Expert Strategies for Breaking Down Brick Walls

Class 4: Confirming Parentage

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With each answer on your multi-generation chart, you add a generation to your family tree. However, that means you also add a minimum of two new questions: 1) Who is the father of my ancestor? 2) Who is the mother of my ancestor? These questions may be tricky to answer, especially if you have tracked your research back to the early 1800s or even into the 1700s. While some families have published genealogies, you will discover that such availability often depends of the location of the family. As such, it generally becomes necessary to "cast a net" for people of interest.

Who Are the Parents

The further back you are in your research, the more you may be relying on compiled or authored works with your research. Keep in mind that not all authored works are the same and many may lead you astray simply because the name is the same and you end up following the wrong family.

Tip: Think outside the box. Not everything is online, indexed or even published.

Some of the records you will need to turn to will at first suggest more questions than answers:

- Census records
- Tax records
- Land records
- Probate records

When all of these are combined, they can answer questions. They show a path of sorts for a person or a family. This shows you where your ancestor may fit in, or more importantly, where they can't fit in.

Compare & Contrast

When we are working on our family history, our mindset it to combine people into a family structure. However, this isn't the best approach when you are working in the murky depths of the early 1800s or into the 1700s or earlier when names of the head of the household may be listed. As such, it becomes necessary for us to pivot our research by asking questions of each individual:

- How are the people connected?
- How are they not connected?
- Who can be traced forward?

And when I ask about who can be traced forward, I mean, what other records help to tell the story of that person? What records help to fill in the ten years between federal censuses, for instance.

One of the best ways to compare and contrast is to use forms or software for analysis. For instance, abstracting people from a head of household census (1790-1840) to see what columns the children fall under helps you to see possible people of interest. Using a census tracking form helps you to see the movement of a specific person, or what censuses either don't exist or that you haven't researched yet.

There are also a number of ways you can accomplish this type of research using programs that are likely already installed on your computer—especially spreadsheet programs like Microsoft Excel. There are also some specialty programs and methods for tablets that can be helpful.

The main point is to not think about how you can force people into a family. Instead, think about how they are connected to a place, piece of land, or to other individuals through the records you find for them.

Tip: Records may be online but not searchable by name.

Keep Track of Research

It is especially important to keep track of your research when trying to confirm parentage because you are not just concentrating on a specific family, but instead looking at other individuals who may or may not turn out to be related. There is no hard and fast rule on how to do this, and there are many different techniques you can use. The most important thing is to be consistent in your method of tracking research to ensure you don't overlook anything.

In addition, you will usually need to use a compilation of records in order to draw your conclusions about the person you are researching.

An easy way to keep a research log is to copy and paste information from the catalog that you used to access the records. You can also take a screenshot of the catalog entry. The beauty of using a computer is that you can easily paste the catalog entry into a Word document and identify what you did or didn't find and how you searched the record, as well as the focus of the record.

The research log is also a great way to prepare for upcoming research, especially if the research you need to undertake is going to be done away from home. You want to ensure that you take full advantage of your time at a repository.

Note Taking Applications

If you use a tablet there are a number great note taking applications:

- Microsoft OneNote

- Evernote
- Google Keep
- Goodnotes (Apple only)
- Notability (Apple only)
- Joplin (Evernote free alternative)

If you aren't sure what would work best for you, you may want to investigate articles that compare various note taking applications that will work with your computer setup.

Put Everything in a Folder

You don't want to have to waste time seeking documents you have downloaded, or files of abstracted information. The best way to avoid this, especially when you may not be able to put the information directly into your family folders, is to create a folder for the project of identifying the parents. This way, you can have sub-folders for individuals of interest, into which you place all records you have compiled. This way you can compare things after you have compiled the important records. It is not going to be possible to identify the parent—unless you have found the birth records—without gathering many different records and then analyzing them to see if there is space for the child that you are trying to attach. After all, if you had found a birth record, or the parents' names on a marriage or death record then you wouldn't be going through all of this.

