others named in the will may not necessarily be the persons with those names you have concluded were members of Samuel's family; their relationship to Samuel may require additional documentation.

The best "documentation" comes from a "primary record." [A discussion of primary and "secondary" sources will be the topic of Part Three.]

Sources of Additional Information

On the Net:

Cheryl Singhal did some scouting on the WWW and come up with some places to get guidelines for the proper drafting of citations. Items with a * are Chicago Manual of Style sites; the others are Modern Language Association sites, except the one marked ^ and it has links to these and more. Some of them deal exclusively with citing electronic sources, others hit all citations. Thanks also to Anne Boyes for additions and corrections.

These are good starting points:

Internet Sources

General:

Modern Language Association Style Guidelines

University of Chicago Citation Guides (scroll down)

The Internet:

Cal State -Fullerton CyberCitations

University of Chicago Cite the Web In Style

William Paterson University of NJ Internet Citation Guide

Beyond the MLA Handbook: Internet Citations

Books:

Richard S. Lackey, *Cite Your Sources* (University Press of Mississippi, 1980), \$11.95.

Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence: Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing. Co., 1997)

The Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago Press). (I have the 14th Edition and I think that is the most recent; suggest you see their website before buying.)

Part Two: How Much Documentation?

How Much "Documentation" Do I Need?

About two years ago, following a spirited discussion of the growing demands placed on genealogists to "document, document, document," I received the following message from Bob Sawyer, a fellow Washington-area computer-genealogist.

"Richard," he began, "I poked the future key (Ctrl-Alt-Del-F), and found this letter:"

27 Oct 2020

Dear Cousin Lucy,

At long last I have published my books (Volumes I and II) of ancestors (make that ancestor), and your copies are coming under separate cover. I hope you enjoy them.

Over the years, the documentation standards have required more and more footnotes, end notes, parenthetical commentary, and appendices. While I have found three thousand ancestors, printing costs limit me to including only one, Great Grampa Henry - see page 37.

The first 36 pages explain the books' sections and acknowledge those contributing assistance (See cab driver who took me to the Library of Congress, p. 20. You will enjoy his comments). Pages 38 to 876 tell you where I found the information about G-G Henry, so that you can check and draw your own conclusions about details of his birth, marriage, and death. (I have over a hundred fascinating pages about his life, but, alas, could not afford to include them.)

You may find it interesting that the Massachusetts State Archives employee on duty at 2:31 p.m., 23 February 1990 (see pages 79, 101, and 124-140), was our cousin once removed. (She witnessed my microfilm viewing that day, and you will find a copy of her credentials (p. 160), with the description of the film reader's make, model, serial number, and 5-year maintenance log. She signed the statement, verifying my use of the film, and the fact that I wore my glasses - see page 290).

Since old Henry's birth date was not on the tombstone, I calculated the date from that miserable line: "...at the age of 87 years, 3 months, and 3 days." You will find the calculation explained in Appendix M, pages 901 to 1467.

Appendix X, in Volume II, includes summaries of documentation standards and annotation formats from NGS, Barzun and Graff, Lackey, Chicago Style Manual, Turabian, and the publishers of Walt Disney comics. Most citations are duplicated in each of those styles.

Lucy, the more I think about it, with your day job at the plant, your night-time cab driving, and the weekend Bingo sessions, you won't have time to read two books. Here's the main text from page 37:

Henry Harborhaven (may have been Henry Bratsmith)

b. 4 Jan 1834, in New York or New Orleans

m. 11 Jun 1867-73, somewhere in Nebraska

d. Beats me. See Volume I, p. 301

I won't send the books. Say hello to Jack and the kids.

Regards,

Cousin Bob

"Cousin Bob" obviously had his tongue firmly in his cheek when he wrote that delightful piece of satire. But it is easy to see why he wrote it when you consider that a major portion of the thread dwelt on an article in a genealogical journal questioning whether - with the ability of computer software to easily alter scanned documents - a photocopy or digitized image of a primary document could be considered adequate documentation - or even be considered at all!

Unfortunately, this issue of computer "morphing" is not going to go away. The ease with which images can be altered by a computer raises great concern about the reliability of digitized copies. In fact, doubtless innocently, a recent ad for a major genealogy program stressed its ability to doctor photos; for example, altering a series of individual photos to create a group photo.

Cheryl Singhal reports that Walter Anderson, a Washington-area genealogist and the system operator for the BBS of the Capital PAF Users Group (one of the oldest computer genealogy groups in the country), recently gave a talk on using computers for genealogy. During the Q&A session, a lady asked him if he were going to include copies of the official certificates or of the passenger lists, etc., in his database and published matter. His answer was NO. Why, he said, waste the resources: Future genealogists will be told not to believe them. Sadly, even though most of us will faithfully represent the originals, it will only take a few bad examples to make Walter a prophet.

Whether that happens, there is no denying that the standards for "adequate documentation" in genealogy have over the years become increasingly more demanding. And just when we get the last photocopy of the last original document, damned if they aren't raising the bar we are expected to vault!

Part of this pressure for better documentation comes from a genuine and worthwhile effort to improve the quality of the work produced by those engaged in the hobby of genealogy. And it doesn't take too many visits to a collection of family trees on a CD or the WWW to demonstrate that there is enormous room for improvement! The ease with which data can be transferred from one person to thousands almost demands that more attention be given to improving the quality of the information that is available electronically.

But there is also pressure from some to lift genealogy from the ranks of a "hobby" to the level of other disciplines such as history or anthropology. That level of accomplishment may be a noble aspiration of some, but it is certainly beyond what most people want or expect out of their family tree climbing.

