

How to Evaluate Genealogical Evidence

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As you proceed through the genealogical research process, discoveries are made from a wide variety of sources and talking to family members, friends, neighbors and others who claim to have knowledge about an ancestor, family, or event related to your research. Eventually, you must begin the process of evaluating this information for accuracy. Contradictions are a fact of life in genealogical research.

Our ancestors lived in a world where record keeping was not considered as important as it is today. We live under legal guidelines that were non-existent prior to the late 20th century. When you begin the process of testing the accuracy of each piece of information, you must proceed using some of the same analytical techniques for evaluating evidence as used by detectives.

"Evidence" is defined as information used to reach conclusions about the accuracy of relationships or events. It consists of the specific items of information we have selected to reach a conclusion. Information only becomes evidence after we have carefully analyzed whether it passes the following four tests:

1. Do the facts refer to the correct individual or family of interest?
2. Do the facts accurately reflect the circumstances or issues?
3. Do the facts fit the applicable historical circumstances of the time period?
4. Was the informant's knowledge reliable?

Question #1: Do the facts refer to the correct individual or family of interest?

There are no hard and fast rules for determining whether information applies to the person we're researching. We simply look carefully for any other individuals to whom it may also refer, and then for a combination of circumstances that eliminates other contenders and gives us good reason to believe it belongs with our subject.

Question #2: Do the facts accurately reflect the circumstances or issues? This question is a challenge in the sense that there is seldom a simple or straight forward "yes" or "no" answer. More often, we're left with some degree of probability that the original informant got it right, and that the information came to us unchanged. If there's a reasonable probability that the information may be both relevant and right, we'll select it and throw it into the mix with our other selected evidence, each item with its own degree of reliability.

Question #3: Do the facts fit the applicable historical circumstances of the time period?

This question is extremely critical for success in the evaluation process. In order to understand many of the life decisions that our ancestors made, it is important to have some knowledge or appreciation of their life circumstances. Due to technological advances in all areas of life, it is very difficult for people living in the 21st century to relate to these issues unless they take the time to study the historical circumstances that applied to given time periods and places.

If you are fortunate, either you or other members of the family or neighbors may be able to use past experiences with the source to judge how reliable the facts may be. There are many

potential sources and methods that can assist you in making some logical and educated guesses at this stage. To facilitate efforts for obtaining the accurate historical facts, I've listed some of the most common and useful tools by genealogical standards below:

1. Ethnic histories
2. County/town histories
 - a. Describe major events within a community.
 - b. Shed light on migration patterns and early settlements.
 - c. Provide details on the historical, religious, political, and economic environment that often influenced residents.
 - d. Describe the various ethnic compositions within the area or region.
 - e. May provide a brief, albeit somewhat flawed or inflated profile of prominent early families and individuals.
3. Timelines
 - a. Family historians are dependent on dates, facts, lines, and charts to make sense of research findings,
 - b. Timelines allow the researcher to:
 - (1) Make sense of how two families became one.
 - (2) Prove or disprove family stories and traditions.
 - (3) Understand how historical events influenced an individual or family
 - (4) Interpret migration patterns (as in why a family ended up in one place or circumstance versus another)
 - (5) Analyze the circumstances unique to your research
4. Newspapers: Provide a detailed and photographic chronicle of a community:
 - a. More accurate details than found in county histories.
 - b. Information about controversial events, and various ethnic minorities.
 - c. Obituaries and death announcements
 - d. Marriage/engagements/receptions announcements
 - e. Anniversaries
 - f. Graduations
 - g. Reunions
 - h. Probate and legal notices
 - i. Estate/tax sales
 - j. Notices of missing persons
 - k. Divorces
 1. Epidemics
5. Family Bibles
6. Letters, diaries, and journals often contain intimate details about individuals, families, and events.
7. Regimental (military) histories: Provide details and clues about ancestors who served or were affected by actions of the unit.
8. Historical Maps/Atlases/Gazetteers:
 - a. Can help you identify and picture where your relatives were:
 - (1) Born
 - (2) Resided

- (3) Attended school
 - (4) Shopped and conducted daily activities
 - (5) Voted
 - (6) Traveled over land, water, or rail
 - (7) Dated and/or socialized
 - (8) Married
 - (9) Raised their families
 - (10) Worked
 - (11) Died
- b. Pinpoint civil registration or courthouses (town or county) where records may be located and accessed.
 - c. Provide insight into migration patterns (in both the old country and the new world).
 - d. Can be used in conjunction with other genealogical records to distinguish between two or more individuals with the same name.
 - e. Provide information about the name, location, and history of the city or town in which your ancestors resided.
9. Family Health Narratives/Interviews
10. Photograph Albums/ Diaries

