

INTRODUCTION

Challenging research puzzles are unavoidable in genealogy and family history research. When encountered, such challenges are often referred to as “brick walls.” The term itself implies that there are external forces obstructing a researcher from locating essential information. Most often however, the problem lies with the researcher and not the lack of records.

The two most common research obstacles are first, searching in the wrong place and second not knowing what records exist and where to find them.

There is a difference between “brick walls” and dead-end lineages. Two examples of dead-end lineages are first, a child born out of wedlock where the father’s identity is not known and second a foundling child left anonymously with a church or hospital. In these two cases records simply do not exist that might identify unknown parentage. DNA research is a quickly evolving science however, and is worth consideration for solving such dead-end mysteries.

Aside from dead-end lineages mentioned above, all other American genealogical problems can be solved, because the records exist. Every person in America leaves a trail of records, a trail that follows them from birth to death, and often after death. The genealogical challenge is how to identify a particular individual’s record trail and then follow it. A good place to begin is the Genealogical Proof Standard, or GPS.

GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD (GPS)

The overall goal of genealogical research is to reconstruct family trees and histories that are as close to the truth as possible. A standard used to measure the credibility of statements made about ancestral identities, relationships, life events, and biographical details is known as the Genealogical Proof Standard. The GPS is a five-step process, as follows:

1. Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search in reliable sources for all information that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question.
2. Collect and include complete and accurate source citations for each item of information used.
3. Analyze and correlate collected information to assess its quality as evidence.

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4. Resolve conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question; and
5. Arrive at a soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.

RESEARCH TIPS

No one search method works all of the time. Consider the following:

- Make sure you are climbing your own family tree.

- Start with a specific, written goal (record it in your research calendar).
- Use research calendars, record positive and negative search results.
- Begin with the known and work toward the unknown.
- Begin with the most recent known life event and work backward chronologically.
- Know who, why and when a document was created. What information should be primary evidence and what information should be secondary evidence within the record type? For example, a birth date recorded on a death certificate is secondary evidence.
- Re-examine every piece of evidence. Does the information make sense? Does it fit the circumstance?
- Every piece of information provided on a census record can be confirmed or denied from other record sources.
- Consider alternate spellings for surnames. Make a list of as many ways your ancestor's name could be spelled. A simple common surname like "Smith" has been spelled more than 30 ways in historical records in the United States.
- Broaden the geographical area of your search. Political boundaries (state and county lines) have changed over time.
- When using online websites, such as FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com, for best results, begin each search broadly and add filters as necessary to narrow your search.
- When it seems you've reached a dead end, go back and use "FAN club" methodology, which is

to follow an ancestor's known Family, Associates and Neighbors. The missing clue to your research puzzle may be found by following such individuals.

- Broaden your search beyond the birth and death dates of your ancestor. Sometimes, it took years to settle the estate of a deceased ancestor.
- Search again. New records are being made available online every day.
- Always view the original record. It is the best way to avoid transcription and indexing errors.
- “Google” everything. If you encounter a place name in a record that is difficult to read, try entering what the spelling may be in Google.
- Improve your research skills by attending family history conferences, joining a local genealogical group, or by viewing instructional videos on the internet. Visit the “Learning Center” on FamilySearch.org, or “Ancestry Academy” on Ancestry.com.

RECORD GROUPS

When the research trail goes cold, expand your search to more, less used record groups. Below is a partial list of various record types:

- Census records.
- Vital records; birth, marriage, death.
- Land records.
- Probate records.
- Military records.
- County pauper and poor house records.
- City directories.
- Newspapers, birth, marriage and death notices, land transactions, court proceedings, general articles.
- School records.
- Church records, birth, confirmation, marriage, death.
- Cemetery records.
- Funeral home records.
- Ship passenger lists.

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- Immigration and naturalization records.
- Prison records.
- Family Bibles.
- Personal letters.

RECORD REPOSITORIES

To find some of the record types above, expand your research to new record repositories, such as:

- Less common, but very useful websites on the internet.
- County courthouses.
- Public libraries.
- University libraries. Be sure to search their special collections.
- State libraries.
- Local genealogical and historical societies where your ancestors lived.
- Funeral homes.
- State archives.

Printed Resources:

Eichholz, Alice, Red Book American State, County, and Town Sources, 3rd ed. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2004. ISBN-13: 978-1593311667. Everton, George B., The Handybook for Genealogists: United States of America, 10th ed., Draper, Utah: Everton Publishers, 2002. ISBN-13: 978-1932088007. Garner, Bryan A. editor in chief, Black's Law Dictionary, 9th ed. St. Paul, Minn.: Thompson West, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-03141099508.

Greenwood, Val D., The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy, 3rd ed., Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000. Rose, Christine, Courthouse Research for Family Historians, San Jose, Calif., CR Publications, 2004. ISBN-13: 978-092926161.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy, 3rd ed. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-1593312770.

Internet Resources:

<http://wiki.familysearch.org>: search for United States court records.

<http://www.familysearch.org>: this is a free website that includes county court records contained in the collection of the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Digital images of many records are available. All digital images of records may be browsed online, not all records are indexed.

Free Courses are also available online on many topics, including court, land, and wills. To access the courses, scroll to the bottom of the home page and select the link “Free Courses” at the bottom left-hand corner.

<http://www.usgenweb.org>: This website provides links to websites for all 50 states, which in turn, provide links to individual county websites. Useful information available at the county level includes addresses and contact information, records available, maps, order forms, fees, hours of operation, and other pertinent information.