Where does this leave you and me?

The level to which you develop the documentation of your work largely depends on your own interests and expectations. Not only are your personal aspirations, experience and research opportunities and methods involved, but an important consideration is what you intend your finished product to be.

In another life many years ago I was for six years a technical publications editor at two major research universities. At both of these there were three general classes of publications that came across my desk:

1. **Research Bulletins.** These were the formal results of studies that the scientists use to place their studies before their peers - for recognition and validation (and for promotion!). These bulletins are the ones that bear such esoteric names as "Some Maturation Aspects of a Portion of a Subspecies of Dusenberries in Temperate or Near-Temperate Climates, Adjusted on a Seasonal Basis." They have footnotes for almost every sentence.
2. **Popular Bulletins.** These are usually summaries of the above works and give the methodology and general conclusions of the study. Only lightly footnoted, they are aimed not at other scientists, but designed to inform affected portions of the public of the project and to outline practical applications that may result.
3. **Consumer Bulletins.** These are minus the scientific talk and aimed at informing gardeners how they can use this new research to improve the dusenberries in their own gardens.

What does this have to do with genealogy? Simply this: As in the scientific world, the level of documentation depends largely on your purpose in preparing the material. Most of us are not writing Ph. D dissertations or conducting research on planting and growing dusenberries.

But if your objective is to present to a major genealogical journal an article which solves a long-standing genealogical puzzle, your work will be held to the highest standard of genealogical research and reporting. Each bit of information will have to be documented.

Not only that, but you can expect, just like a university scientist, peer review and the publication's editor will even stoop so low as to check out your citations! It is here that you must truly provide accurate and definitive sources so that any competent researcher can retrace your research and reach an identical conclusion - or challenge your conclusions.

While we want to produce the best work possible, most of us don't aspire to that level of accomplishment. Our sights, often of necessity, are somewhat lower.

For example, in 1982, after having spent more than three years entering data for thousands of persons with the surname Pence into a computer database, then using the magic of the computer to mix and match and sift and sort these people, I published two books. They were titled *A Guide to the Pence Families of America*, parts I and II. They contained no source citations other than in the text itself: "During the 1880 census they were living in Blankton County with the following children," or "his tombstone in Geengrass Cemetery says he died in 1876."

A notice on the back of the contents page stated:

This compilation is not intended to be a finished history of the Pence families included. It is an attempt to place in an orderly fashion records on the Pence family that have been gathered over many years. Please use this material as the basis for further research, not as a final product. The dates and places given should provide you with necessary clues. ...

While that may have gotten my conscience off the hook, there is little evidence that anyone ever read it or heeded it! Whole sections of these compilations can be found, completely without any supporting documentation, on the WWW or on CDs or in other databases. Fortunately, further research supported most of the educated guesses I made about some families. But in other cases, I now have a cottage industry trying to clean up the inaccurate information that seems to be spreading from researcher to researcher like some dreaded computer virus.

To go to a higher level of publication: I am now in the midst of a multi-year project to produce a major *documented* genealogy of the descendants of my Pence fourth-great grandfather and three of his brothers. The difficulties I am encountering and how I am attempting to resolve these may help guide you in your own work.

Inevitably, I have had to compromise my own goal to fully document each of the vital "facts" about each person in the compilation. As the number of people in my work passed a thousand and headed toward the second thousand, I have had to admit that it is beyond my resources to seek out each of the necessary records, assuming they even exist.

The compromise then is to rely on the work of others (with credit, of course) or to make a judgment that a particular compilation of marriage records is accurate enough to be relied on without chasing down each original record. Or a census record may have to substitute for a will in deciding who were the parents of a particular spouse. Cheryl, in reviewing

this article, noted the irony that a rocket scientist seems not to have any qualms about referencing - and relying on - the work of others, but that genealogists are not supposed to do that without independent verification. This fact is probably a commentary on both disciplines.

The compromises I have had to make don't mean that once I cite "a letter from a descendant" in listing the children of a particular couple that I stop researching that couple. What it does mean is it will have to suffice as a "source" if I am not able, either through lack of a clue or lack of time, to track down better information.

Meanwhile, what I am trying to do is to provide a "source" for each bit of data as I progress in compiling each generation included in the book. Then, as the opportunity arises or a chance clue turns up, I build on this with more authoritative information. A progression may go something like this:

1. A letter states that Joe Blankety died "about 1836."
2. Another may say he died 31 Dec. 1835" and give the county of death.
3. A book of cemetery inscriptions (or a list at a website) may give the place he is buried and the dates on the tombstone.
4. These dates may be confirmed by info in a county history (watch out: others may have used this source and all that is confirmed is that they copied it correctly!).
5. A book of will abstracts may give the date his will was written or probated.
6. Or a Bible record may turn up.

The final citation for this person's death may include elements of all of those sources. It will certainly include the strongest one or two of them.

What happens if all you ever get is source No. 1? It simply will have to suffice. And, with any luck, your reader will recognize that this information needs further substantiation before being accepted.

If you would like a sample of what I am doing in the way of citations and documentation in this work, you can see excerpts from some of the chapters at a page of my website. To visit it and look around, click the button below. [Use the BACK function of your browser to return here.]

If you would like to try later, the main website address is:

<http://www.pipeline.com/~richardpence/hawk.htm>

The "Hawksbill" page includes three generations from my book-in-progress. There you will not only find evidence of my sins in not creating good citations many years ago, but you will also find some citations that will meet the sternest tests.

No Hard Rule

So, a main point of this section can be summarized this way: There is no rule which says how much "documentation" you need.

