Building Your Genealogical Skills
Part 2: Research
Module 4 – How to Research

How to Research: Overview

Although the word "search" is part of the word "research", searching ≠ researching.

In general, try to consult multiple sources. Don't stop at the first record that seems to answer your question. You are going to want to gather as many records about a family or individual as you can find so that you can truly identify the uniqueness of your particular ancestor. And TRACK YOUR WORK (see below, Research Log).

When feasible, seek original material (digital image) rather than relying on transcriptions or abstractions. Errors may have been introduced by indexers or transcribers who couldn't read the handwriting.

Research Log

Research logs are underutilized by most genealogists; however, they encourage an invaluable habit to form and maintain. Research logs help prevent needless rework. At a minimum a log should include the name of the person or place that is being researched, the date of the search, the sources searched, and the search objective. You also need to include a space for results. Be sure to capture negative searches so you don't research that source again.

Expanding Your Search

As you gain experience searching, you will want to expand your search to the family, friends, and associates of your ancestor. You may be seeking a specific fact, but your ancestor did not leave the relevant record. Perhaps one of their children or siblings left a document with the information you seek. Understanding the neighbors and associates of your ancestor helps build their identity and confirm what makes them unique.

Tips for Online Researching

Before searching any database sites, it is important to understand just what the records cover. It is tempting to jump right in and fill in all the fields of the database search box, but you could be eliminating the very item you had hoped to find. Or the database in question may not actually cover the county or years you are interested in. Therefore, be sure to read the database description to understand what is truly in that database. Take advantage of wikis if they are available on the site or elsewhere to understand if the records you seek were ever in existence.

Getting the Most from a Search
- Think first:
    - Location
    - Event (birth, marriage, or death)
    - Time period (century, decade)

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- Think second:
    - Name – sometimes using quotes to force the search for the entire name can be useful
    - Occupation (e.g., "soldier," "minister")
    - One-word modifiers

When working on database sites such as Ancestry and FamilySearch, do not rely solely on the transcription. Always remember to start with less information. Computers do what you tell them, and if you supply more information, because you know it, but that wasn't in the document in question, you run the risk of eliminating your ancestor from the results.

Note: It CAN'T all be free. Storing images and hiring individuals with technical know-how is expensive and we must share the costs.

Use wildcards to replace one or more letters in a search string.

Power Searching at American Ancestors
Search within a specific database rather than using the general search. Start broad and filter your results.

Power Searching at Family Search
Consult the Research Wikis. Use the catalog. Use some of the unique searching features such as searching by alternative names, searching by relationship, searching multiple collections, and exporting results to Microsoft Excel.

Power Searching at Ancestry
Ancestry offers several tools to enhance your search process. First, as on FamilySearch.org you can filter by database type, although they are called categories on Ancestry. Ancestry has a feature that allows you to focus on a specific search parameter, such as name or date by using sliders. And Ancestry allows searching through the catalog.

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