Strategies for Tracking Migrating Ancestors

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, **dalambert@nehgs.org**

Introduction

Tracing our ancestor's migration begins with identifying where they began the migration OR where they ended the migration. The next step involves learning as much as possible about one or both of these locations.

Four strategies for tracking migrations:

1. Use records that show movements.
2. Organize data:
   o To track movement
   o To identify patterns
3. Use cluster research to track chain migration.
4. Study major migration routes and patterns.

1. Use records that show movements.

Check sources that will provide a birthplace or other residences.

- Compiled biographical information in local histories or genealogies
  o Consider reliability based on the compilation's sources and distance from the events.
  o Check study projects and scholarly journals for entries with source citations.
  o To search for digitized (public domain) published histories and genealogies: **archive.org/**, **books.google.com/**, or **hathitrust.org/**.
- First-hand accounts like diaries and letters
  o Gain a sense of daily life, hardships, and moments of celebration. Fill gaps between records.
  o Look for accounts written by ancestors, relatives, and even those who made a similar migration. Check collections affiliated with the recipient's residence.
  o Search the American Ancestors Library Catalog, at **library.nehgs.org/** for diaries and letters. See ArchiveGrid, at **researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/**, to search your nearest archive's catalog for first-hand accounts.
- Census records
  o Put a person in a specific time and place.
  o Starting with 1850 U.S. federal census, each person asked birthplace
  o Starting with 1855 N.Y. state census, each person asked birth county if born in N.Y.
  o Starting with 1880 U.S. federal census, each person asked for parents' birthplaces

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- End-of-life records: death records, obituaries, gravestones
  - Check for birthplaces (for decedent and parents) and burial locations.
  - Check their children's records for any information about their parents' birthplaces and mother's maiden name.
  - Note the identities of anyone else buried in their plot as they may be worth researching as part of the FAN club.
- Land records and power of attorney
  - County-level deeds usually describe each person as being "of" a residence. A grantee could be "of" a place in New England when first purchasing land in New York or a grantor might be "of" a new location when selling off property he left behind.
  - Sometimes a person still retains or inherits rights to lands in which they no longer live, so they may give power of attorney to a proxy to handle their business in a location too distant to easily commute.
- Military pension files
  - Pension files may feature all kinds of documentation providing all kinds of residences from a veteran's birth through marriage through service to death.
  - The files and "pension payment vouchers" (available through the National Archives) provide current residences for the pensioner and the person given power of attorney to collect on their behalf.

Check for records at every single location.

- Look for proof linking the person from one place to the next.
- Use a gazetteer, atlas, or guide to track any changing place names and borders.

Be thorough in searching for records and in recording data.

- Records (especially for land) were kept at different jurisdictional levels. Identify what record sets are available at the town, county, state, and federal levels.
- Look for substitutes to replace missing record sets.

2. Organize data.

Make a timeline/list/spreadsheet.

- Note *where* someone lived and *when*.

For example:

When? (Date)	Where? (Full place name)	Who? (Ancestor)	With whom? (Relative etc.)	What? (Record type or event)

- This can help in seeing patterns and differentiating between people bearing the same names.
- Using a spreadsheet helps in organizing large amounts of data, such as when conducting cluster research.

3. Use cluster research to track chain migration.

Chain migration is a process by which migrants from a specific place follow others from that location to a new destination. In general, people were more likely to settle in places where they knew people. Through these contacts, new immigrants could settle into pre-established communities where they could find job opportunities and support.

Cluster research entails identifying family, associates, and neighbors (the FAN club) who may have made the same migration and tracking them through records. When using cluster research for chain migration, you seek to identify the origins of each member of the FAN club. After you have assembled your list, go through it, and build family groups and research origins.

Take the time to learn about each member of the FAN club and determine their unique identities including their relationships and origins. Learning about the community as a whole can offer context to an ancestors' life.

The key questions to get you started include:
- Who else was enumerated in your ancestor's household?
- Who lived next door? Nearby?
- Who did your ancestor buy land from or sell land to? Who were the witnesses?
- Who was mentioned in your ancestor's probate proceedings?
- Who witnessed their marriages? Sponsored the baptisms?
- Who provided the affidavit when your ancestor naturalized?
- Who worked alongside your ancestor? Where were they from?