You may decide that the work of your great uncle, Casper Snowjobber II, is good enough to be incorporated "as is" into your family tree, along with a few notes you have discovered which confirm or correct it. Or that what is said about your great grandfather in that 1882 county history is enough "documentation" for you. Or you can insist on tracking down the deeds, wills, marriage bonds and cemetery records before you stop.

But whatever route you choose, *do not* fail to cite your sources, even the most meager of them! Not only will your readers and correspondents appreciate it, someday you will be the happiest beneficiary of this diligence.

Can You "Over-Document"?

For the purist, the answer to the above question is "of course not." But the fact remains that the people who are going to be reading your compilation will largely be your cousins. And most of them couldn't care less where you got your information. All they want is "just the facts."

How, then, do you avoid boring them to tears with source citations, while at the same time demonstrating that what you have compiled can stand scrutiny?

You probably can't. But doing things like placing the notes at the ends of chapters (or at the end of your book) gives your readers the opportunity to skip past them - even though it makes it more difficult for a serious researcher to follow your "proofs."

Another way to avoid page after page of notes is to consider whether portions of some of your explanatory citations might more properly belong in your narrative instead at the end of a chapter. My tendency is to stick to writing the vitals in the narrative and providing supporting or anecdotal material in a note. The result of this is that sometimes the more interesting stuff is hidden. So, periodically, I go through my notes and decide whether this or that bit of background information shouldn't be moved from a note to the narrative. This not only cuts down the length of the notes, it usually improves the story line. (Those who visit my website will see a particularly long note regarding the authenticity of the birthdates of the children of my fourth great grandfather; in the next revision, a great deal of this explanatory matter will likely become a part of the story.

I've also decided to do is to kill as many birds as possible with the same stone: A over-all citation may suffice for a list of children, or one note - attached to the first spouse listed - may suffice for both if they are buried together.

And perhaps an explanation in your introduction can save dozens, if not hundreds of notes. Many of the families covered in my book lived and married in two counties,

Shenandoah in Virginia and Champaign in Ohio. I - and others - have thoroughly checked these marriage records and they have been published for both counties. Therefore, I state in the introduction that for marriages which took place in those two counties, if a specific date is given, then the source is the marriage records of the county and that these records have been verified.

Finally, I think there are some things you simply don't need to document. I learned this in dealing with university scientists, who are prone to documenting such things as "Wednesday invariably, with some possible as yet undiscovered exceptions, follows Tuesday." And citations to at least three authorities attest to this fact.

How far is too far depends on the circumstances. But I submit the following is a bit of overkill: An article in a genealogical journal stated that a particular event occurred on "Wednesday, August 17" in a particular year. So far as I could tell, the fact the event occurred on Wednesday was not essential to the point being made, yet when I checked the note for that statement, it was a reference to a perpetual calendar to prove that, indeed, that particular date was a Wednesday.

Let's face it. There are some things that are either "general knowledge" or that can be easily verified in a standard reference. If someone says Frederick is a town in South Dakota (and it really is), is it necessary to cite the U.S. Geographic Names Information Database to prove it? I don't think so.

Setting Realistic Goals

Aside from sharpening my research skills, my 30 years plus in doing genealogy has taught me one important lesson: If you want to avoid frustration, you must set realistic goals.

Those who set out to "trace all my ancestors" are doomed to a frenzied dash from surname to surname in a never-ending quest that will result in failure. The secret to producing good genealogy is to focus your activities on a defined goal.

For the beginner, setting out to document your line back to his or her 16 great-great grandparents might be a good initial goal. For others, tracing one line back to an American progenitor might be the course to choose. Defining where you want to go doesn't mean you ignore everything else. It means that your energies are primarily directed to that task until you feel comfortable in saying, "This is solid."

Meanwhile, you will inevitably be learning bits and pieces about those outside your primary target and this information may lead you to your next definable goal.

In my own case, my original goal was to determine as best I could "all" of my American ancestors. Even that turned out to be a bit much because I discovered several lines that went back to the beginnings of the American colonies. Later, as a result of having to sort out various 18th century families with my own surname, my interests turned almost

exclusively to the study of those with the Pence name. The chances are pretty good that your own experiences and discoveries in genealogy will eventually point you to your own areas of special interest.

To be sure, every genealogist has his or her own idea of "accomplishment." If you want to see how many names or generations you can get into your database, so be it. There are plenty of places you can be a "name gatherer." For myself, there is no excitement or satisfaction in being able to import 15 generations merely because it turns out that some colonial ancestor has a link to a "royal line." Nor do I have any desire to try to retread oft-trod ground where, at best, little solid evidence exists. I much prefer the "thrill of the chase" in deciding it was wife one or wife two that was the mother of a lad born in 19th century Ohio. Instead of dumping the databases, no matter how well documented, on top of what I have, I would much rather delve into courthouse records to solve a knotty problem involving the families of two contemporary neighbors with the same name.

But no matter your inclinations and interests, the setting of reasonable goals is the key to both sanity and success in genealogy.

Part Three: Evaluating Evidence: Primary and Secondary Sources

In the previous sections we discussed Source Citations and Documentation. This brings us to "evaluating evidence." There are lengthy books written on this subject, but briefly speaking, evidence comes from two general sources: "Primary" or "Secondary."

The broad definition of a primary source is a record made at or near the time of the actual event described and, preferably, recorded by someone with first-hand knowledge of the event and without a vested interest in what the record says. In short, a contemporary, unbiased record of an event.

The "vested interest" part simply means that when you examine records, you need to be alert to the fact that people say or write things that tend to reflect their perception of those events in terms of their own self-interest. A simple example might be great grandmother's propensity for understating her own age.

