

# Researching Your Ancestral Places

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## Introduction

How can you be sure you've selected the right person as the father or mother of your ancestor? If you rely on research done by others, you might be planting your family tree on unstable ground.

## When You Start with Existing Research

Perhaps you're beginning with someone else's research.

- Online tree
- Tree from the family genealogist
- Published family history local history book

How do you know that the research is correct? You can't be sure unless you've found a recent article by a reputable genealogist.

Tip: Always verify the information for yourself. If there are sources listed, check them yourself. If there aren't any sources, the information is suspect so use it as a hint.

Maybe you're starting your own research project. You've identified a specific question about one ancestor.

1. Start with a specific research question.
2. The genealogical proof standard tells us to do a reasonably exhaustive search.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, you want to look at a wide variety of sources, using original records where possible.
  - a. Become an expert on the place and time you're researching.
    - i. Find out what the relevant sources are.
    - ii. Research the history and topography.
  - b. Always search for other people nearby with the same or similar names.

What do you do with the people you've found who aren't your ancestors? You will probably run into them again so be sure to keep track of them.

If there are multiple people with the same name in the area, research all of them and sort them out. You might find out that you conflated two different people, or someone else has, and merged their identities.

A timeline can be a helpful tool. Events that don't fit often become apparent.

3. Develop a unique identity profile for your ancestor. That will help you tell which person is your ancestor.

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## What's Makes Your Ancestor Unique?

- Name
  - Middle name or initial
- Birthdate
- Birthplace
- Residence
- Occupation
- FANs
  - Family members
- Economic status
- Physical characteristics
- Military service
- Immigrant status
- Literacy
- Property ownership
- Signature
- Cattle marks or brands

4. Analyze and correlate the evidence. Does it match your ancestor's identity?

## Missing Records

5. If the record you need to link your ancestor to the previous generation isn't available, look for other records that will help you prove your case.
  - If a birth record doesn't exist, look for a baptism record.
  - If the death wasn't recorded, look for a cemetery record, an obituary, or a probate record.
  - Look in adjacent and nearby places – towns, counties, states, countries. Find out where the boundaries were at the time they lived there. Maybe it was easier to record vital events further away.

## Conflicting Evidence

6. Analyze conflicting evidence to determine whether there's a reasonable explanation or if you have the wrong person.<sup>2</sup>
  - Did it come from an original or derivative (non-original) source? An original source is more reliable. Every time a record is copied, there's a chance for error.
  - Is the information contained in the source primary or secondary information? Primary information is usually given at the time of the event by an eyewitness and is more reliable.
  - Does the evidence directly, indirectly, or negatively answer your research question?

# Researching Your Ancestral Places

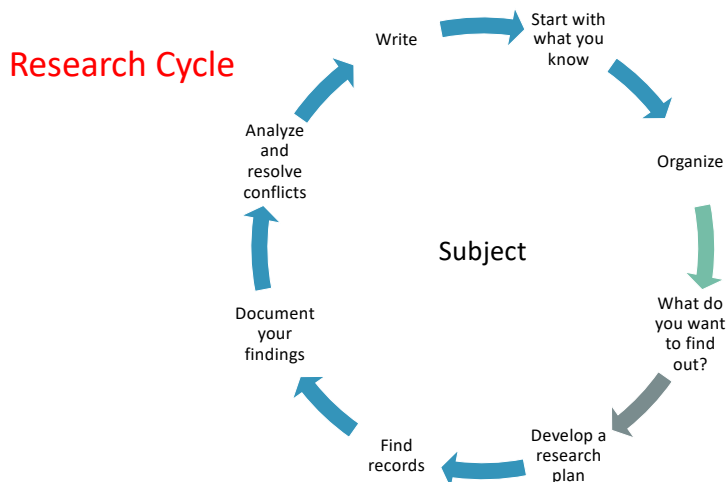
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## Tips

- Before you begin a new project, do a literature survey to find any published articles about your ancestors. Perhaps the research has already been done.
- Build a timeline to analyze and correlate information.
- Use common sense. Ask yourself, “does this make sense?”
- Always try to find multiples source for each piece of information.
- Use original records when possible.
- An index is not a record. Find the record that the index is referencing.
- Research the FANs (family, associates, neighbors).
- Use the genealogical proof standard (GPS).<sup>3</sup>
- Evaluate each source.
  - Original vs. derivative
- Evaluate the information.
  - Primary, secondhand, or undetermined
- Evaluate the evidence.
  - Direct, indirect, or negative (missing where you’d expect it) as applied to your research question
- Analyze and correlate the evidence thoroughly.
- Write as you go.
- Cite as you go.



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## Resources

### Articles

Child, Christopher C., "The wrong Blood!," *Vita Brevis*, blog. 10 September 2021.

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle> : 15 September 2021).

Williams, Alicia Crane, What's in a name,? *Vita Brevis*, blog, 13 September 2021.

### Books

Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition. Nashville : Ancestry, 2020.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: The National Genealogical Society, 2013.

### Quicksheets

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Quicksheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to the Research Process." Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012.

### Webinars

Thomas W. Jones, "Using 'Correlation' to Reveal Facts that No Record States," FamilySearch webinar (<https://www.familysearch.org/help/helpcenter/lessons/using-correlation-to-reveal-facts-that-no-record-states> : accessed 21 February 2020).

Beth Foulk, "Problem Solving with FANs," Legacy Family Tree Webinars, subscription required <https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/problem-solving-with-fans/>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Kellar Fox, "Reasonably Exhaustive"—How Do We Know We're There,? *Ten-Minute Methodology*, (<https://bcgcertification.org/ten-minute-methodology-what-is-reasonably-exhaustive-research/> : accessed 16 September 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills, "QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>: 21 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "The Genealogical Proof Standard," *Board for Certification of Genealogist* (<https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards>: accessed 17 September 2021).

Links verified 4 October 2022