Timelines are considered by most professionals to be the most reliable way to make this determination. The most recognized reasons are listed below:

1. Timelines are a sequential time frame tool designed to assist researchers in tracking the years and dates of major events that impacted ancestors' lives and behavior.
2. Many genealogists make the creation of a timeline of events their first priority as they progress through the research process.
3. Timelines often identify contradictions quickly, thus avoiding wasted research time.
4. Timelines allow you to place ancestors in their proper historical context by knowing the following circumstances that existed in the era and place of residence:
 - a. Political
 - b. Social
 - c. Religious
 - d. Economic/occupational
 - e. Geographical

Question 4: Was the informant's knowledge reliable?

While it isn't always an easy task, knowing something about the background, relationship, and/or reputation of the person who gave the information can shed some light on the accuracy or lack thereof. This applies not only to the information found on historical documents or records, but also to oral histories or accounts given after the fact by family members, friends, etc.

Some examples of useful questions to ponder are:

1. Was the informant on good or bad terms with the person described in the record?
2. Were they in a position to provide reliable intimate facts about the person?
3. Would they have benefited by giving false or misleading information?

4. Has information provided by this informant in the past proved to be reliable?
5. Is it possible that the information was given by a neighbor or bystander because they were the only source available?

While tracking down the answers to these questions may be difficult, it is not impossible. If you discover that this same informant has provided other pieces of information in various situations, check on the validity of those claims. Living family members often have input on the accuracy of statements made by deceased members.

Types of Evidence

The genealogical definition of evidence is facts that are used by the researcher to reach conclusions about genealogical relationships and events that surface in their findings. Evidence falls into two categories:

1. Direct evidence provides firm undisputed answer to the question being researched.
2. Indirect evidence
 - a. Sometimes is referred to as circumstantial evidence.
 - b. Requires using deductive reasoning based on the available proof and perceived reliability of the facts and informant.
 - c. When faced with multiple logical possibilities, researchers are forced to make an "educated guess" when the facts are iffy or circumstantial.
 - d. The educated guess or circumstantial evidence route necessitates giving greater weight to evidence that is most likely to represent what really occurred.

Another issue involves primary versus secondary sources which are used as evidence. Briefly defined, a primary source is a record created at the time of, or shortly after, an event by either someone with personal knowledge of the facts or the actual testimony of a person involved in the event. A secondary source is a record that was created a significant amount of time after an event occurred. For example, a marriage certificate would be a secondary source for a birth date, since the birth took place several years before. However, that same marriage certificate would be a primary source for a marriage date, because it was created at the time of the marriage.

While the definition of both types of records may be straightforward to legal experts, professional genealogists, and scholars, it can be difficult to decide what constitutes a primary source versus a secondary source. Two reasons for this confusion involve the nature of the records themselves (how they were created), and the origin of the information in the record. A good example of how confusing the situation can get involves a death certificate.

Death certificates are normally created immediately after the death of an individual. Be aware that some exceptions, albeit very few, to this rule have been discovered! Death certificates are often associated with the term "primary records". However, much of the information on that certificate pertains to events that happened years before the death, such as the birth date and birthplace of the deceased, and the parents' names, making the record secondary regarding those facts.

Establishing Proof

The concept of proof occurs when the researcher is satisfied that the evidence provides a clear and logical explanation of how a conclusion was reached. If this standard is not met, the researcher must regard the evidence as probable or possible, hence more detective work will be necessary.

Success in genealogical research requires the ability to master the process of testing information for accuracy. Researchers often utilize dozens of sources as they strive to gather evidence to support a relationship. Reliability of sources must always be questioned. Statements made by family members cannot always be taken at face value for a variety of reasons. Official records can also contain a variety of errors. The key to being successful and accurate is the ability to identify and understand the many aspects of each record that must be evaluated for accuracy.

The information we find during the research process, whether primary or secondary, comes in bits and pieces, often without any clear connection to anything else we've collected. Primary information would come from someone who had first-hand information about the person, event or circumstance. Records generated from a primary source were usually compiled at or near the time of the event. Secondary information or sources were normally compiled well after the event took place. Researchers must carefully examine the relationship of the source providing the information. The information found may be a snippet as small as a name with some associated data item, without anything more to help us make a judgment about linking the item to a particular individual.