Primary records include deeds, wills, court proceedings, church documents which record births, baptisms, marriages, deaths or burials, birth and death certificates, and (usually) such documents as an application for a Social Security number (keeping in mind that the applicant may have had a reason for not telling the truth).

Secondary sources include almost all published works, be they county histories, genealogies or indexes and abstracts of original records. Please note that almost everything you will find on the Internet is a secondary source.

In much of the U.S., the main repository of primary records is generally the county in which the family lived (which is why it is important to record the county of residence when making entries into your database). The exception to this is that in most New England states, vital records were/are most often recorded at the town level. In other places, things may be very different. For example, in Great Britain, Scottish birth, marriage and death records are to be found in Edinburgh - those for England and Wales in London. Other countries may categorize by the relevant state or province, or even hold everything centrally.

Some Primary Records

The following list, not inclusive, deals with the strengths and possible pitfalls of various types of records.

Birth Certificates. These are generally reliable - keeping in mind that while they are never proof positive of who the father was, but they will be in many cases the only official statement of such. In more modern cases, it is perfectly legal to alter birth records to reflect such things as adoption. (The foregoing applies primarily to the U.S. It's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to change a certificate in Britain, where finding an

original birth certificate can be the first step for adoptees wanting to learn about their biological parents.

Generally, even on altered certificates, the date of birth is correct - although my own birth is recorded in the court house as being 10 days after it actually was. (In any case, the exact date of birth is not usually a critical factor in establishing a genealogical link.) "Delayed" birth certificates are an official substitute for a primary record; often there will be some sort of back-up documentation on file at the court house to verify the date of birth. You need to know the local requirements for issuance of delayed certificates to know where to locate this backup info (sometimes just an affidavit is needed, but often an official court proceeding is involved). The availability of birth records varies between jurisdictions; generally laws providing that these records be kept did not "take hold" until early this century. Keep in mind, too, that in the colonies of New England, births were recorded in the towns, while in colonial Virginia and elsewhere in the south, these records were maintained at the church parish level.

Marriage Records. Marriage bonds were prevalent until the latter part of the 19th century and usually contain only the name of the bride or groom. If the father or parents of either are given, this is an indication that the person was not yet 21 years old and also that there may be a parent's consent on file.

Note that a marriage bond was not a "promise to marry," but the equivalent of a statement that there was no lawful reason that the marriage could not take place, such as either party not yet of age, either party already married or the parties were too closely related as defined by laws of the jurisdiction. Keep in mind the distinction between the date the marriage bond was signed as opposed to the actual date of the marriage (usually only a few days later). If a minister's or J.P.'s name is given, this usually indicates the date is that of the marriage and is a "marriage return" that was required of clergy or justices.

In the U.S. marriage *licenses* generally replaced bonds about the last decade or so of the 1800s and usually provide more detailed information, such as age or date of birth of the parties and names of parents. "Vested interest" plays a part here: My father was a few months short of his 21st birthday when he married my mother and "fibbed" about it on the application. If a marriage took place in a county other than where the couple lived, there may have been a reason. Thus, my parents were married in an adjoining county to avoid detection of my father's actual age; had he applied for a license in his home county, the clerk would have checked his birth record. Keep in mind that the information on parents and dates of birth in marriage records are considered "secondary" sources: They do not reflect a contemporary event.

Death Certificates. These are primary records only with respect to the date and place of death and cause of death (if signed by a doctor, coroner or medical examiner). Information regarding the date and place of birth of the deceased person or the names of his or her parents is secondary information and only as reliable as the "informant" named on the certificate. Note that even if the informant can be considered a "reliable source,"

he or she may have been confused in responding to the questions, did not know the correct information or had a momentary lapse of memory with respect to a certain item.

Example: The death certificate of one of my great grandmothers contains personal information about her provided by one of her sons. In response to the question: "Mother's maiden name?" he provided *his* mother's maiden name (i.e., the name of the deceased), rather than the name of *her* mother.

Again, the information to be found can vary significantly, depending on the state or country you are researching. Using the British example again, certificacates for births, marriages and deaths began in 1837 in England and Wales - but not until 1855 in Scotland.

Wills and Probate Records. These are usually the best evidence of descent. Keep in mind, however, that all children, living or dead, may not be mentioned. My third-great grandfather's will, for instance, mentions only the five children by his third wife and her two children by a previous marriage. Not mentioned were the 11 children by his first two wives. Sometimes other heirs will be mentioned in other records relating to the probate. In some states (Ohio is one), the law required that a list of all heirs be recorded. However, this apparently was not always done and even if it was, the records were not well maintained; most court house workers are unaware of "heirship" books.

Deeds and Land Records. Deeds are often overlooked as an excellent source of relationships, particularly if the land was inherited by one or more children. When inherited land is sold, it is often necessary to state from whom it was inherited and the relationship to that person. If there is ambiguity or seemingly an error in a deed, check the previous and subsequent transactions involving the land to see if errors can be reconciled.

Guardianship and Administrator's Bonds. These were usually kept in separate books and, even if not indexed, are more easily searched than some county records. A good source not only for the names of minor children but the date of the death of an ancestor. And often those who give bond for these "jobs" may be relatives. Note that the purpose of appointing guardians for minor children was to protect their interests in property they are to inherit at their majority, not to be responsible for raising them (although this could also be true). Often guardians for children were not appointed at the time a parent was lost, but at the time of some other event. Thus no guardian might be appointed until the widow planned to remarry or until the death of a parent of the children's father or mother - at which time they became heirs either by will or by law. The date of a guardian bond is a good clue for discovering, for example, the name of a grandparent: The death of a person with the appropriate surname could signify a relationship because it triggers a guardianship.

