

Family Tree OR Fairy Tale?

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To err is human, and this is especially true for compiled genealogies. By their very nature they contain errors. The bigger the compilation the more errors to be found. Genealogists, therefore, need rules by which sources can be evaluated. If three, or more, of these rules are broken, you are out of luck and need to do more research to ensure the correctness and completeness of that information. Online trees make this process more important than ever.

DIFFERENTIATE:

1. Source citation = identifies what you looked at
2. Analysis = evaluates and compares the factoids within the source(s) you found

LEVELS OF SOURCES: (a sliding scale for original records versus compiled records)

1. Primary = Recorded by an eye witness as close to the time of the event as possible
2. Secondary = Recorded at a later time by someone who may not have been a witness
3. Tertiary = Oral tradition or something recorded much later based on hearsay; or a compiled source that fails to state its sources and conclusions drawn from the same.

TODAY'S STANDARD:

- document every name
- document every date
- document every place
- document every relationship

WHAT IS:

- A source = anything containing information
- Evidence = the information the source contains (considered one factoid or piece of information at a time)
- Proof = a thought process by which you arrive at an assertion of fact based upon the quantity and quality of evidence (or lack thereof)

DIFFERENTIATE:

1. Direct Evidence: stands alone and requires no other supporting facts/sources
2. Indirect Evidence: requires a thought process to draw a conclusion and often requires additional pieces of evidence for that conclusion
3. Indirect evidence may have as much weight as direct evidence, especially if the credibility of the direct evidence is in question.
4. The weight of evidence is based upon quality and credibility and not only upon numerical superiority.

TIP: It helps to take the information found in a compiled source and copy it onto a paper family group sheet (or into a computer database then print a family group sheet). This organizes the information so it is easy to see what you have, and what you don't have. A family group sheet is

the easiest format for applying the following seven rules for evaluating sources. I suggest evaluating that family group sheet (using red ink for your comments/ideas) on three separate days, at three different times of day.

3 STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT OF LUCK:

RULE #1: What sources are quoted, if any?

- Quality: Primary vs. Secondary vs. Tertiary and Original vs. Compiled
- Number of Sources
- All from the same original source?

RULE #2: Relationship of compiler to that ancestral family or ancestor?

- The larger the separation the less likely the accuracy or completeness.
- But there are exceptions in credibility:
 - where a distant cousin has a phenomenal memory
 - where a close relative makes up stories

RULE #3: Has standard usage been followed?

- for names
- for dates
- for places
- for notes & sources
- in the abbreviations used?

RULE #4: How complete is the information from that source?

- “of” places or place of residence
- dates
 - approximated (“about” or “ca”)
 - calculated (age 16 in 1850 = 1834/35)
 - exact (ddmmmyyyy vs. mmmddyyyy vs. dd/mm/yy)
- missing fields of information
- old-style family group sheets lacking children’s marriage places

RULE #5: Is the family structure incomplete or inconsistent?

- gaps in the childbearing years
- ages of spouses at time of marriage
- ages of spouses when first child was born
- ages of spouses when last child was born
- extremely large families (children by two or more wives?)
- historical inconsistencies
- inconsistencies in recorded information. Example: where someone is listed as having died before they were born (from transposed numbers or other typos).

RULE #6: Is there a contradictory migratory pattern?

- for the birth/marriage/death places of any individual in that family
- for the birth/marriage/death places of the spouses of the children in that family
- for the birth/marriage/death places of the parents of the parents in that family

RULE #7: Did the author gain anything by stretching or obscuring the truth?

- possible monetary gain
- lineage society applications
- prestige of being related to a famous or infamous person
- is this the right John SMITH? Isaac LINDSAY? Amon GROSS?
- hiding a family scandal? Avoiding the stigma of race, religion, illegitimacy, birth defects, medical conditions, or undesirable occupations

In genealogy, it is nearly impossible to prove a relationship without core sampling an ancestor's grave for DNA. What genealogists attempt to do is to assemble the best evidence (that is reasonably available), in a sufficient quantity for a thorough (and hopefully low-biased) interpretation and analysis. Later, as more evidence comes to light, a genealogist must be prepared to re-evaluate on the basis of this additional evidence.

