Research Analysis

Genealogy is all about researching and collecting documents and pictures that tell us who our relatives are, both dead and alive, and creating a family tree. Some people do it for fun and are not concerned about analyzing the accuracy of the information and records. Others want to be sure they have the right relative, the right John Smith in the family tree and that the records prove each link from us to each person in the tree.

In this internet information age there is a lot of data on the internet and we tend to do most of our research sitting at our computer. Unfortunately not all information on the internet is there or correct. It is easy to fall into some of the traps the internet holds (see attached article "Mouse Traps" by Lauren Eisenstodt). And, it is all too easy to just use the internet for all our sources of information.

When we use the internet we want to make sure that the website we get information from is a good website and has a good source. See the attached articles on "Check Your Sources!" by Janice Nickerson and "Considering The Source" by David A. Fryxell.

Testing sources, information and evidence we receive from the internet, libraries, government records, etc is part of developing a correct family tree and becoming a creditable genealogist. To this end professional genealogist have developed a "Genealogical Proof Standard". The G.P.S. tests your sources, information and evidence to conclude and prove you have the right stuff, the right relative, the right John Smith.

The Genealogical Proof Standard has five steps: (1) Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search for records (2) Cite your sources (3) Analyze your findings (4) Resolve conflicting evidence (5) Write your conclusions. The attached article "5 Steps to a Healthy Family Tree" created by Amy Johnson Crow, CG, Anne Gillespie Mitchell and Juliana Smith from Ancestry.com is a good article that explains the five steps of the Genealogical Proof Standard.

Here we are going to concentrate on step 3 – Analyze your findings, though we will also touch on steps 4 and 5.

The chart on the next page is from *Evidence Explained* by Elizabeth Shown Mills, who is considered the leading genealogist on source citations and evidence analysis. She explains that sources give us information, from which we identify evidence. All undergo the evaluation-analysis process to produce the proof we need for the fact about our ancestor. This is how we are going to analyze our research.

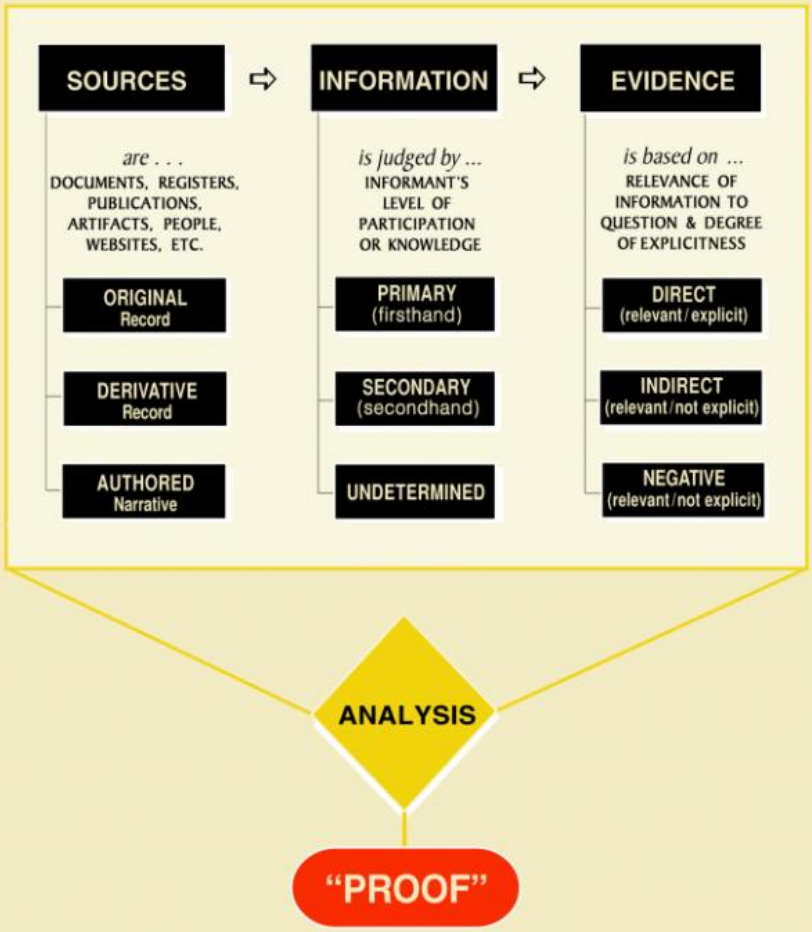
Fig. 1

Evidence Analysis

A Research Process Map©

Basic Principle:

SOURCES provide INFORMATION from which we identify EVIDENCE for ANALYSIS. A sound conclusion may then be considered "PROOF."