Other Court Records. Since general court records are often not indexed (as probate records, marriage records and deeds are), these records are often overlooked. Considerable individual research is often required but the rewards can be we;; worth it.

Family spats, "petitions for partition" of land inherited by many heirs, paternity or support suits - or any other type of suit - can be extremely revealing.

Be aware that some church records can have a status half way between primary and secondary. While most clergy recorded baptisms, etc., at the time of the event, some were prone to procrastinate and to deciding for themselves how names should be spelled, rather than consulting their parishioners. There are also cases where whole families were baptized en masse - and then the ages or birthdates of older children should be treated with caution. Similarly, in the German Lutheran and Reformed churches in the U.S. colonies and even later, often the task of making entries in the church records fell to the father of each family because there was no regular minister to do the job. When the family joined the church, the father would enter the names and births of the older children, then add each new child on the page reserved for the family. In New England, when a family moved to another town, the clerk in the new town would sometimes enter the names and births of the entire family, even though these people were born elsewhere.

Some Secondary Records

Published works vary in their accuracy and evaluation of the information within them must be based on their reputation and your experience in using them. While it is sometimes necessary to rely on these records, whenever possible they should be considered only as good clues for further research into the primary records, especially with regard to the primary lines you are researching.

Lesley Robertson notes that some printed books should be taken with much more than a pinch of salt - including many that claim to show connections to noble or royal houses. As an example, there was a limited edition of a book by George Parker Knowles with this grand title: *A Genealogical and Heraldic Account of the Coultarts of Coulthart and Collyn... To Which Are Added the Pedigrees of Seven Other Considerable Families, etc., With a Genealogical Account of the Rosses of Daltons in the County of Dumfries*. It has coats of arms, a large pedigree chart and is printed on vellum. Sounds like a researcher's dream, doesn't it? Now consider what antiquarian bookseller Benny Gillies says about it in his latest catalogue. "An elaborate and expensive hoax," he writes. "The seven other considerable families never existed. The man who had it published was of uncertain origin. The man who is believed to have been his grandfather was a half-witted small farmer known locally in Kells as 'Laird Cowtart.' The place and castle of Coulthart never existed and the arms were borrowed from the Essex family of Colt, and others."

While U. S. **county histories** can be notoriously unreliable, generally I consider them to be fairly accurate as to the birth dates of the person whose biography is being recorded and his or her immediate family. Too, they are generally accurate in stating relationships to persons contemporary to the publication date. But too often they are inaccurate in such details as state or country of origin of grandparents or great grandparents. Sometimes even the names of those in earlier generations get garbled, as do other relationships in earlier generations. A most common problem is that connections to famous people of that

same surname are often postulated, or the patriotism, heroism or military service of earlier generations is, well, somewhat exaggerated.

Often the only information you will find comes from census records, a family Bible or a tombstone inscription. None of these can be considered entirely reliable. Nor are they generally "primary" sources.

Census records are both primary and secondary sources. They are primary in the sense that they are a (more-or-less accurate) enumeration of the population of the years in which they were taken and are a record of where a particular family lived that year (in and of itself valuable information). They are secondary in the sense that the information recorded about individuals is not a contemporary record of, say, the birth of any person. The accuracy of this data depends, first, on an informant providing correct information - and not even mothers remember the ages of all their children at any given moment. Fathers, it has been called to my attention many times, even call their children by the wrong names. Besides being given accurate information, the enumerator must then have accurately recorded it and, since he often copied the day's work onto new forms - and then made the required additional copies for various jurisdictions - he must have copied it accurately.

However, even if the specifics are off, census records usually are pretty good indicators of relationships and, at least, relative ages. And you often have the opportunity to verify your observations against a later or previous census. Again, if your citation is solely to a census record or several censuses, the reader can make a judgment on the information based on that knowledge.

In estimating year of birth from age in a census record, keep in mind the "official" date of the census. In the latter part of the 1800s, this date was June 1. Ages were supposed to be recorded as of that date, even though it might be September before the enumerator finished his rounds. Thus the year of birth for a person who is age 10 at June 1, 1850, has a 5/12 chance of being 1840 and a 7/12 chance of being 1839.

Bible records or **tombstone inscriptions** are usually considered to be secondary sources, but they are much better than, say, Grandma's memory. The memories of grandparents and great aunts or uncles can be quite selective and the more distant the event in time, the less accurate the report on it is likely to be.

In evaluating a Bible record, you should first note the date the Bible was published. If it was published in 1859 and contains the birth record of someone born in 1801, obviously the record was made long after the fact and must be considered in that light. An important consideration is the handwriting in which the various entries were made. Sometimes you can easily determine that all of the entries were apparently made by the same person at one time. In this case, you can surmise they were prompted by the last event so recorded. Bible records can generally be considered more accurate if the entries appear to have been made by the same person over a period of time. Look for such things as each entry being only slightly different; perhaps a more shaky hand is evident or a different writing

instrument used. With this type of pattern it is likely that the entries were made at or near the time of each event recorded.

It is common to see a series of entries in a Bible in which all appear to be different except perhaps two or three. In this case, what it usually means is that Mother or Father neglected to record the births of John and Alfred until William was born, at which time he or she recorded all three. Thus William's entry can be considered to be the most accurate and the other two subject to the vagaries of memory. If two or three distinctly different hands are apparent in a Bible, it generally means that the task of maintaining the records was passed to the next generation at the death of the previous recorder. If Mother's death is recorded in a new hand and subsequent entries made in that hand, the conclusion you may reach is that she was the original recordkeeper and a son or daughter, or even a second wife, took over when the first wife died.

