

Overcoming Genealogical Research Challenges and Dead-ends

Overcoming dead-ends, also known as brick walls is an occupational hazard with genealogists. These challenges are an inevitable part of the genealogical research process. The good news is that many dead-ends can be overcome over time with patience and good detective work. Most genealogists often find methods or strategies to overcome these roadblocks. The process involves creativity, knowledge of history of the ethnic group, and having confidence in your gut feelings.

Sometimes historical factors are such that in the end, a researcher may be forced to make an educated guess. While this is not the ideal solution, an educated guess made with a careful examination of the facts, should not be viewed as a failure. Remember that many of our ancestors lived in a time period before record keeping was viewed as a everyday necessity. Many of our ancestors were attracted to life in the New World to escape from the big-brother syndrome that prevailed in much of Europe and the British Isles.

Regardless of the level of your research, you should always be asking the question, “Does the information fit the circumstances?” Being a genealogist will provide you with the opportunity to practice some of the same techniques employed by private detectives. That fact in and of itself can be strong motivator to many newcomers and seasoned genealogists alike. Overcoming these problems is what makes genealogy interesting.

Attending genealogical seminars and workshops often play a significant role in helping researchers overcome these challenges. Taking the time to attend such workshops may offer the following benefits:

1. Provide the opportunity to talk to fellow researchers.
2. Sometimes just to talk to someone who will listen and shares the same passion for genealogy.
3. Share research problems and, with any degree of luck, gain some new perspectives on how to solve them.

This is also a very critical reason why I always urge new genealogists to join their local genealogical society. Membership in a local or regional genealogy society is one of the best and least expensive ways to obtain these benefits. Genealogists in Southwest Florida have the benefit of several excellent societies in the region:

1. Bonita Springs Genealogy Club
2. Charlotte County Genealogy Society
3. Genealogical Society of Collier County
4. Lee County Genealogical Society

Based on my years of working with patrons and attending workshops put on by the Lee County Genealogy Society, National Genealogical Society, the Federation of Genealogy Societies and the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy, the challenges listed in the next section represent what seem to be the most common research problems. I have included some recommended strategies to overcome each issue. These strategies have been discussed by many of the top genealogy research professionals at the various seminars. I have cited them by name along with their

recommendations. I have included an outline at the end of the handouts which lists the problem and recommended record types to find answers or clues. The bibliography at the end of this study guide contains additional sources written by professional genealogists. These sources will provide more detailed recommendations and strategies.

Issue #1

Your ancestor does not appear in any records for the locality or county where he or she is supposed to be. Where do I go from here?

While frustrating this is a fairly common challenge. County and state boundaries have changed over time. This applies in all 50 states. The best source for verifying if the county was in existence at the time your ancestor resided in the area is Everton's ***Handybook for Genealogists***. The Fort Myers-Lee County Library has the 10th edition of this title.

Another good strategy is the 25-50-75 mile radius study. If you are certain that your ancestor or their family resided in a given area and the records are not showing up in the county where you began the initial search, draw a circle with a 25 mile radius around your ancestor's home. Any county, even if it is in another state, that falls within this radius should be considered a potential candidate for research. If the 25 mile radius fails, expand outward 50 and finally 75 miles in all directions.

In other cases, the problem may be caused by the type of record you are seeking. Kory Meyerink, AG, and senior partner of ProGenealogists.com, advises you to fully understand the record. One example he often cites is the need to know some religious affiliation information. For instance, if your family is Catholic, you probably will not find them in Lutheran cemetery records.

Sometimes the reason you're unable to locate them could be a simple matter of misspelling. An example would be when a patron recently mentioned the difficult time she had in tracing her grandmother's ship passenger records until naturalization papers revealed her name as Eror instead of Eva.

Issue #2

What do I do when I can't get access to sources I need? It may be a public record, but the agency or entity is preventing me from looking at the record. What are my options?

In today's world in the aftermath of 9/11 and growing concerns about identity theft, many genealogists discover that access to public records does not always mean what it did a decade or more ago. This problem is often overcome when the researcher joins a local genealogy society in their hometown as well as one in the area where the ancestor resided.

I have often heard accounts of patrons talking about how they relied on the kindness of strangers to help them access documents and other genealogical materials that are geographically inaccessible. Examples of information that patrons have been able to access using this strategy include the following:

1. Obtaining copies of pages from foreign business directories at the Library of Congress

2. Obtaining copies of Naturalization Records from regional archives
3. Obtaining photos of gravestones
4. Obtaining contact information prior to a trip to a given courthouse or repository. Get the best time to come and the best staff or volunteer contact person provided by the local genealogical society to assist the patron doing research.