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Sources

Sources are the forms in which we find our genealogical information. They may be historic documents, family papers, books, websites, photographs, or verbal stories.

We employ our evaluation skills to question the reliability and accuracy of a source. Many sources were created for purposes other than genealogy and family history, and we need to remember that, because part of our testing is to ask “Why was this record created?” for what purpose?

There are three types of sources:

An original source is a document that is the first written or first recording or reporting of an event. Examples: some Vital Records, the original form or piece of paper that the census taker wrote his/her findings on when they knocked on your door and asked you questions, etc. Original sources are tangible pieces of paper or photos we can hold in our hand or digital copies of the record that we can view ourselves. Because we can see the actual document or photo we can determine what it says about our relative, or what it doesn’t. We can draw our own conclusions based on what we see and know, without someone else telling us.

A derivative source is one that is based on a prior source, whether the original source still exists or not. It has been repeated or transcribed or abstracted or rearranged from an earlier source, increasing the risk of error. Examples: indexes, database entries, abstracts and transcriptions of a document.

Before the digital age many documents could not be seen on the internet. What we had were transcripts or abstracts of the document. Someone had looked at the original and wrote out what it said, either word for word, or paraphrased it and put it on the internet. These were considered transcripts and abstracts of the original record.

Today we have digital copies of the record (which can be accepted as an original source) and an index of the document (indexes make it easy for us to search by name). When you go on Ancestry and look at a census record, you have a digital image of the original census record but before you see that image you have a summary or index of what it says. That index is a derivative source. Someone looked at the original census record and wrote down what it says to make the index.

Anytime someone writes down what they think a record says it can have mistakes. Maybe they can’t read the writing, or maybe the record is poor quality making it difficult to read.

Authored Narratives is a hybrid works. Authors of historical narratives will study many sources and synthesize findings. From that, they reach their own conclusions and write a paper or book. Because the core information in the paper or book comes from other sources, much of an authored work is derivative. However the author's conclusions and narrative will be his/her original creation and therefore an original source. But together they are labeled under Authored Narratives.

Information

Information is a statement that a source contains or reports (and many pieces of information or data may be in one source). In other words, "Information" is the fact or facts that we get from our source. Getting a birth date (information) from a birth certificate (source) is an example.

Primary information about people, events or relationships comes from someone who was a participating party in the occurrence. First hand knowledge. The person telling the information was there to witness the event. A doctor at a person's death reports the death date and time (primary information) on the death certificate (source),

Secondary information is the giving or reporting of information by someone who was not directly involved with the occurrence at the time it took place. It is second hand knowledge. A deceased person's birth date on a death certificate is usually Secondary Information as the person giving that information was not at the decease's birth.

Undetermined or unknown involvement is not being able to discern who gave the information and what level of knowledge they have of the event. Example: Census records do not tell us who gave the census taker the information on our ancestor. Was it the head of household, the maid, or the 10 year old that lives next door? We do not know. So when we evaluate a census record we must keep this in mind when deciding the reliability of the census information.

Evidence

Evidence might be described as all of the information relevant to the problem at hand, whether it proves our point or not. Example: all the records we can find that have grandpa's birth information gives us evidence of his birth date. This will include information from records that could have an incorrect birth date. Evidence of when he

was NOT born can be just as important and helpful in proving when he did (see negative evidence).

If you understand that you must seek out and find as many sources and as much information as you can to support any fact about events, identity and relationships, you will soon find that not all your information agrees. Names or dates or places may differ among the various sources you consult.

Evidence is our interpretation of information that we consider relevant to a particular research question. It also exists in three basic classes.

Direct Evidence: information that obviously addresses the question in one way or another. It may not give us a complete answer. The evidence may require us to make a calculation, a correlation, or a conversion of some type; but if it addresses—in some way—issues involved in our research question, it is direct evidence. Example: A birth certificate gives us the birth date. It is direct evidence. Most census records do not give us an exact birth date like a birth certificate does.