You should also be aware that Bible records are a place where *deliberate* deception may be practiced. I have in my files a photocopy of a Bible record of a Kentucky couple. It contains, among other entries, the marriage date of the couple and the birth date of their only child. The birth record follows the marriage date by a little more than a year. Across the Ohio River in an Indiana county is recorded the marriage of this couple on the same date but a year later than given in the Bible. Also recorded in this Indiana county is the birth of their daughter on the date given in the Bible, but only two months after the date the marriage was recorded.

Tombstones, unfortunately, can be erected long after a person dies or can be carved inaccurately (as my mother's was). Generally, though, tombstones are more accurate with respect to date of death than the date of birth. Once when talking about genealogy to a fifth grade class, an alert youngster expressed this well. After discussing primary and secondary records, I asked if a tombstone inscription was primary or secondary. "Secondary," he declared. "No one has his tombstone carved when he is born."

Finally, since this article is being made available via the Internet, I want to emphasize as strongly as I can that most of the genealogical information you may discover on-line is strictly and totally secondary. It provides you with little more than clues to be checked out. This caveat applies not only - and *especially* - to website genealogies, but to the digitized versions of previously published works or transcriptions of local records. And to indexes - up to and including the International Genealogical Index (IGI), the assorted census indexes and anything requiring the intervention of a human for interpreting or recording.

An example: The other day I encountered at a county website some inscriptions for a cemetery where one of my wife's great grandfathers and his father are buried. In the case of the former, a typo had been created in transcribing the material from the book in which it originally appeared. In the case of the latter, a copying or transcribing mistake in the original book was repeated. Two relevant records, both wrong.

The answer to the question, "Where on the Internet can I find my ancestry?" is nearly always: "You can't." What you can find, however, are the means to greatly reduce the time and effort needed to find the records for accomplishing your task.

Back to the IGI, certainly one of the better digitized databases. I have encountered an entire Pence family - father, mother and some eight children - that is an amalgamation of several other families - but as the family described never existed. The Ancestral File and the various World Family Tree disks, so far as my experience with them, generally lack the thoroughness one should expect and usually cannot be relied on for anything but pointers to source material.

Summary

In a perfect genealogical world there would be a precise primary record for every event in your database (and you, of course, would have recorded it). Unfortunately, the world of genealogy is one of the least perfect. Therefore, you will often have to rely on secondary sources to document your work.

As to whether you actually need the primary record in all cases, I think some common sense has to prevail. It is, after all, an all-but-impossible task for you to personally verify each item of information in a compilation that may contain the lives of a thousand different people.

Suppose, for example, you have a book of will abstracts for Blank County. Is it enough to use the information in the abstracts as documentation? Or do you need to get a copy of the actual will and personally verify that the abstract is correct?

There are "purists" who will say you should not stop until you see the original record. I view this more practically and believe you can make a judgment on whether you should examine the original document based on context and the relative importance of this fact to the total work.

If there seems to be a conflict as to whether the information in the abstract conforms to your previous knowledge of the "facts," by all means the original should be sought. If all you are doing is giving the names of the parents of a spouse to a sibling of your great grandfather, I consider it enough to cite a published work. I may even cite the word of a descendant or other relative of the couple in such cases.

If your citation is to a published work rather than to the original record (or a photocopy or transcription made by another researcher for you), your reader can evaluate the relative worth of the information. The same thing applies if your citation is to correspondence or a group sheet sent you by another person. If it turns out this is a line a reader may be particularly interested in, he or she has pointers to the records and can do the follow-up research.

One of the most important skills you can acquire will be learning to evaluate the accuracy of primary records and the relative reliability of secondary sources, both with respect to specific records and in general.

Links to sites with information on how to find primary sources in various countries:

The following list, put together by Lesley Robertson, includes just a few examples; those of you in other corners of the globe should be able to locate similar sites:

GenUKI includes information about where to get Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English primary records: <http://midas.ac.uk/genuki/>.

Links to many sites including data from primary sources for the Netherlands and Belgium can be found on http://home.wzs.nl/~hjdewit/links_en.html (for the English Language version).

Similar information for South Africa can be found via <http://home.globe.co.za/~mercon/sources.htm>.

And for Germany, check out <http://www.genealogy.com>.

Other sites with information on where to find primary sources, including in particular the U.S., can be found by browsing Cyndi's List at <http://www.cyndislist.com>.

Part Four: POE (Preponderance of Evidence)

and BARD (Beyond a Reasonable Doubt):

When Do You Know You Have "Enough Proof"?

In the previous section, we discussed the strengths and shortcomings of various types of evidence. Among other things, it was noted that primary records do not always exist or are difficult to obtain for the events you are researching - and even if you can find them, these records can not always be relied on for complete accuracy or the full story.

How, then, do you know when you have "proof" of a specific "fact" about an individual?

Again, countless books have been written on this topic and there are, as you might guess, varying opinions. Some even claim that in genealogy you can never "prove" anything. They say, for instance, that you can never be positive that the child's father is the person named as the father on a birth record. (It used to be said that the only thing you can be sure of is who the mother was; unfortunately with today's laws even that can be in doubt - but I will leave that problem to future generations!) In this sense, then, "proof" is not the standard; the worth of the documentation you have assembled is what you must rely upon. And, as previously noted, not all "documentation" is equal. Therefore you must rely on an accumulation of source materials to weave your web.

Often the test of genealogical conclusions are compared with legal concepts such as "beyond a reasonable doubt" (BARD) or "preponderance of evidence" (POE). The former is generally applied in criminal cases, while the latter is a test in civil cases.

