Getting Unstuck, Working Through Research Problems

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Overview

Are you stuck on a genealogy research problem? Does one of these definitions sound familiar?

1. unable to move, or set in a particular position, place, or way of thinking
2. in a difficult situation, or unable to change or get away from a situation
3. not able to continue reading, answering questions, etc., because something is too difficult

Have you ever been there with your genealogy research? Sometimes we say we've hit a "brick wall", but did you make this wall yourself perhaps?

It's time to get unstuck.

Process

• Lose your assumptions

• Start with a focused question
  - Identity
  - Kinship

• Reexamine the records.
  - Do you already have the answer?
  - Mine every clue

  > Tip: Keep copies of original records, transcribe them, and record all clues.

  - Evaluate the credibility of every source
    - Original records are generally more reliable than derivative records.
    - Primary information is generally more accurate than secondary information.

  > Tip: Errors might have been introduced or information omitted when a record was copied. Always look for the original record.

• Look for additional sources. One source is never enough.

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- Research the place.
    - What records were created and what still exist?
        - Check FamilySearch WIKI
        - Consult archives, historical societies, genealogical societies
    - Were there boundary, name or jurisdiction changes for the city/town, county, state, country?

    > Tip: Be sure you have the correct place names and jurisdictions for the time-period you're researching.

- Research the local history
    - Major events
    - Military
    - Industry, occupations

- Learn about the geography

- Expand the scope of your search
    - Check records in adjacent cities/towns, counties, states
    - Research family, associates, & neighbors (FANs)
        - Family: siblings, in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins
        - Investigate neighbors

    > Tips:
    > - If you're unable to find your ancestor's parents, look for a sibling's parents.
    > - Witnesses at baptisms and marriages are often family members
    > - People with the same surname on the same or adjacent are pages likely to be related.
    > - Always get copies of the pages before and after the page your ancestor is listed on.
    > - Land records show adjacent owners and may help you find out where your ancestors came from.

- Find associates
    - Witnesses on wills
    - Sponsors at baptisms
    - Witnesses at marriages
    - People who inherited property or bought it at auction

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- Members of the same church
- Business associates
- Fraternal organizations
- Others working for the same company or with the same occupation

- Try different records. Get out of your comfort zone.
  - School records
  - Poorhouse records
  - Electoral records
  - Church records
  - Naturalization records
  - City directories
  - Phone books
  - Land records

- Improve your search skills
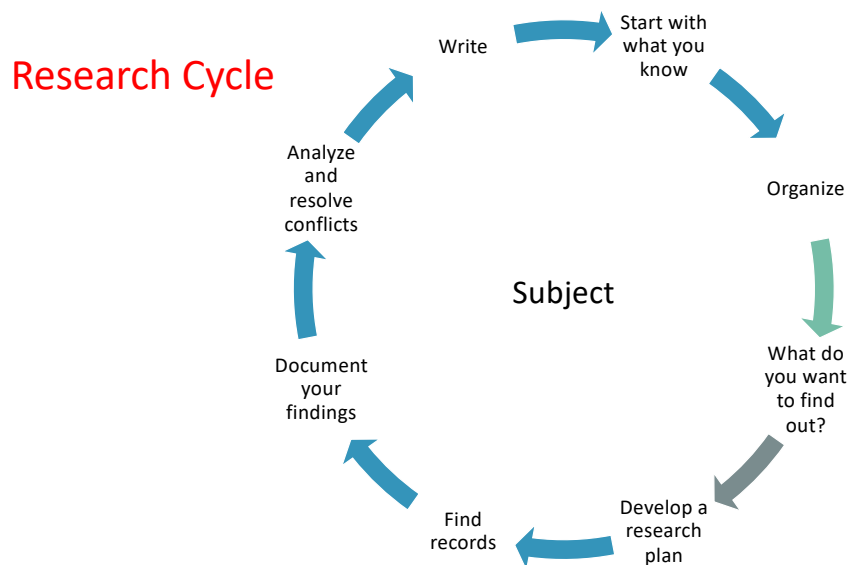 - Outsource your search to Ancestry or MyHeritage.

  > Tip: Build a private working tree and wait for green leaves pointing you to records or online trees. You'll need to determine which matches are valid.

  - Use a different search engine: Bing, DuckDuckGo, Yahoo!, Swisscows

- Name searches
  - Try all variations of a name
  - Search just by first or last name
  - Use wildcards, where supported

- Google
  - Use advanced search
  - Use quotes "" for an exact match or prevent stemming
  - Use - to exclude unwanted results, e.g. "Patrick Day" -St. -Saint

- Collaborate - Find others researching the same family or place and time
  - Ancestry family trees
  - FamilySearch family tree
  - Geni
  - WIKITree
  - Facebook genealogy groups
  - DNA – Ancestry, MyHeritage, 23andme, LivingDNA

- Get help
    - Phone a friend
    - Hire a pro

Research Cycle

Subject

Write

Start with what you know

Organize

What do you want to find out?

Develop a research plan

Find records

Document your findings

Analyze and resolve conflicts

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Resources

Resource	URL	Notes
Collaboration		
Ancestry Public Member Trees	www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1030/	individual family trees
Facebook genealogy groups	www.facebook.com	search by surname, place, or topic
Facebook genealogy group list	socialmediagenealogy.com/genealogy-on-facebook-list/	Katherine R. Wilson's list of genealogy groups on Facebook (16,700+)
FamilySearch Family Tree	https://www.familysearch.org/tree	one world tree, anyone can modify
Geni	www.geni.com	
WIKITree	www.wikitree.com	one world tree, members must negotiate changes
DNA Testing		
23andme	www.23andme.com	autosomal tests
Ancestry	www.ancestry.com/dna	autosomal tests
FamilyTreeDNA	www.familytreedna.com	autosomal, mitochondrial and Y-DNA tests
MyHeritage	www.myheritage.com	autosomal tests
Evidence		
Elizabeth Shown Mills. Evidence Explained Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace. Third Edition Revised	genealogical.com/store/evidence-explained/	
Evidence Analysis Process Map	www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map	
Maps		
Atlas of Historic County Boundaries	https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/index.html	maps with boundary changes over time
Historic Map Works	www.historicmapworks.com	historic digital map database of North America and the world, browse or purchase
Old Maps	www.old-maps.com	historic maps that you browse or purchase
OpenStreetMap	www.openstreetmap.org/	contemporary maps showing topography
Place Guides		
FamilySearch WIKI	https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page	Excellent resources by record type
National Genealogical Society Research in the State Series	https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris/	Guides for many individual states