

GENTREK: Avoiding Genealogy Errors

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Regardless of our approach, some general errors will creep in if we aren't prepared. Let's discuss some of these errors and methods to avoid them.

Lack of Focus and Preparation

We often get excited about our projects and let our imagination run amok. This is particularly true when we find our first piece of solid information, such as your great-great-grandfather listed on an early census. However, without focus and preparation we might take a jackrabbit approach--hopping to and fro--wasting time, money, and rendering poor results.

So, **define the project**. Ask yourself, am I looking for my family's genealogy? Am I trying to find out the "who, what, where, when and how" of my ancestors' origination? Or, could it be that my goal is to find information for both topics? Later, **GENTREK** will have a talk on the many approaches to genealogy. You'll likely find yourself in many of them. <G>

After deciding, take time and prepare. **Analyze your goal and focus on one step at time**. Dissect the project into bite-sized pieces, making each one palatable and not overwhelming. This really is the quicker route to the information you seek. Practice will convince you.

If you're new to research, you must do some tedious background work first. Go to FamilySearch.org, About.com or ShoeString Genealogy and download some basic techniques and learn how to properly do research. How often have we embarked in a new project (genealogy or otherwise) only to discover much later that if we'd prepared better, it would not only have taken less time and effort, but would have been more enjoyable, too? You definitely want to avoid the hit-and-miss approach.

Let me recommend some particularly good genealogy reference books. **Evidence! Citation and Analysis for the Family Historian** by Elizabeth Shown Mills teaches how to document and analyze your findings. I bought mine for \$17, but I see it has gone up to \$24 now. **It is still worth it**. Also Val Greenwood's **The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy**, is one to take on every research trip. "Don't leave home without it." If you don't have it already, it is available now in PDF format.

Many books are good starting points and can answer just about any question you may have about general genealogical research and documentation. Later **GENTREK** will review several genealogical reference books that you may (or may not) wish to add to your library. Evidence is currently reviewed on ShoeString Genealogy.

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Lack of Documentation

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Another error to avoid is a lack of documentation. Regardless how you approach your research, **it must be documented. It must be reliable and in a logical sequence.** As I and most of the other Hosts here have mentioned time and again--the main point to remember is start with what you know and work backwards ... always ... without exception, documenting each of these backward steps.

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So? It's boring to start with yourself, but that IS where successful research starts. Think of it this way: What if you knew about each relative all that you know of yourself? Frightening, isn't it? On the other hand, are there things about each person that you wish you did know? OK, from yourself go to your parents, then to your grandparents AND after each step, what do we do? (Everyone say 3 times: "Document our findings.") Right. And what do we document? All the information and source of that information. And what else? (Think future time-savings here.) Document **when and where** you encountered this information, *i.e.*, Name of Library, call number, website URL, and date you found it. I see no future value in recording the actual time that I found information, however, unless I'm working for others.

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As you document what you've researched so far, you can prove what you're saying. However, be prepared for some disparagement because most people don't like being corrected--especially when they're wrong.

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Ignoring Collateral Lines

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Our next step is finding four sets of great-grandparents. It is here where we can encounter real trouble. This trouble may be caused by the researcher's lack of interest in the whole family. Tracing only our direct lines is a serious mistake!

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Your direct line is your lineal descent, while your aunts, uncles, cousins, great-aunts and uncles, are collateral descendants. Studying these collateral folks is essential to your success. Collateral lines not only broaden the family history record, it can lead you to information your direct line is lacking. You'll find no greater advocate of Collateral Research than Emily Anne Croom. I've attended sessions she's conducted and even some online through Barnes & Noble University.

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Imagination and Supposition

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Once you have found four sets of great-grandparents, you will find how easy it is to start imagining things. A little imaginative thinking is good. A lot of it gets us in trouble. At best, the work will meander all over. You can also spend a lot of time on false leads. At worst, you'll come to wrong conclusions and that wastes your time and money. Besides that, you'll miss your family's GENUINE history.

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Let's say we have a family tradition that we descend from a Pawnee Indian. Although this may be true, how much time and energy will you spend chasing this undocumented ghost? Do the geography and era coincide with the possibility? This error is most often made by researchers who haven't studied tribal histories. Native American ancestry is traceable if we follow the rules of sound research.

Always check out family traditions. If possible, learn the source. Try to find out about what time the tradition first appeared in your family. This gives you a place and time so you can investigate any records that either help support your tradition or refute it. One tradition my father passed on to me was that we were related Lillian Russell, the American actress. How easy is that to disprove? The more famous the individual, the more documented her life will be. Russell was not even her given name, but her stage name! Disproved.

