



Recognizing Inaccurate and Misleading Genealogical Records, Citations, and Sources

False and error filled information can be found in all genealogy sources, including many of the highest rated quality sources. The Internet has proliferated this tendency. In the name of convenience and time, genealogists are increasingly failing to compare original records with the information gleaned from print and online resources. Taking this information at face value, leads to mistakes spreading throughout sources.

Errors are errors whether accidental or intentional. Facts without proper documentation cannot be trusted. No source should be considered unquestionable or deserving of absolute trust. Similarly, the perception that any potential source should be ignored is just as false, even if you feel the source or informant is questionable. Trusting one source or cherry picking items that “seem” to fit is an open invitation to errors and misinterpretation.

There are numerous potential scenarios and variations involving errors but here are the most common:

1. Accidental: Errors can be caused by speaking, hearing, reading, writing, or memory lapses.
2. Intentional: The informant deliberately provided false information and/or omitted important details. Some of the most common examples include:
 - a. Intent was to hide information that was perceived to be offensive and/or the desire to paint a negative portrait of the person or family. This tends to be the #1 scenario.
 - b. The possibility of personal, financial, or social gain or advancement influences the informant to provide false or distorted versions of event or situation.
 - c. Informant deliberately exaggerates or embellishes the story or accounts to make themselves look better, impress a listener or reader.
 - d. Rather than admit ignorance of people or events, informants and/or family members will invent or distort information about people/events.

3. Researchers create errors by misreading or misinterpreting accurate sources or applying them to the wrong people. Using the Internet versus taking the time to compare the information with other primary or secondary sources fosters this spreading of errors and misinformation.

Errors and misinformation can lead to some significant research challenges. Some of the most common discrepancies patrons run into include the following:

1. Baptismal/christening/presentations containing the wrong birthdates, names, and sex
2. Birth records with incorrect proper and surnames
3. Death records with incorrect names for the decedent, parents, and places of residence
4. Family Bibles entries with fabricated information.
5. Marriage license applications with incorrect names of bride or groom's father
6. Tax rolls listing a dead man as a living taxpayer
7. Military records omitting a soldier
8. Wills omitting the names of children and falsely identifying bogus heirs
9. Deeds containing incomplete or bogus land descriptions, and incorrect names of the owner

Taking the time to analyze the accuracy of information is not an absolute guarantee of being able to detect errors but it forces researchers to focus on the situation and historical context. The most important question in evidence analysis is "Do the Facts Fit the Circumstances". While there are exceptions to every situation, information gleaned from eyewitnesses taken at the time of the incident or event is more likely to be correct. Information compiled or recorded at the time of the incident or event (original source document or record) is more likely to be correct than information that obtained via abstracting, hand copied, translated, or transcribed from a prior record or incorporated into a published work. Information obtained after the fact or based on hearsay, speculation, opinions, or sources that are unidentified or questionable, must be taken with a grain of salt.

Most genealogical errors are uncovered by taking the time to compare and contrast independent sources that provide evidence answering the same research questions. The following steps are considered critical in the evidence analysis process:

1. View any uncorroborated records or testimony with skepticism.
2. Search broadly for independent sources that might provide corroboration.
3. Verify independence of corroboration sources, accounts, and testimonies.
4. Reject information that cannot be corroborated.
5. Thoroughly examine research subject's records from birth to death, looking for repetition, patterns, and sequences.
6. Use a variety of formats to compare and contrast seemingly relevant information. The most popular used by experts include
 - a. Language and writing used by the subject in daily activities
 - b. Timelines of events relevant to the event or subject
 - c. Maps and plats
 - d. Tables and spreadsheets

As stated previously, false and error-filled information can be found in all genealogy sources, including many of the highest rated quality sources. The Internet has proliferated this tendency. In the name of convenience and time, genealogists are increasingly failing to compare original records with the information gleaned from print and online resources. Taking this information at face value, leads to mistakes spreading throughout sources. Errors are errors whether accidental or intentional. Facts without proper documentation cannot be trusted. No source should be considered unquestionable or deserving of absolute trust.

In an effort to provide some first-hand proof of content in this study guide, e article, with permission from the submitter, I am including a snippet of their research experience that seem to sum up all of the feedback I received from over 25 responders. My hope is this real first-hand experience may help someone down the road. “All too many genealogists, or so-called genealogists, are not interested in recording facts based on primary or even secondary evidence. Their interest is solely to fill in blanks.