TIP: Avoid premature assumptions. They are ticking time bombs. Sooner or later you will end up with egg on your face and errors to your discredit. On the other hand, you do not want to over-research a problem. Let the spirit be your guide and realize that sooner or later it will happen to you.

TIP: Always go back to the original copy of any record, if at all possible.

TIP: Never judge any record/source at face value.

HAVE YOU BEEN SYSTEMATIC?

1. Have you overlooked any available sources?
 - a. because they weren't indexed?
 - b. because they were difficult to read?
 - c. because they were not readily available?
2. Research should be exhaustive and sometimes exhausting.
3. You should have found a least some contradictory evidence.
4. Then you need to find enough weight of evidence to overcome the contradictions.
 - a. especially records from different original sources
 - b. if no direct evidence is available, seek more indirect evidence
 - c. if primary sources are not available, seek more secondary sources

THE GOAL OF THE EVALUATION PHASE: To analyze what you have found, set new goals, and plan your next survey and/or research phases.

CREDIBILITY:

1. Recorded by?
 - a. eye witness
 - b. close relative
 - c. clerk or clergy
2. Recorded when?
 - a. when event occurred
 - b. soon after
 - c. much later (age of testator)
3. Recorded how?
 - a. under oath
 - b. in a diary
 - c. for a lineage society membership application
4. Details about the record or source?
 - a. Sloppy or nearly illegible handwriting
 - b. transcription, abstract, etc.
 - c. altered in any way from the original
 - d. can you identify your ancestor's signature?
 - e. can you identify the scribe/recorder's handwriting?
 - f. historically accurate for that location and time period?
 - g. etiology (and any metamorphoses) of that original record?
5. Biases of the recorder? Biases of the person reporting to the recorder?

Credibility helps you determine the authenticity, accuracy, and probable completeness of any factoid you find in a source. Credibility is not applied to a document as a whole, but rather to each detail in a specified document on a case-by-case basis.

You must understand the historical background to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various types of source materials. You simply can **NOT** say that obituaries are always inaccurate while birth certificates are always accurate.

3 POSSIBLE RESULTS OF A THOROUGH SEARCH:

1. Direct evidence is found that strongly supports one conclusion.
2. In the absence of a single document that gives you the name, date, place, and relationship you are seeking, you may turn up multiple documents that together are of a quality to suggest (circumstantially or indirectly) an answer.
3. When your searching results in conflicting evidence—be it direct evidence, indirect evidence, or both—then one of two courses of action should result.
 - a. You weigh the credibility of the evidence on each side and make a decision (while noting in your database notes or sources why you decided in favor of one side or the other).
 - b. You find neither case to be sufficiently strong to resolve the conflict and deliberately seek more evidence to (hopefully) support one side or the other.
 - c. If you can clearly write out on paper a well-documented argument based upon your methodology, then your conclusion is probably justified.

CONCEPT: Original material tends to be primary material. Derived material ranges from secondary down to tertiary source levels. Compiled genealogies or family histories are typically tertiary sources. When you find a copy (partial or supposedly complete), **ALWAYS** go back to the original source.

DEFINITIONS:

1. Transcripts
 - a. verbatim copies
 - b. typed or handwritten
 - c. rendered as close to the original in terms of spelling and punctuation as possible
2. Abstracts
 - a. abbreviated
 - b. summarize original document
 - c. attempt to leave out details that are not important to your research
3. Extracts
 - a. verbatim transcription
 - b. but of only selected portions of the original
4. Compendiums
 - a. compiled from various types of sources
 - b. using multiple sources
 - c. example: family history book or a county history

FURTHER RESOURCES:

- Elizabeth Shown Mills. *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007.
- Elizabeth Shown Mills. *Evidence Explained: History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* 3rd Edition Revised