Mistakes about national origin can distort a family's history. Your great-aunt Mary may have denied a particular nationality because it was not "the thing to be" in her day. Thus, she might pass on what she believes is the truth; in reality, though, great-aunt Mary "withheld evidence."

Or let's say great-aunt Mary has told us that she doesn't know anything about her family history and doesn't want to talk about it. But we've seen our surnames in a list--ship passenger, wagon train, settlement, or whatever. Does that mean this is OUR family? Of course not. But how much time should be spent proving it is? None, in my opinion. Rather, try to prove that it isn't and move on. Sometimes this approach delightfully backfires and you find they ARE your family.

Common Names

Related to the above is the "common name syndrome." I've already presented "Common Surnames" in the past. (Although, I could be coaxed into doing it again.) Keep in mind here that some families changed their names upon arrival on American soil and are unrelated to others of the same name. Also, be aware of misspellings and alternate spellings of a surname.

Be aware that historical pronunciation and the spelling of what American-English ears thought they heard and what was really meant are often very different. A story is told of the woman who had twelve children. When she delivered her thirteenth child, she asked her doctor if **he** would name the new baby girl. The mother was delighted when she spoke the name the doctor recorded on the birth certificate – she said she wouldn't have thought of such a beautiful name as "Femolly." It's a true story and the name was spelled f-e-m-a-l-e.

Laziness

Another pitfall to avoid is the excuse "There are no written records. I looked everywhere. What am I supposed to do?" When we hear this, we know it either comes from a beginning researcher, or it comes from somebody who is a bit lazy. They must think they just really can't be bothered to take time to do their own research. Research is hard work. Inexperience can be corrected, but how do we overcome laziness?

Borrowed Research

Another thing we see often is people swapping their family trees. They take a little from each swap and truly believe they have done research. Their reasoning seems to be "It must be true because I read it in three books." Not everything in print is accurate ... or even close. The "publishing anything is better than publishing nothing" attitude is not only a mistake but it hinders others. There are just too many untapped primary sources to have to recycle unverified information.

Books can be great secondary resources betimes, but it's prudent to research your author and his or her sources before using the information. When the work is documented, the information checks out, and you use it, be sure to credit to the person who did the work. If their work doesn't check out, then you certainly don't want to be caught quoting them even with proper credit given! If you are satisfied the work is documented and correct, then use the book as a guideline, but not as proof. Be careful with secondary sources.

I shared my information with a cousin at a Family Reunion. I gave her a copy of my file, which had taken about three years to create. She gave me very little that was new and none of it was documented. A year later, I saw my information posted on a website by her, as if it were her research. Word of caution! Make a copy of your family file, put the word "shareable" at the end of the filename; such as "Powell Family - shareable" or "Powell - Shd"; then abridge it. You could omit locations, sources, dates, anything to identify that copy of your family file as the "sharable" copy. Then send that file to anyone wanting to "share" information. Now, if someone lays claim to your research and publish it as theirs, you will know. This must sound selfish, since one of the purposes of family research is to share information with other researchers. But, be careful about it, too. It is so disheartening to see your hard work posted on a website with someone else's name as the author. We all rely on the research of others when compiling our family information. Use that information to lead you to additional research and always give the other person credit as the source.

One of the major drawbacks of family genealogies and histories, especially those published in the Nineteenth Century, was the lack of adequate documentation. As often as not, the author--in her zeal to trace the family back to the Mayflower or other illustrious beginnings--made serious mistakes. The most common one was assuming that an ancestor was the descendant of a particular family with the same name without proper documentation.

Many newcomers to believe that if they found family information at the FHC or on the Internet, it must be so. The LDS Church and their Family History Centers and libraries are excellent resources, but remember that people just like us compiled the genealogies you find there, or on the Internet. Those genealogies are only as good as their documentation and in most cases, the documentation isn't shown. The greatest advantage of using LDS sources is the extensive microfilm and microfiche collection of original records. You will need access to a branch library to use the collection, unless you can go to Salt Lake City, Utah. It would be so wonderful to have all those microfilmed files imaged for Internet access, though. (I've heard that the work has already begun.)

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Conclusion

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There are several other errors to avoid in genealogy research, but these are certainly central ones. If we keep these things in mind we'll be prepared to collect, document and analyze our findings. We won't have to rely on copying what others have said or written--which may or may not be correct. We'll have documented evidence instead of just guesses and we can develop our next strategy with confidence knowing we're going in the right direction.

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Learn to develop and trust your own skills. Don't just accept what someone else has done, and use it as your own research.

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