Indirect Evidence: information that does not directly address our question, although our experience suggests a way to use the information to discover direct evidence or to help build a case. Indirect evidence is seldom obvious and often missed. Example: Census records don't list the exact birth date of our ancestor. They often do list a birth year or the age of the ancestor and where they were born. We can use that information to help us determine a birth date and a place to look for a birth record. Census records than are indirect evidence for a birth date.

Negative Evidence: Conclusions or implications that can be drawn from the absence of a situation that should exist given the circumstances.

Caution: negative evidence is not the same as negative findings. Merely not finding what we hope to find is a routine matter in historical research and one that thoroughness often resolves.

Negative evidence, on the other hand, remains negative evidence no matter how much more we find. Negative evidence requires us to understand and consider the implications of what should have occurred under a specific set of circumstances.

Example: A tax list in which our ancestor is not listed. This may provide evidence that our ancestor was a minor, too old to pay taxes, deceased, or living some place else.

The Evaluation Process

This process—the analysis of the source, its information, and the evidence we draw from it—is only the first step toward a conclusion. It is a step we repeat over and again, as research progresses.

Most of us are doing an evaluation process as we research and look at various records. We are asking ourselves is this our relative, is this his birth date, is this where he lived, based on what we already know. This we do in our head and usually not on paper.

However, if we have looked at several records and they all say something a little different we have what is called Conflicting Data. Here we should write it down so we can compare all the records to determine what is most reliable. Writing it down often gives us a clearer picture and we can draw better conclusions.

Conclusions must be based on the whole body of evidence that we assemble. In the evaluation stage, which we should repeat each time we make new findings, we weigh

the quality of each source against the other;

the credibility of each piece of information against the other; and

the strength of each piece of evidence against the other.

We correlate details. We compare and contrast them in a search for patterns, dissimilarities, or conflicts that could strengthen or weaken a conclusion. If we have multiple pieces of evidence pointing to a conclusion, we consider whether each piece of underlying information is independently created—or whether all might be tracked back to a common source. Obviously we do not want to use just one source.

Example of 3 sources coming from one source: Grandma's birth record has a different date of birth than grandma's death certificate, her obituary and her grave marker. However, the last three sources have the same date. All three of those documents received their information from grandma's friend who was there when she died. Since she was not there for Grandma's birth chances are she has the incorrect date. Since all three sources of information (death certificate, obituary and grave marker) came from one source (the friend) we cannot treat them as separate sources.

It is also at this point that we apply the Genealogical Proof Standard to measure the strength of any hypothesis we might be forming.

Proof and Conclusions

Once we have analyzed our sources, information and evidence, and determined that this document proves our ancestors fact, we must write out our conclusion. That is to say we must write out why this source, as opposed to other sources, proves our point. Why did we pick this source? Or conversely, why doesn't this source prove our point? Both types of conclusions need to be written out so when faced with the next brick wall we can easily go back and determine why we accepted this evidence or why we didn't accept it. It also helps others who look at our research to determine if we are correct in our analysis. Did we find the right John Smith?

Sometimes writing out our reasoning and conclusions also helps us weed out wrong data, sends us in a research direction we did not see before, or helps us in our overall analysis of our family tree. Putting words to paper has many beneficial results.

While we may be correct in our analysis today, tomorrow may bring new records into our research that will change our conclusions. We can only conclude with what we have currently researched and analyzed. Tomorrow may be the next generations work and it will help them to have your reasoning and conclusions written down on paper.

How to Analyze Your Research

Technically we want to go through all the steps of Evidence Analysis (Elizabeth Shown Mills chart on page 2) for each person and each fact about the person. However, some facts about a person are so overwhelmingly proven by the number of sources, each saying exactly the same thing about the fact that it is not necessary to go through this analysis or writing a conclusion.

Conversely, for those facts that have several sources that give different information about the fact, or if you are having trouble finding a fact, going through the analysis process is a must.

The easiest way is to use a chart that will list each of your sources for the fact you are trying to prove and which has all the elements of the Evidence Analysis chart on page 2. This chart will help you determine which source is more reliable and help you draw conclusions after evaluating your sources.