Contact the local genealogical society where the material exists. A member may volunteer to help or point you in the direction of someone who works at the agency, courthouse, or entity that will allow access under certain guidelines. They might allow you to see the record provided the society member is present and retrieves the information for you!

The website Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness website (www.raogk.org) and county-specific sites on RootsWeb (www.rootsweb.com) are two websites that utilize volunteers to assist researchers with challenges. Many local libraries with genealogical collections also utilize volunteers from the local genealogical society. When calling these libraries, ask for the reference department and inquire if there is a staff member who specializes or acts as a liaison with the local genealogical society. While not always able to do personal searches, staffers can refer you to the right person or repository. You can also hire someone locally or hire a professional researcher. Check other repositories such as archives and libraries.

Also consider that the information you seek may not be as inaccessible as you think. An increasing amount of digitized records is appearing on the Internet, so use your favorite search engine to see what you can find online. Check for catalogs, state resources, and the Family History Library which is the largest single collection of records. This information may be accessed using the Family Search website at www.familysearch.org.

Issue #3.

My ancestor has a VERY common name such as Smith or Jones. How can I tell them apart?

The good news is that there's plenty of information on your family name. The bad news is that there's so much information that you don't know which pertains specifically to your family. Having a common surname is one of the most difficult challenges to overcome regardless of the amount of experience you have. You may be tempted to make leaps of faith. However, if you are able to pinpoint dates and locations, the path will be easier. Gathering records from a variety of sources and carefully analyzing the information they contain can guide you to success.

Issue #4

How much confidence can I place in the particular piece of information? What happened when I find discrepancies?

Evidence is based on two kinds of sources. You must determine if the source is original or derivative and if derivative, how faithfully it represents the information content of the original source. You will also need to determine whether the information from the source is primary – based on first-hand knowledge and given at the time or soon after an event – or secondary. You can place more confidence in the source if it is original and primary. The further away from the

original source or information given at the time of the event, the more you will need to question the accuracy.

If you find you have a discrepancy between the information from one record versus another, either one or both of them could be wrong. In general, it's a good idea to obtain additional records. However, be aware that the more information you gather, the more discrepancies you may uncover. Conduct a careful analysis of the information analyzing all the facts available. In addition to the information mentioned above, I have compiled two additional study guides which can also be used as guides in evaluating evidence and figuring out discrepancies:

1. *How to Evaluate Genealogical Evidence*
2. *21 Things I Wish I'd Found: Types of Proof and Evidence to Collect*

The latter study guide was compiled by our long-time genealogy volunteer Jessie Hooper. Ms. Hooper served as our genealogy research volunteer from 1974-1997.

Issue #5

What happens when I discover the court house burned or the records were destroyed by some form of a natural disaster? The clerk said none of the records survived.

This is a difficult challenge as any researcher can attest when tracing ancestors in the South after the Civil War or in Eastern Europe after the double whammy of invasions from the Germans pushing east towards Russia and the retaliation by the Red Army as it marched towards Berlin.

When confronted by this challenge, search for alternate and perhaps even non-traditional sources such as notary or land records or directories and obituaries. If you find that the courthouse that held the land record you needed burned down, title companies and perhaps even newspapers can help.

Duplicates copies of records often exist in multiple places. In the United States, for instance, several records are created when someone dies. The most common of value to genealogists are:

1. Burial record
2. Death certificate
3. Tombstone inscription (not mandated by law but you should always check for one)
4. Newspaper obituary (not mandated by law in all 50 states except in instances of a contested probate and estate, but you should always check for one)
5. Funeral home records (NOTE: In the aftermath of 9/11 and the increasing number of cases nationwide involving identity theft, some funeral homes are now requiring some form of proof of a family connection to the deceased BEFORE full access to the information is granted.)
6. Will/Probate packet
7. Estate inventories
8. Letters of guardianship
9. Coroner's report

Researchers should also keep this in mind. I've encountered a number of patrons over the years that had to conduct their research long distance because they were working. Once they retired

and had time to travel, they visited the courthouse to research another matter and discover that the record which they were told (long ago) did not exist was in fact available. Did the clerk lie to them? In most cases the answer was no. The courthouse did indeed burn or many records were lost during the time period in question. . However, there were no photocopiers back in the 1800s and early 1900s. Records were handwritten. They may not have been at the courthouse at the time of whatever disaster or fire occurred.