Conviction in a criminal case requires that 12 people unanimously believe that there is *no* reasonable doubt that the accused committed the crime he or she is charged with. While you may aspire to this level of certainty, it is generally a level above what can usually be attained in genealogy.

On the other hand, "preponderance of evidence" (POE) in a civil case can mean that evidence on the side of the plaintiff only slightly outweighs the evidence on behalf of the defendant. A jury in a civil case can vote by a majority of one in favor of one side or the other. This is a test that is generally below that sought in genealogy. (Note that the Board for Certification of Genealogists recently announced it is abandoning "preponderance of evidence" as a concept in its certification process.)

My own view of genealogy, shared by many others and borrowed from some of them, is that the level needed to substantiate a line lies somewhere between BARD needed for criminal conviction and the POE that tips the scale only slightly one way or another in a civil case. I have heard this level described as "clear and convincing."

It can more properly be compared with the level of evidence needed to convince a judge of legal heirship. In fact, while looking for some definitions in preparation for this article, I ran across the following in a newsletter for title attorneys in Pennsylvania. Citing state court decisions, the newsletter noted:

A claimant seeking to show that he or she is a legal heir to an estate would have to provide "a fair preponderance of credible, trustworthy and satisfying evidence. The proof should be clear, precise and definite."

The evidence most often presented to the Department [of Revenue] is a family tree connecting the decedent to the petitioner, along with birth certificates, death certificates and marriage certificates that establish the connection.

The courts have also determined that when a claimant to an estate comes forward, not only must they prove that they are an heir, but that no other heirs are available to inherit.

Leaving aside the logical impossibility of "proving a negative" outlined in the preceding paragraph (see later), there are a couple of things I like about the above definition. Instead of the simple POE, where the scales can balance only slightly one way or the other, there must be a "fair" preponderance of *credible, trustworthy and satisfying* evidence. Further, the proof must be *clear, precise and definite*.

The first set of qualifiers - "credible, trustworthy and satisfying" - are the key.

How "credible" is, for example, a county history? Are Uncle Carl's notes "reliable"? Is the information in someone else's compilation "satisfying" in terms of being free of ambiguity and doubt?

The second set of qualifiers - "clear, precise and definitive" - puts a still more demanding (and perhaps too demanding!) level of "proof" upon the genealogist. That is, the evidence must be "clear and convincing" - it must be absent any unresolved conflicts.

Notwithstanding the above-cited court decisions requiring a demonstration that there are no other heirs, this concept defies the dictum of "the scientific method" that says negatives cannot be proved. While it may be possible to prove that other persons seeking to show heirship are not, in fact, heirs, this does not eliminate the possibility that there are other unknown (to both the claimants and the courts) persons who may well be.

Similarly, genealogist should be wary of approaching a problem in terms of a process of elimination. Although a sometimes fruitful approach in terms of focusing research efforts, the mere fact that Jacob was too old to have been the father of George, Lewis too young and Henry is known to have died childless, it does not necessarily follow that the remaining known contender, Samuel, is the of George. The most obvious reason for this is that there may be as yet undiscovered contenders. And, of course, there may be unknown facts for Samuel that also eliminate him from contention. Conclusions drawn in

this manner can only be valid when the researcher is highly knowledgeable about both the family and the area(s) in which it lived.

In using concepts such as POE or BARD, you should establish a working hypothesis and then gather as much evidence as possible to test this hypothesis. Often as you collect the "facts" you will be "clearly convinced" that they either support or contradict your assumption.

Note that this concept does not require that every doubt be banished, as in BARD. But it does require one essential thing not needed under the every-day definition of POE: Your hypothesis cannot be considered sustainable if there are unresolved or unexplained contradictory evidence.

What does "unresolved" or "unexplained" mean in this context?

Most importantly, keep in mind that the primary purpose in building your family history is to establish *links* from one generation to the next. While it is always satisfying to "fill in all the blanks" on a family group sheet or a demanding computer screen fully and completely, that's not the purpose of the exercise. Thus, if there are conflicting dates for a great grandfather in various sources, that is not an "unresolved" or "unexplained" conflict. Such discrepancies are almost the rule rather than the norm. A conflict in dates is irrelevant unless they create an anachronism.

But a challenge to the thesis, such as a document stating that your quarry is the son of A rather than B, as stated in your hypothesis, demands that there be a plausible, rational - "explainable" - reason for this conflict. If there isn't, then the hypothesis must either be reformulated or abandoned in favor of a new one.

Further Study

Two excellent books on genealogical evidence and citations are:

- Noel C. Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship and Family History* (Laguna Hills, CA: Aegean Park Press, rev. ed., 1989).
- Donald Lines Jacobus, *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co. 2nd ed., rev., 1968, repr. 1996. Softcover. 120 pp.).

The latter is one of the first books I read on the topic of genealogy and it had more than a little influence on my approach to the "pastime." Both books are available through most genealogy bookstores and can often be found in general book stores, such as Barnes and Noble.

One that I haven't read - and which may present differing views on the topic of this lesson - is:

- Christine Rose, *What IS the Preponderance of the Evidence?* (Rose Family Association, 1996; softcover, 15 pp.)

Case Study

A "Clear and Convincing" Exercise:

William and John Griffin of Highhope County, Ohio

I have put together an imaginary case study that you can use as an exercise in proving or disproving a relationship based on accumulated evidence. See if you think the hypothesis below is supported by the evidence given.

Working Hypothesis: John Griffin, born 1823 KY, and in Highhope County by 1850, is the son of William Griffin, born 1799 KY, and in Highhope County by 1840.