When gathering information from sources, family members, etc., one must realize that the information may or may not be supported by facts. Most researchers have the eventual goal of proving the accuracy of their information. The following points are important to remember as you progress through the investigative process:

1. Start with the information that seems most likely to lead to a sound conclusion about some family member or relationship.
2. Sometimes a single piece of evidence tells us exactly what we want to know and is called direct evidence. More often, we have to deduce the answer from several items of information. Evidence used in this way is called indirect, or circumstantial, evidence.
3. Sometimes an item of direct evidence will be at odds with a conclusion reached from a collection of indirect evidence.
4. When evaluating indirect evidence, the researcher is faced with weighing the relative reliability of each piece of evidence. Conclusions are based on the item or items that appear to be most reliable in reflecting what really happened. Some also call this making an "educated guess".
5. Documents may be considered official records, but there is no guarantee the information is accurate. Many of our ancestors could neither read nor write by our modern standards. Official records were compiled by clerks based on information provided by the ancestor, neighbor, or any number of possible scenarios. For example, if your ancestor had a very pronounced thick accent, the person taking the information may have simply put down what they thought was said or Americanized a name or place based on what the clerk thought was appropriate.

6. Proof is often in the eye or mind of the beholder, when the individual is convinced that the information is correct. Proof is also subjective. What constitutes proof to one person may seem ridiculous to another.
7. Proving your genealogical information as evidence will always present challenges even in the best of circumstances. How much evidence does it take to prove a genealogical conclusion? This is a subjective question depending upon the researcher and how far they wish to go in terms of proving or disproving their compiled research.
8. Always be aware of the possibility that even the supposedly most proven genealogical fact or the seemingly best-reasoned conclusion from all currently available evidence may have to be reconsidered if new evidence surfaces. This is a rather common occurrence. Remember that your ancestors lived in a world where they faced fewer legal roadblocks. Record keeping, and the need to keep track of names, dates, and places, was non-existent in comparison to the accepted norms in today's society.

Recording Genealogical Information

Before computers, most genealogists used forms such as family group sheets, pedigree charts, research/correspondence logs; census work sheets etc., to keep track of their work. Other researchers found the printed forms too constraining and preferred to write up their findings in narrative formats. Some used style guidelines such as those recommended by various national and state societies. Others used whatever style or format that was convenient for them. Researchers must be prepared to work with whatever they find.

Computers have helped standardize this process. The wide variety of genealogical software programs provide multiple options for entering information into records for individuals, which can then be assembled to produce almost every type of genealogical form, charts in a variety of formats, and even narrative-type reports. Many genealogists now enter information directly from the source into laptop computers. Some record each bit of information into a separate individual record, adding as a note or attachment whatever additional information the source provides.

Points to Remember

For each piece of genealogical evidence we discover, the following seven factors must be considered when evaluating our findings:

1. Where Did The Information Originate?

Most records contain elements indicative of both primary and secondary information. An example of this would be census data. The 1920 census identifies relationships at the time the census was taken. That would be considered primary data. However, the age and birthplace of the adults in the same census are only secondary, since, by definition, primary information is that which was recorded at or near the time of the event. Secondary information was recorded much later than the event it describes, and/or by someone not closely associated with the actual event or was not in a position to know firsthand.

2. What Is The Nature Of The Record Or Document?

The nature of the record or document has no bearing on the reliability of the information. A compilation of marriages, taken from original county records, still presents primary information;

however, the nature of the source allows for the possibility of errors. This is where a consideration of the categories and formats of records can be useful in the evaluation process. Genealogical records comprise two categories—original and compiled records.

- a. Original records were created to record certain events. They were generally written close in time to the events they recorded and are usually the earliest record of such events. A baptismal record is an original record, as are obituaries, military pension papers, business account books, city directories, and most newspaper articles. In all of these examples, someone who had accurate knowledge of the recorded information entered the information into the record.
- b. Compiled records (may also be known by some as records of a previous search) represent a gathering of information from one or more additional sources. These can be original or compiled records or a combination of both. The bottom line is that someone interpreted the information found in other sources. Examples of this would include family histories, biographies, and local histories of a city, county, organization, or township.

