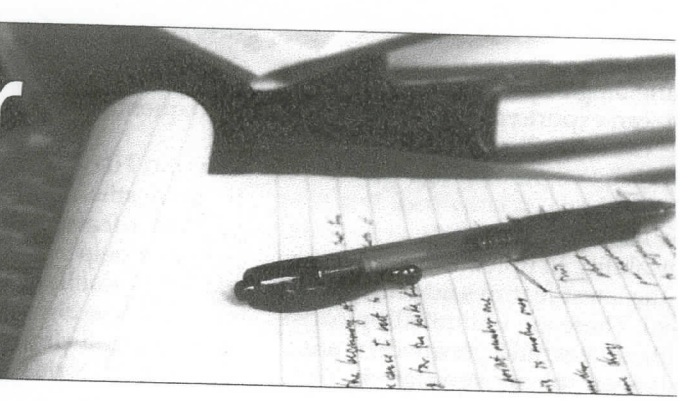
Check Your Sources!

ACCORDING TO JANICE NICKERSON, NOT ALL WEBSITES ARE CREATED EQUAL



THE ADVENT OF the Internet was a huge boon for researchers of all kinds — especially genealogists. But just as some books in a library are more trustworthy than others, some websites provide more credible, reliable information than others. How do you tell the good from the bad? You ask who, what, when, where, why and how questions and pay close attention to the answers.

WHO CREATED THE WEBSITE?

It's important to know who is behind any website you plan to rely on for information. Was it created by a government department? A public institution such as a library or archives? A private company? An individual hobbyist? Government sites are not always the most trustworthy, but in most Western countries, at least, you can assume there are many safeguards in place to ensure accuracy. A company that hires indexers whose first language is different from the one used in the records will likely produce a lower quality index than one that hires local native speakers. Professional researchers will provide even better accuracy, as they know how to read old handwriting, know the old names of locations in the area and understand the context of the records. Individual hobbyists run the gamut from brand new dabblers who don't worry much about accuracy to very diligent and responsible researchers whose work is impeccable. You'll need to read whatever information is provided to decide which kind of person you're dealing with. If you cannot find any information about the person or organization that created the site, be wary.

WHY WAS THE SITE CREATED?

This may go hand-in-hand with the answer to the "who" question. Government departments usually create websites as part of their mandate to serve the public. This is likely also true of a public institution. What about the private company? Is it a for-profit subscription site? If so, you will want to dig deeper for assurances of the quality of the information, as there may be incentives to "cut corners" to provide larger amounts of data, quickly. If the site was created by an individual, what was the person's motivation?

WHAT KIND OF RECORDS OR INFORMATION IS PROVIDED?

Are you looking at scanned copies of original records? Word-for-word transcripts of documents? Abstracts, indexes or summaries? Family trees compiled from a variety of sources? The closer you get to the original, the better. If you're looking at a compiled history, does the author provide footnotes describing his or her sources? If not, again, be wary. Always read whatever introductory information is provided to describe the records you're looking at. You need to know what dates are covered, what geographic locations, how the records were selected and where the information came from.

I've seen many sites where a person provides online transcriptions of gravestone inscriptions from a cemetery they have visited — but if you read carefully, you'll see that they only transcribed the stones pertaining to their own family, not the entire cemetery. If you didn't read the introduction, you might assume that since your ancestor's gravestone isn't listed, your ancestor wasn't buried in that cemetery.

WHEN WAS THE SITE LAST UPDATED?

This information may be importan especially if the information you're looking for is fairly recent. An index to local newspaper obituaries, for example, might keep up with newly published notices on a weekly or monthly basis, or it might have stopped some time ago Some commercial websites update their information very frequently, others lag a little.

WHERE ARE THE ORIGINALS?

Any conscientious researcher will describe the location of the original records it has scanned, transcribed or indexed. If the site doesn't provide actual images of the original records, look for information about their location (or the location of microfilm copies) so you can examine them yourself to be sure the transcription is accurate, hasn't missed anything and provides enough context for you to fully understand the information.

HOW WAS THE INFORMATION ON THE SITE PROCESSED?

This is the toughest information to find, but sometimes the most important. A newspaper that was scanned and processed using optical character recognition software will produce a different quality of index from one that was read and indexed by a human. This is particularly true of very old newspapers, as the print quality was so poor that most OCR technology can't accurately interpret individual words.

Finally, don't forget to record the URL of the site in your notes. You never know when you might want to go back and re-check something!

Source Documentation Cheat Sheet

Examples of what to enter in your genealogy software

Family Tree MAGAZINE

	MASTER SOURCE					CITATION DETAIL
Source	**Title**	**Author**	**Publisher**	**Location/Repository**	**Call No.**	**Volume/Page No.**
Bible record	Green-White-Crume Family Bible		New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1829	Rick Crume, Glyndon, Minnesota		
Book	*A History of Old Tioga Point and Early Athens, Pennsylvania*	Louise (Welles) Murray	Athens, Pennsylvania.: L.W. Murray, 1908	Library of Congress, Washington, DC	F159 A9M9	pp. 484-485
Cemetery marker	William Myers tombstone, Schenevus Cemetery, Maryland, Otsego County, New York		Photographed by Rick Crume, May 2005			
Census record	[Jonathan Hall household,]* 1850 US Census, Cuba, Allegany County, New York		Ancestry.com		<www.ancestry.com>	pp. 250-251
Church record	Register of baptisms, marriages and interments, 1759-1865	St. Paul's Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Episcopal)		Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah	FHL microfilm 384,843	p. 217
International Genealogical Index	[Thomas Morgan and Joan Jones marriage entry,]* International Genealogical Index (IGI)		FamilySearch		<www.familysearch.org>	citing microfilm 934,310 for batch 7,401,710, sheet 20
Land record	[Deed of sale, William Pennington to Jarvis A. Grant,]* Clay County, Minnesota deeds			Clay County Recorder, Moorhead, Minnesota		book B, p. 142
Military record	Martin B. Van Buren, New York, Revolutionary War pension file		HeritageQuest Online		<www.heritagequestonline.com>	
Obituary	Isabella Pennington obituary		*The Aroostook Times*, Houlton, Maine, Friday, 16 December 1898		Fogler Library, University of Maine, Orono	p. 7
Oral history interview	Oral interview with Doris (Morgan) (Lee) Kuehn of Crookston, Minnesota, 4 July 1992	Rick Crume, interviewer	Notes by Rick Crume	Rick Crume, Glyndon, Minnesota		
Passenger list	Ellis Island		The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation		<ellisisland.org>	
Pedigree database	Howard C. Griffin Ancestors	Karen Hale	RootsWeb's WorldConnect Project		<worldconnect.rootsweb.com>	
Vital record	John Hall entry, Rice County Deaths			Clerk of the District Court, Rice County, Faribault, Minnesota		

* optional