Making Timelines

Timelines assist you in understanding all the information you have for the person you are seeking parents for. Timelines also can help you understand how others interact with your person and how the historical events that happened during your ancestor's lifetime could affect your research.

Just as you would cite sources in your family tree, it is equally important cite sources in the timeline so that you can evaluate the validity of that information, especially as you progress through the individuals of interest that you have identified.

Ask Questions

As you are working through the different individuals, you are likely to come up with questions as the research is progressing. You may want to put those in your research log or timeline so that you can easily refer to them. Don't assume that you will remember them later. Make a point of recording your questions as they come to you.

Applying Everything

In order to work effectively, you need to identify everything that you have on the individual that you are seeking parents for. This is a good place to begin your timeline, as you can add to it as you progress. Don't

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forget to make note of anyone residing in the household once your person reaches maturity and is married, especially if you are seeking assistance on the parents of a female.

Tip: Work from the known to the unknown.

Remember to put information about everyone who is somehow connected to your individual throughout the records. These records likely will result in questions—for example, how an older woman comes to reside in the household of your ancestor. And if you are fortunate enough to find individuals in the 1880 and later censuses where relationships are listed, make note of those. Even though the connection may not seem obvious at the time, it is important to track everything.

Tip: Finding women means researching men.

If you are researching the parents of a woman, be sure to include everything you have on her husband. After all, she met her husband somehow and answering that question could be helpful in identifying her parents. When seeking women in the earlier years, they usually stayed with their family until the married.

When locating your ancestor in the census, don't forget to examine who is living around your family. This process only works if the copy of the enumeration has not been arranged alphabetically by first letter of the surname. Once the enumerator had completed his canvas, some place made copies of their specific enumeration by rearranging the families grouping all the A surnames together for a town, then the B surnames and so on. This is only seen in the head of household federal censuses (1790-1840). This alphabetical arrangement removes any understanding of who lived near your ancestor, thus making identifying individuals of interest a little more difficult.

After you have all the records in which your ancestor has reach the age of majority, moved out, gotten married, then you are going to turn to the first census that your ancestor would appear in as a child. Examine all the households that qualify. You have created your *People of Interest* list.

At this point you will systematically work through the list, seeking other records which will include tax, additional census, land, vital, church, and probate records. Combining all available records will be what helps you to determine if that person of interest is still a possible candidate in the household of your ancestor. Even if some children have births but it is clear that the household had more, it is always possible that some of the births weren't reported.

Unfortunately, records are sometimes destroyed, which is another reason why it may not be easy to identify the family. Eliminating people through records will allow you to whittle the list down—for example a will that says "my four daughters" and proceeds to name them.

Except for census and tax records, it is recommended that you concentrate on a single individual until you have either eliminated that person or you have exhausted the records you have access to. If you will need to continue your research by taking a research trip, you want to be sure to make note of that. It means you can't eliminate the person, and they must remain on the list of potentials.

When it comes to census and tax records, it is important to keep an open mind for anyone with the surname(s) of interest. Sometimes people get missed in the census, especially because the census enumerations we are using are usually a copy of the original enumerations. The tax records may reveal households you were unaware of or may assist you in better identifying potential ages of some individuals, once again giving you information to use in comparison.

Applying this approach usually allows you to eliminate all but a single household, and though you do not have the "smoking gun" record of birth, you have built a case of why it can't be anyone else in the area because your diligent research has eliminated them in one way or another.

Suggested Bibliography

Books

Anderson, Robert Charles, *Elements of Genealogical Analysis* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014)

Mills, Elizabeth Shown, *Evidence Explained; Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 2024)

Online Resources

Ancestry.com www.ancestry.com

Best Note Taking Apps https://zapier.com/blog/best-note-taking-apps/

Clooz.com www.clooze.com

FamilySearch.org www.familysearch.org

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