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4. Study major migration routes and patterns.

Your ancestor needed not only motivation but also a path – road or water – and a mode of transportation to migrate. During the colonial period, the modes of transportation were fairly limited, usually horseback and a few types of water travel.

Late in the Revolutionary War, flatboats were introduced on the Ohio River to ship goods to New Orleans and became a dominant force in water migration for over a decade. The canal boat, towed by horses or mules, was introduced about 1795 on the South Hadley Canal in Massachusetts. Steamboats in the second decade of the nineteenth century revolutionized travel on the Mississippi and the Great Lakes. Once the railroad was introduced in 1827, it became the dominant mode of transportation.

Consider the time period of your ancestor's migration and the locations involved to make an educated guess as to whether they used any of the routes described below.

Routes of the Northeast

A variety of routes were used by colonial and early nineteenth century settlers. The stopping places along these routes identify where your ancestor may have left records.

Table 1: Routes of the Northeast

Year Begun	Name and Description
1644	Boston Post Road – three branches – Boston to NYC
1699	Albany Post Road – Albany to NYC
1722	Mohawk Trail Boston to Utica, NY
1735	Kings Highway – continued Boston Post Road from NYC to Charleston SC.
1745	Catskill Road – Springfield to Catskill, Greene County, NY on Hudson
1753	Mohawk Trail - Utica to Oswego
1794	Great Genesee Road – Syracuse to Buffalo
1825	Erie Canal – Albany to Buffalo

Routes of the Mid-Atlantic and Ohio

Routes in the Mid-Atlantic region were shaped by the topography. The first three listed here followed the Appalachian valley, the fall line (a geologic feature between coastal flat land and piedmont plateau marked by waterfalls), and the Upper Road. The Great Valley Road, known by various names such as the Wagon Road, and Warrior's Path. The next two listed were forged during the Seven Years war for military purposes. Zane's Trace was to provide new access to Ohio lands and the last was a federal government initiative to facilitate travel into Indiana and Illinois.

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Year Begun	Name and Description
1730	Great Valley Road – Philadelphia to Roanoke
1735	Fall Line Road – Fredericksburg, VA to Camden, SC
1748	Upper Road – Fredericksburg, VA to Charlotte, NC
1755	Braddock's Road – Cumberland, MD to Pittsburg, PA
1758	Forbes Road – Harrisburg, PA to Pittsburg, PA
1775	Wilderness Road – Bristol, VA to Lexington, KY
1800	Zane's Trace - Wheeling WV to Maysville, KY
1818	National Road – Baltimore, MD to Vadalia, IL

Routes of the Southeast to the Mississippi

Settlement west of the Appalachian Mountain chain was off limits per the 1763 proclamation upon the end of the French & Indian Wars, so these southerly routes west opened up after the American Revolutionary War ended.

The famous Natchez trace was founded in 1797 and was a way for merchants who had traveled by water down the Ohio to the Mississippi and thence to New Orleans, to leave their boats and goods in New Orleans and return on foot to their starting point.

The Federal Road was made possible when the Creek people granted permission for a "horse path" through their nation to allow more efficient delivery of mail between Washington, DC, and New Orleans. During the War of 1812, it was widened into a war road.

The War of 1812 also saw the creation of General Jackson's Road, General Carroll's Road and McCreay's Path, the latter also known as St. Stephen's Road, in Alabama and Mississippi.

Table 3: Routes of the Southeast and to the Mississippi

Year Begun	Name and Description
1797	Natchez Trace – Natchez MS to Nashville, TN
1806	Federal Road – Macon GA to Mobile, AL
1814	General Jackson's Road – Nashville to New Orleans
1814	General Carroll's Road – New Orleans to Jackson, MS
1814	McCreay's Path – St. Stephens to Natchez, MS

Resources

Digital access to major record sets:

- ✓ AmericanAncestors.org
- ✓ FamilySearch.org
- ✓ Ancestry.com
- ✓ U.S. National Archives records: **https://www.archives.gov/digitization/digitized-by-partners**

Cluster Analysis and Chain Migration

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Migration routes:

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