5 Steps to a Healthy Family Tree

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ancestry.com

We invest a lot of time, money, and, let's face it, heart into our family tree. With the kind of love we've invested, it's important to make sure that the links between generations and the links between our ancestors and the records we've attached to them are strong and healthy. The following five steps make up the Genealogical Proof Standard, which is the standard established by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. These common-sense points can save you from wasted time and the heartache that comes with finding you've been chasing down someone else's ancestors.

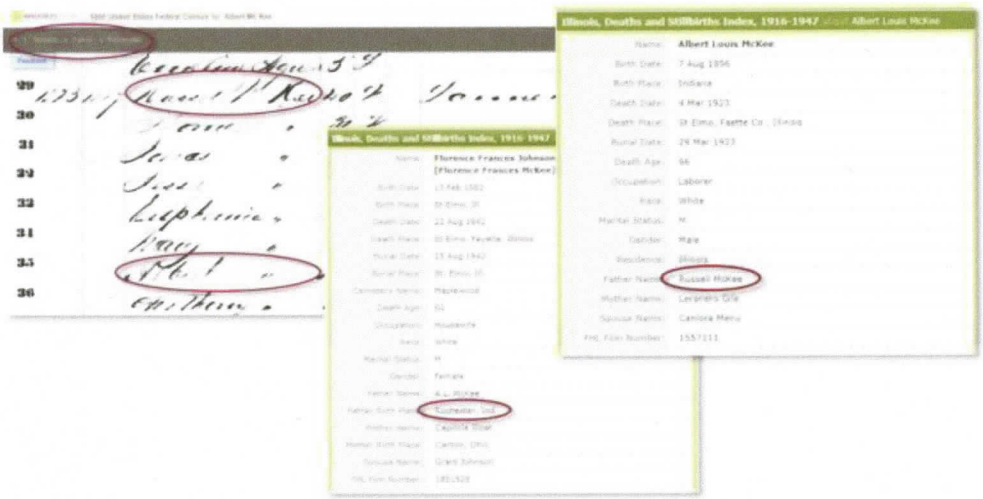
1. Conduct a Reasonably Exhaustive Search

So you're looking at your online tree and a shaky leaf appears. You follow that leaf to a hint about your ancestor. The record doesn't have a lot of detail about your ancestor, but it does name the parents, and you've been looking for those names for years. The basics match, but is that enough? Should you attach it?

Records can contain erroneous information, so relying on one record is never a good idea. It's important to seek out multiple sources that were created independently of one another. The more variety, the better. Plus, it often takes more than one record to make the case that you have the right person. Let's look at an example.

Albert McKee consistently lists his place of birth as Indiana in the 20th-century census records that enumerate him with his wife and children. So when we find an Albert McKee who is about the right age in 1860 in Rochester, Fulton County, Indiana, it can be tempting to jump back in time to his childhood and assume right away that it's him. Before we attach the entire family, with his newly found parents to our tree, though, we should look for some supporting evidence. McKee isn't exactly an uncommon name, and there could very well have been more than one Albert McKee born in Indiana in the mid-1850s. We need to look for more records.

Fortunately, we can also find Albert's father's name in this death index entry for Albert and his birthplace on his daughter Florence's record in that same death index, both of which match details in that Rochester census record. (Of course the next step will be to request a copy of those original death records so they can be examined for further clues.)



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So before committing new individuals and their families to your tree, be sure to search for corroborating evidence to support your theory. If you run into conflicting evidence, you will need to keep searching, but it's a lot easier to add a family when you're sure you have the right people than to remove an entire branch that was added before a thorough search was conducted.

2. Cite Your Sources

If you are going to prove a relationship, a date, or some other piece of genealogical knowledge, you need to know where the information came from and how reliable it is.

And don't trust your memory! Every experienced genealogist can tell you a story of woe about how they forgot to write down where a significant fact came from, only to never be able to find it again.

A source citation will also give you an idea of how much validity you want to give the information. A birth date in an index of birth records does not have the same weight as a birth date in the actual record. If you find a birth date for a person in a death record and a different one in a marriage record, you have to make a decision on who supplied the information and which one is more likely to be correct.

So why should you cite your sources?

1. So you can find the source again if you need it
2. So you can evaluate the quality of the source when you have conflicting evidence

How do you cite your sources? Elizabeth Shown Mills has written the accepted guidelines in *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, and you can also find more information on her website EvidenceExplained.com.

If you want to begin with the basics, these five videos will get you started:

- Citing Your Sources Can Be Fun and Useful!
- Sourcing Your Vitals—Citations for Birth, Marriage and Death Records
- Sourcing Information Not on Ancestry.com
- Source Citations Are Not as Hard as You Think
- How Good Is That Record? Evaluating Sources

3. Analyze Your Findings

Sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees. When we're looking at records independently, we can miss problems with our research (such as conflicting evidence) and opportunities (such as clues and new avenues to explore). Take a break from gathering new records to review what you have. Organize the details in a way that makes sense. Timelines are wonderful tools for analyzing and correlating the evidence you've collected.

Start by gathering all the records you've collected on an ancestor. Review each one and organize each fact from the records chronologically, citing each fact and its source. Including an abstract, extract, or in some cases a transcription of the record can be helpful as well. Go back through the facts that are explicitly stated

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and analyze them, looking for conclusions you can draw based on what you have. For example, Mary Kelly was born in Ireland c. 1817, and her sister Jane was born in New York sometime between 1819 and 1825. From that we can estimate that the family immigrated between 1817 and 1825. Their brother James' death certificate provides additional evidence to support this time frame.