Here is what you have found:

These three families are listed in Broad Brush Twp. in the 1840 census of Highhope County:

- William Griffin, head of household, one male 30-40, one male 15-20, one male 10-15, one male 5-10 and one under 5, one female 60-70, one female 20-30, one female under 5.
- John Griffin, one male age 40-50, one male 10-15, two males under 5; one female 40-50, one female 5-10.
- George Griffin, head of household, one male age 20-30, and one female, age 20-30.

The 1850 census of Highhope County shows these Griffin families, all in Broad Brush Twp.:

- Wm., 51, born KY; Clara, 40, born OH; Robert, 18, KY; Samuel, 13, OH; and Polly, 12, OH.
- John Sr., 53, born KY; Elizabeth, 49, born KY; John, age 22, KY; George, 19, KY; and William, age 17, OH; Sarah Griffin, 79, KY.
- John Jr., age 27, born KY; Sarah Ann, 23, born OH; Martha, 2, KY; Margaret, 3 months, OH.

In 1860, there were only these two Griffin families in the county:

- Broad Brush Twp.: Clara, age 49, OH; Samuel, 23, OH; Alice, 19, OH.
- Clark Twp.: John, 36, born KY; Sarah, 30, OH; Patsy, 12, OH; Margaret 10, OH; William, 5, OH; Henry, 3, OH; John, 2, OH; "Baby" (male), 2 months, OH.

Only the family of John Griffin can be found, again in Clark Twp., in 1870 and this listing contains no new information; the same is true for 1880.

Highhope County was organized from Upper County in 1837; the marriage records, as published in an index, reveal these Griffin marriages:

- Clara to Adam Matthews, 1862; no bondsman listed, by Rev. A.J. Hart
- George to Betsy Meyers, 1839; bondsman William Griffin
- John to Sally A. Brown, 1848; bondsman John Griffin, by Rev. A.J. Hart
- John to Sarah Forman, 1854; bondsman John Griffin; by Rev. John Price
- Mary to Charles A. Davenport, 1859; bondsman, Harris Davenport, by Rev. A.J. Hart
- Robert to Minnie Kurtz, 1854; bondsman John Griffin Jr., by Rev. A.J. Hart
- Samuel to Alice Long, 1859; bondsman John Griffin, by Rev. A.J. Hart

William Griffin wrote his will in July of 1858 and it was proved at the October term of court that year in Highhope County. In it he names "my now wife, Clara" and "my son Samuel and my daughter Polly," who are to receive his farm in Broad Brush Twp. "when my wife is through with it" and the same two are to divide "the land I bought from John Griffin." This is the only estate record found under the name Griffin.

Pertinent deeds in Highhope County include:

- John Donovan to William Griffin, Broad Brush Twp., 1837.
- John Donovan to John Griffin, Broad Brush Twp., 1837
- William Griffin to George Griffin, "the land I purchased from Aaron Wilson," Broad Brush Twp.
- George Griffin "to my brother John," Broad Brush Twp., 1849.
- John Griffin to William Griffin, 1856, Broad Brush Twp. (same land as previous deed)
- Henry Forman to John Griffin, 1856, Clark Twp.

The 1881 history of Highhope County has biographical information for two of the above individuals:

- Mary Davenport, wife of A. C., Broad Brush Twp.; a native of the county, daughter of William and Clara Griffin; her father was a native of Fertile County, KY, came here in 1833, mother a native of this state. Their children are listed as Louise and Alexander C., Jr. She has one brother, Samuel, living in California. Baptist.
- John Griffin, farmer of Clark Twp., native of KY, came to this county with his family when about 10 years of age; parents not named; his "only surviving brother," not named, lives "in the west." Details of his wife and children are given, no new info.

Mary G. Davenport, in her family Bible (handwritten copy sent you by a descendant) gives her father William Griffin as being born "January -- 1799" and gives dates of birth and death for "Clara Mathews." Their children are listed as Louise and Alex Davenport.

Under deaths there is an entry that reads "Robert Griffin died Sept. 6th, 1911, in Mudslide, Calif., age 79."

Greenlawn Methodist Cemetery, Clark Twp., Tombstone Inscriptions:

- John Griffin, "Father," 1823-1901
- Sarah J. Griffin, "Mother," 1830-1919
- "Infant son of J. and S.J. Griffin, 1860"

Baptist Cemetery, Broad Brush Twp., Tombstone Inscriptions:

- Albert Griffin, 1839-1849
- "Infant son of J. & S.A. Griffin, 1851"
- "Infant daughter of J. & E. Griffin, died 6 July 1842"
- James Griffin, 1838-1849
- Patsy Griffin, "Mother," "180-" (broken, rest illegible)
- Sarah Griffin, 1771-1851
- Sarah A. Griffin, 1827-1851
- William Griffin 1799-1858

A 1985 letter you received from a Davenport descendant in Highhope County quotes from a letter addressed to Louise Carpenter, dated 1900 in California, and signed only "Cousin Esther and Aunt Wilhelmina." The letter mentions "your brother Alexander" and "your mother Polly."

[In doing this exercise, it may be helpful to place the above individuals into conjectured family groups and to classify the various pieces of evidence as "Pro Hypothesis," "Con" and "Neutral."]

Evaluation:

1. Does the accumulated evidence support the hypothesis?
2. What are the main reasons for your conclusion?
3. Are there any "unresolved" conflicts in the evidence? What are they?
4. If you don't believe the hypothesis is "proved," is it flatly "disproved" or is it "not proved but worth pursuing"?
5. What clues for further research did you detect? List.

Or: Answer by writing a brief narrative describing the history of the Griffin family.