A case in point is my family from West Virginia. Many family members have adopted the fantasy of one particular researcher who created the marriage of a male to a particular Indian woman, whose name she invented. This information appears in dozens, if not hundreds of family trees, in spite of the absence of any substantiating primary or even secondary evidence, beyond the story of the woman who created it. In fact an examination of the circumstances surrounding the male and the evidence that is available, including one primary document with an “English” name rather than an Indian one, establishes its improbability. In addition, those who knew the woman who created the story knew her to be a prevaricator. Too often the easiest path to generating a tree is to copy someone else’s work, and from one to another, bad information spreads like wildfire. “Your steps 1 and 4 for analyzing information should be emphasized in every genealogy class. “

I will close with a comment by a local professional genealogist who used our collection for many years until their passing over a decade ago. It is just as valid today as it was back then. “If you do genealogical research long enough, mistakes will happen. Yes they are frustrating but if you learn from them, they can be a blessing in disguise.”

I have several additional guides on evidence analysis related to this topic. All are available free electronically upon request.

1. Alternative Records Research 2021
2. Brick Walls, Challenges, and Dead-Ends 2021
3. Citing Sources Genealogical Research 2020
4. Common Genealogy Research Mistakes 2020
5. Evaluating Genealogical Evidence 2021
6. Genealogy Dead Ends and Brick Walls – Why Can’t I Find My Ancestor?
7. Genealogy Documents Reliability 2020
8. Primary Sources in Genealogy Research

Suggested Websites and You Tube Sources for Additional Information and Techniques

10 Minute Methodology: What is “Reasonably Exhaustive Research” – Judy Keller Fox

<https://bcgcertification.org/ten-minute-methodology-reasonably-exhaustive-how-do-we-know-were-there/>

About.com – How to Apply the Genealogical Proof Standard to Your Family Tree

<https://www.thoughtco.com/genealogical-evidence-or-proof-1420515>

Ancestral Findings.com – Using Negative Evidence to Prove Family Relationships

<https://ancestralfindings.com/using-negative-evidence-prove-relationships/#:~:text=What%20is%20negative%20evidence%3F,examining%20what%20is%20not%20there.>

Ancestry.com – Genealogy Proof Standard – You Tube Videos – Christa Cowan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfR2yLsXu88> Introduction to Genealogical Proof

Standard 23 minutes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG_fJMCFmt4 Exhaustive Search – Genealogical Proof Standard 28 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2cZyme18v4> Resolution of Conflicting Evidence – Genealogy Proof Standard 38 minutes

Cyndislist: Evidence and Analysis <http://www.cyndislist.com/evidence/gps/>

Family Search Blog – Genealogy Proof Standard - Tyler S. Stahle

<https://familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart1/>

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart2/?icid=bl-rt-4530>

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogicalproofstandardpart3/>

Family Search Wiki – Evaluate the Evidence

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Evaluate_the_Evidence

Family Search Wiki – Rookie Mistakes

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Rookie_Mistakes

Family Search Wiki – Using the Genealogical Proof Standard in Your Research

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Using_the_Genealogical_Proof_Standard_in_Your_Research_\(National_Institute\)](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Using_the_Genealogical_Proof_Standard_in_Your_Research_(National_Institute))

Family Search Wiki – Genealogy Proof Standard

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical_Proof_Standard

Genealogy Bank.com – Genealogy 101 – Genealogy Proof Standard

<https://blog.genealogybank.com/genealogy-101-the-genealogical-proof-standard.html>

Genealogy Assistant.com – What are Primary and Secondary Sources

<https://www.thegenealogyassistant.com/index.php/store/three-brushes-with-death/43-news/blog-posts/314-what-are-primary-a-secondary-sources>

National Genealogical Society – Mastering Genealogical Proof

<https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/going-to-the-next-level/understanding-genealogical-proof/>
http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/mastering_genealogical_proof

Cowan Christa –Ancestry.com - Complete and Accurate Citation of Sources - Genealogical Proof Standard - Ancestry – You Tube 29 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8WII7D3eBE>

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----- **Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Immigrant & Ethnic Ancestors: How to Find & Record Your Unique Heritage.** Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, c2000. **Adult Non-Fiction 929.1072 CAR**

----- **Genealogy Sourcebook** Cincinnati, OH: Lowell House Contemporary Books, c1998. **Adult Non-Fiction 929.1072 CAR**

----- **Organizing Your Family History Search: Efficient & Effective Ways to Gather & Protect Your Genealogical Research.** Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, c1999. **Adult Non-Fiction 929.1 CAR**

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Genealogy Reference 929.1 Wri.

NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers Regional 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 L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library, 2/9/2022.