Timeline

1814-1815
Kelly, James – born in Ireland
1880 US Census data, age 65=b. 1815[1]
Death cert. age 82 in 1896=b. 1814[2]

ca. 1817
Kelly, Mary A.
1860 Census, age 43, born in Ireland[3]

ca. 1817-25
Kelly family emigrates from Ireland
Estimated from birth dates and places of Mary and Jane found on noted U.S. Census records. Also, from James Kelly death certificate in 1896-- been in country for 75 years = 1821.[4])

6 Jun 1819 (or c. 1822 or 1825)
Kelly, Jane
Death ctf. 10 January 1882 she was 62 years, 7 months, 4 days; = 1819[5]
1870 census, age 48, born NY=1822[6]
1880 census, age 55, born NY=1825[7]

Translate dates into ages and ages into dates for more perspective. Be on the lookout for inconsistencies, such as parents having children at a very early age, or at an advanced age, or someone being in two places at the same time. For more information on timelines, download our free step-by-step guide.

4. Resolve Conflicting Evidence

Sooner or later, it's bound to happen. You'll have two sources that don't agree with each other. Rather than flipping a coin to decide which is right, take a closer look at each source and see where there might be errors.

Just because someone writes something down doesn't mean that it's correct. Think about who gave the information. Did he or she know what they were talking about? Did they have any reason to lie?

Consider the time between the event and when the record was made. The longer it takes to record something, the more fallible our memories become. Also consider what form the record is in. Are you looking at the original/digitized record, or are you looking at just the index? Get as close to the original as possible.

Sometimes resolving conflicting evidence requires getting more evidence. (It's that "reasonably exhaustive search" again.)

Emma Bell Mason, daughter of Philip Mason, married Jonathan Groves in Washington County, Ohio, on 31 January 1901. According to the marriage record at the probate court, Emma "is 20 years of age on the 27 day of July, 1900," which would make her birthday 27 July 1880. However, Philip states in his Civil War pension application that she was born 27 July 1881. (Emma's birth record has not been found.)

Emma's marriage record, however, has at least one error on it. In one place, she is listed as Emma Bell Fox (appears to be an error due to being married by Rev. C. J. Fox). It's important to note that Emma wasn't the one who filled out the record; the probate clerk did.

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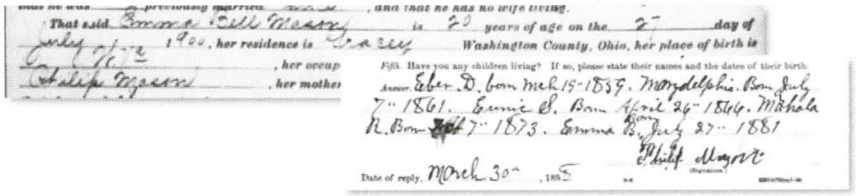
That said Emma Bell Mason is 20 years of age on the 27 day of July of 1900, her residence is Dover Washington County, Ohio, her place of birth is
Philip Mason, her mother
Fifth. Have you any children living? If so, please state their names and the dates of their birth.
Answer. Eber D. born Mch 19-1859. Mary Delphia. Born July 7th 1861. Ernie S. Born April 26th 1864. Mahala R. Born July 7th 1873. Emma B. Born July 27th 1881
Philip Mason
Date of reply. March 30th, 1905

The error calls into question how carefully the clerk filled out this record. Also, with the date being in January, could the clerk have had his years confused (similar to how we keep writing the wrong year on a check well into February)?

Emma's father would presumably know when she was born. The Civil War pension application is in his handwriting, so he is the one giving the information. Also, Emma was still living at home when Philip made his statement, and he had no reason to lie about her age.

The 1900 census and 1920 census also corroborate an 1881 birth, though those records don't have as much weight, since we have no way of knowing who gave the information. Until Emma's birth record turns up and points to the contrary, the evidence is pointing to her birth date being 27 July 1881.

5. Write Your Conclusions

Don't let the word "write" scare you off. Writing your conclusions is an important step, but it doesn't have to be painful. You don't have to write the definitive work on your ancestors, but you should write up why you think they are your ancestors and why you think these facts are correct.

Writing your conclusions will help you spot gaps in your research. As you look through your notes and compile your sources, you will think of things that you hadn't considered before. You will notice things like a marriage date being based solely on a census and not a copy of the marriage record.

Like good source citations, a written conclusion will help you when you revisit research that you haven't looked at in a while. That written explanation will serve as the condensed version of all of your research notes so you don't have to scavenge through countless folders (physical or electronic). This lets you pick up and carry on your research faster and more effectively.

That written explanation will also help others see what your train of thought was. This goes beyond the source citation. In the case of Emma Bell Mason's birth, it would be tempting to cite just her father's Civil War pension file, since that is the source you believe to be correct. However, if you don't write down why you trust the pension more than her marriage record, other researchers could easily dismiss it. Adding a sentence that you've looked for her birth record but have not found it would also let others know that you are aware that the "best" record might still be out there.

Writing can take many forms. You can write paragraphs, a bulleted list, a spreadsheet, or anything in between. The main thing is to get your thoughts and sources all in one place.

You can add notes to Family Tree Maker or your tree on Ancestry.com. You can print them out and add to your folders or notebooks. Blog it. Facebook it. Just make sure that you write it down somewhere. You'll find that the more you write, the more you'll want to know about your ancestors. Rather than being something scary, writing will end up being a springboard to more research ideas.