In various courses I've taken at the annual Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy, a number of courses have dealt with a variety of solutions for dead ends and research challenges. Two of the more prominent instructors that I've had the privilege of taking classes with, Kory Meyerink and Paula Stuart Warren, have always taken time to drive home the following point: "Records exist in multiple places in multiple jurisdictions. You must be creative and seek them out". I have compiled a study guide titled *Alternative Records and Genealogical Research* which deals with these situations.

Issue #6

How do I get around family members who refuse to talk or discuss the past?

Dysfunctional families are not unique to modern times. One of the myths I grew up believing was that families in previous generations were closer and people were more honest. That is not always true.

While many older people love to reminisce about the good old days, and some love to talk about the history of the family both here in America and in the old country, there are many who will use any method at their disposal to avoid any discussions about the past. I happen to know from first-hand experience what it feels like to have someone who refuses to provide any information whatsoever.

Prior to the 20th century, families were much larger than today. Every family seems to have had at least one black sheep. Disputes and perceived slights divided some families into warring camps which remain just as bitter towards each other decades later. From a genealogical perspective, the good news is that most genealogists I have dealt with have usually found family members, friends, or neighbors willing to cooperate. Hence they have been able to get eventually overcome many types of roadblocks.

Overcoming these issues can be a challenge for even the most experienced genealogist. Some strategies that have proven to overcome this problem include the following:

1. Ask family members with whom the uncooperative individual had a relationship to intervene on your behalf.
2. Offer to share information with them that might spark interest in your request such as his/her mother's ship manifest or his/her grandmother's birth record from Europe.
3. Call the person and ask them if they could assist you in verifying some information through a set of very specific "trigger" questions.
4. Appeal to their ego and tell them that others have identified them as being the most intelligent and important source in the family for honest and detailed information.

5. If you suspect they are one of the family “black sheep” politely play on their anger and offer them the opportunity to set the record straight in their own words. NOTE: Emphasis should be placed on the word POLITELY!

When confronted with a reluctant relative, be persistent and diplomatic. Don't let your zeal for answers get the best of you or alienate your relative. Seek to understand why the reluctance exists and develop strategies to work with it instead of shrugging it off. Our companion handout on *Oral History and Genealogical Research* may also provide some good insight to supplement this discussion. I have provided a sample script of questions to supplement the strategies. The script questions are broken down by specific time periods.

Issue #7

Identification and Authenticity: How can I be sure this individual is part of my family?

Different record types and sources often conflict and present you with the dilemma of having to choose between multiple people with the same name of your ancestor. How do you determine which one fulfills that role? This is where the researcher must play detective. Evaluate the records you have. Consult other sources to confirm the information. Use sound reasoning to draw your conclusions and document them.

The study guide I mentioned earlier, *How to Evaluate Genealogical Evidence*, can provide an outline of strategies. The materials included in the bibliography at the end of this study guide will also contain more detailed information. Researchers must collect and evaluate all available evidence. You may want to discuss this problem with fellow researchers through your local genealogical society or through message boards or mailing lists to gain other perspectives.

Issue #8

Determining where your ancestors migrated once they became settled in the United States: How can I track them as they moved out of their various places of residences?

Our relatives were forced by a variety of circumstances to move around. Many of them were renters for example. Most leases terminated in January or April. Many moved from one location to another every year. This pattern often repeated itself for many years after the initial arrival in America.

Understanding migratory patterns and routes can help identify these patterns. Reading county histories that include sections which focus on the time period often shed light on reasons that impact migration decisions. Using a combination of local historians, migration paths, trails, and maps, you can construct a list of locations to research. Within those locations, be sure to consult state and federal census records, vital records, military records, courthouse records, and land and tax records.

When studying the influence of migration on the movements of your ancestors and their families, pay close attention to the following pieces of information on old maps or events in county histories:

1. Did they live along or close to railroad lines?

2. Were they close to waterways?
3. Were they close to some of the early major roadways? (For example, the national road which ran from New England down through Virginia.)
4. Were there any natural or climatic disasters that occurred in the area that might provide clues where they migrated to if they had to leave the area?
5. What was the economic profile not only of the county but surrounding areas which may have drawn them away?

Issue # 9

Family Traditions: How can I separate fact from embellishment from outright falsehoods?

Long-time researchers can tell you that family traditions may lead to the truth or may be pure fabrications. How can you tell the difference? Many professionals cite the 80-20 rule. This rule revolves around the following theory: Eighty percent of the relatives' stories are only 20 percent true, though there's always a kernel of truth even if the stories have been inflated over the years. Twenty percent of the relatives' stories are 80 percent true. The more research you do in conjunction with interviewing multiple family members, neighbors, friends, etc., the more you will often be able to begin sorting fact from fiction. However, the time may come when you must make an educated guess based on the preponderance of evidence.