Genealogists often use other records in their research that do not directly add names to their files. In compiling a list of sources, gazetteers, dictionaries, and how-to books should not be ignored. This point is being made because they tend to be ignored initially and often result in wasted time and effort. They might be listed under reference sources labeled as background information and finding aids.

3. Format of Record

The formats of the records also make a significant difference when evaluating evidence. Recording errors can appear in any source, but the nature of the errors changes with the format. The actual document, either an original or a compiled record, is often available to the researcher. Virtually as good as the actual document is a photographic copy, including microfilm, microfiche, or photocopy. In either of these cases, the researcher is viewing the record, as it was first made, and any errors are the fault of the person who created the original record. Copy errors may be introduced if the document was transcribed, extracted, or abstracted. Researchers must always take this into consideration when weighing the evidence either for or against the accuracy of an individual record. In the case of a printed copy, the genealogist must account for possible copyist and typographical errors. In a manuscript copy, there may still be copyist errors, but there is now the possibility of misreading the handwriting.

4. How Direct Is the Evidence?

Evidence consists of statements of fact made in a record or the interpretation of the facts in a record. A direct statement specifically states a fact, such as the date of marriage, or death. An indirect statement, also called circumstantial evidence, implies a fact or event. A marriage record is direct evidence that a person was born, but only indirect evidence of the date of birth because the person may have been born 20 or more years before the marriage took place. Researchers prefer direct evidence because indirect evidence is open to interpretation.

5. How Consistent Are The Facts?

Every record includes several facts or alleged facts. The researcher must judge these facts in conjunction with other facts in the same record or in similar records dealing with the same fact or

event. Consistency or lack thereof, determines whether the facts agree with the known, proved, or accepted facts, or if they disagree with what has been known up until the present time. If a birth record indicates a child was born a year after the known death of the father listed on the birth record, a serious disagreement exists which must be resolved before that record can be accepted as proof of the child's paternity.

6. Could The Event Have Occurred?

Does the event fit the circumstances or timeline of major events that happened in the lifetime of the ancestor or family? Original records generally document specific events in the life of a person. Compiled records also list events, along with other facts about individuals. Part of this evaluation process requires the researcher to consider whether the events, as shown in the records; could have occurred in the setting as described by the facts. Some events, such as joining the military at the age of ten or twelve, being born on the father's birthday, having a probate inventory reveal a considerably larger personal estate than recent tax lists or census records justified are less credible than others. Such events are certainly possible but unlikely.

7. Evaluation of Proof

Each record must be evaluated individually. Proof is the accumulation of acceptable evidence. The researcher is responsible for determining if the accumulated evidence represents clear and convincing proof. In evaluating evidence, one must realize that original records are not inherently better or worse than compiled records. However, they do need to be evaluated differently. The same is true with the information contained in the record. Primary information is not necessarily more correct than secondary information. Every genealogist knows of cases where clerks made mistakes in recording or interpreting events and relationships from the original documents or sources. The evaluator must also consider the format, evidence, facts, and events for each record, keeping in mind that each of these aspects must be evaluated differently.

Suggested Web sites for Additional Information and Techniques-

10 Minute Methodology: What is "Reasonably Exhaustive Research" - Judy Keller Fox
<http://bcgcertification.org/blog/2015/09/10-minute-methodology-what-is-reasonably-exhaustive-research/>

About.com - How to Apply the Genealogical Proof Standard to Your Family Tree
<http://genealogy.about.com/cs/citing/a/proof.htm>

Board for Certification of Genealogists - Genealogy Proof Standard
<http://www.bcgcertification.org/resources/standard.html>

Cyndislist: Evidence and Analysis <http://www.cyndislist.com/evidence/gps/>

Family Search Blog - How to Successfully Apply the Genealogy Proof Standard
<https://familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart3/>

Family Search Blog - Understanding the Genealogy Proof Standard
<https://familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart1/>

Family Search.org - Using the Genealogical Proof Standard in Your Research
[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Using the Genealogical Proof Standard in Your Research \(National Institute\)](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Using_the_Genealogical_Proof_Standard_in_Your_Research_(National_Institute))

Family Search Wiki - Genealogy Proof Standard
[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical Proof Standard](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical_Proof_Standard)

Genealogy Proof Standard Planting the Seeds - Michael Hait
<https://michaelhait.wordpress.com/category/genealogical-proof-standard/>

National Genealogical Society - Mastering Genealogical Proof
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Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library, 11/15/2016.