Issue #10

Tracing Female Ancestors: One of the most difficult research challenges for all genealogists.

Tracing female ancestors has often been a frustrating experience for many genealogists. Individual identities of women who lived prior to the twentieth century, both by law and custom, are often tangled in those of their husbands. Hence many genealogists refer to many of their female lines of research as their "invisible ancestors".

Most professionals in the field of genealogical research recommend broadening your search to her husband, her children, and essentially anyone who came into contact with her or her family. Women led private lives while men led public lives. To the genealogist, that means women didn't create or leave as many records as men who served in the military, bought land, and went to court – all leaving a trail of records. It will take a combination of sources to develop a portrait of your female ancestor, but it can be done.

Adding to the challenge is the practice of adopting the husband's surname. Often, that's the only name by which we know the female ancestor. But census records, marriage records, birth and death records of the ancestor and her children, obituaries and even children's middle names, can help identify the name.

Overcoming Genealogical Dead-Ends Outline of Strategies

The strategies listed below are intended to supplement the discussion covered by the 10 issues listed above. If your research has hit a continuous snag, here are some possible sources that can

break your deadlock:

AGE: Census, Cemetery Records, Family Bibles, Military Records, Obituaries, Pension Applications, Tax Records, and Vital Records

BIRTH DATES: Cemetery Records, Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Military Records, Newspapers, Obituaries, and Vital Records

BIRTHPLACE: Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Newspapers, Military Records, and Obituaries

CITY OR PARISH OF FOREIGN BIRTH: Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Family Histories, Immigration Records, Naturalization & Citizenship Papers, Obituaries, and Vital Records

COUNTY ORIGINS, BOUNDARIES, & PLACE-FINDING AIDS: Atlases, City Directories or Criss-Cross Directories, County or Family Histories, Gazetteers, Land/Property Records, Taxation Maps and Records

DEATH: Cemeteries, Church Records, Court Records, Family Bibles, Land/Property Records, Military Records, Newspapers, Obituaries, Probate Records, and Vital Records

DIVORCE: Court Records, Divorce Records, Newspapers, and Vital Records

ETHNICITY: Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Immigration Records, Membership in Minority Associations or Societies, Naturalization and Citizenship Papers

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: Church History & Records, County or Family Histories, and Minority History Book or Periodical

IMMIGRATION OR EMIGRATION DATE : Census, Church History or Records, Family Bibles, Family History Book or Periodical, Immigration Record, Naturalization and Citizenship Papers, Newspapers, and Obituaries

MAIDEN NAME: Cemeteries, Church Records, Family Bibles, Military Records, Obituaries, Personal Correspondence, Probate Records, School Records and Vital Records

MARRIAGE: Biography, Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Family Histories, Land/Property Records, Newspapers, Nobility Listing, and Vital Records

OCCUPATION Business Directory Listing Company Officials & Employees, Census, City Directory or Criss-Cross, Civil Registration, Court Records, Immigration Records, Military Records, Newspapers, Obituaries, and Probate Records

PARENTS, CHILDREN, & OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS: Biographies, Census, Church Records, Family Bibles, Family History, Immigration Records, Land/Property Records,

Naturalization & Citizenship Papers, Obituaries, Probate Records, School Census, and Vital Records

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Biography, Church Records, Civil Registration, Court Records, Family History, Immigration Records, Military Records, Naturalization & Citizenship Papers, and Newspapers

PLACE (TOWN) OF RESIDENCE WHEN YOU KNOW ONLY THE STATE” Census, City Directories or Criss-Cross Directories, Family Bibles, Family History, Land/Property Records, Military Records, Probate Records, School Census, Tax Records, and Vital Records

PLACES FAMILY HAS LIVED: Census, Church Records, City Directories, Family Bibles, Land /Property Records, Military Records, Obituaries, and Taxation Records

PREVIOUSLY COMPILED GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH: Biographical Bibliographies, County or Family Histories, Genealogical Periodicals, Genealogical or Lineage Societies, Internet Search Engines & Online Databases (Family Search, Ancestry, Heritage Quest) and LDS Sources

RECORD-FINDING SOURCES: Archives & Libraries, Indexes, Lineage Society Depositories, Periodicals, and Subject Bibliographies, Internet Search Engines & Online Databases (Family Search, Ancestry, & Heritage Quest)

RELIGION: Biographies, Cemeteries, Church Records, Civil Registration, Family Bibles, Family Histories, and Obituaries

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NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers-Lee County Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.

Compiled by Bryan Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers-Lee County Library, 9/4/2008.