Who's Who?: Same Name, Same Place, Same Time

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The further back you go in your research the more likely you are to discover that there are individuals who share the same name as your ancestor. Identifying which of the individuals in the area is yours can sometimes require in depth strategies. Many of those strategies should always be in your research arsenal and can save you from following the wrong lineage.

Fundamentals

It never hurts to return to the fundamentals when it comes to genealogical research, especially in today's online research environment where databases may suggest possible records for you. Examining those records and analyzing the information is paramount to ensuring you are on the right lineage.

Fundamental Rule #1

> "All statements must be based only on accurately reported, carefully documented, and exhaustively analyzed records." – Robert Charles Anderson, *Elements of Genealogical Analysis*

You need to question the validity of the record as well as the accuracy. This means that you need to question who created the record and for what purpose.

Most of the resources that family historians use in the search for their family tree were created by others, often by a government entity, for purposes other than genealogy. Understanding why a record was created—and therefore why specific information was collected—assists you in evaluating that information.

Fundamental Rule #2

> "You must have a sound, explicit, reason for saying that any two individual records refer to the same person." – Robert Charles Anderson, *Elements of Genealogical Analysis*

This rule is telling you that while you must draw conclusions, it is important to understand the process of combining records.

Rule #1 deals with *evidence* while rule #2 deals with *proof.*

When it comes to the analyzing of the records there are three tools you will want to put in place:

- Source analysis
- Record analysis
- Linkage analysis

The first two deal with the examination and evaluation of the evidence. The third involves genealogical conclusions.

Source Analysis

Many times, we find that researchers use the terms *source* and *record* interchangeably. However, there is a difference, and it is important to recognize that difference.

A *source* is a collection of records that is created by a single author (such as a book of abstracts) or created by a single entity (such as the probate records of a county court). Meanwhile a *record* is the item within the source that pertains to a single event.

Source	Record
Census	Household in a census
Will book	Will of Sarah Reed
Christ Church, Boston, Baptisms	Baptism of Thomas Robinson
World War I Draft Cards	Card of Thoulough Everett Ayer, Lowell, Massachusetts
Massachusetts: Grand Lodge of Masons Membership Cards, 1733-1990	Card of Thoulough Everett Ayer, Somerville, Massachusetts

One of the most important questions to ask when working with a *source* is whether you are working with an original or a derivative.

Original records are those that are from the time period being researched and include:

- Duplicate original
- Record (Clerk's) copy
- Image copy

Digital copies, microfilm and microfiche versions of these records are *considered original for analysis purposes.*

Derivative sources are those that have been written by someone who did not experience the events or time period and include:

- Transcripts
- Extracts
- Abstracts

These are the published sources that many family historians relied on for years before digitized documents became available online.

There is another class of sources that many researchers have become familiar with—**authored works**. These include compiled genealogies. Some are of a higher level of accuracy than others.

When analyzing a source there are important questions to keep in mind:

1. Is this an original or a copy/derivative?
2. When was the source created?
3. Who created the source?
4. What formulas were used in creating the source?

Question four is asking about how the entries are arranged. The arrangement of the records within a derivative source especially may result in the loss of the original organization of the records. This can make analysis more difficult. For instance, a census page that is arranged alphabetically by the first letter of the surname means that it is not possible to identify who is living near your ancestor.

Record Analysis

First, a reminder. The record pertains to a single event within the source. Like the source, you need to evaluate the record by asking similar questions to that of the source:

- Original
- Derivative
- Authored Work

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

Tip: With any derivative record see if you can find the original record to verify the accuracy of the entry.

Evidence Analysis

Evidence analysis is vital to ensuring that you are tracing the correct individual, especially when names are the same.

We have already discussed sources and records and the understanding of Original, Derivative and Authored works. When examining the record, there are additional questions to ask yourself of that record—the questions mentioned above, but also the reliability of that record. Is the record a primary record or account (firsthand knowledge – someone who was there at the time). Is it secondary (secondhand or later knowledge – someone was told about the event and then recorded it). Is it unknown? Published family histories that have full dates and places but no source citations are an example of unknown.

At the beginning of this we discussed that Fundamental Rule #1 dealt with evidence. The analysis of that evidence leads us to Fundamental Rule #2 – the proof.

When working with the evidence, you want to keep in mind the relevance of the information. Is the information direct, indirect or negative? Direct information is explicit, stating without doubt the details. Indirect may infer information, while negative information is the absence of details that should have been there. Within each of these it is necessary to evaluate what you are seeing, or not seeing, and draw informed conclusions from this.

Proof

> "The most reliable proof is a composite of information drawn from multiple sources—all being quality materials, *independently created*, and accurately representing the original circumstances."
> — Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained*, 4th edition.

Tip: Proof is what supports our conclusion.

When it comes to drawing our conclusions, a logical process is followed, similar to that of an experiment:

- Hypothesis – what is the focus of the research?
- Theory – tentative conclusion based on initial research
- Proof – conclusion based on all the evidence

When working with this process you must evaluate everything that you find. It is not unusual to find conflicting dates, especially if they are found in compiled family histories or trees that are lacking documentation.

For instance, you may have found two trees that show conflicting dates of death for a wife of your ancestor. What can you do to resolve this conflict? Additional records can help you in ascertaining a more credible date. For instance, Elizabeth (_____) Northrup is said to have died in 1855 on one tree and in 1820 on another tree. However, in compiling research on her husband Samuel, you discover that he mentioned his wife Elizabeth in his will which was written 20 June 1840. You do not find Elizabeth

Northrup in the 1850 census (negative evidence). The hypothesis would be that she died between 1840 and 1850.

Additional research would be necessary to prove this hypothesis. It is always possible that Elizabeth remarried. Looking through the additional probate records generated by her husband's estate could offer insight into whether or not this did happen.

Applying Everything

Whenever you are researching and you uncover multiple individuals with the same name, residing in the same place, it becomes more important than ever to apply all that has been discussed.

First you must apply both Source Analysis and Record Analysis to understand what you are looking at and how accurate it may be. Ask yourself—are you looking at original documents or derivatives?

Most importantly, apply the Proof Process so that you can go from your hypothesis through your theory to your proof. Remember that in this process it is essential to amass several different records that were created at different times and that do not rely on one of the other records.

For instance, when you find something on a family tree about a woman who has been kidnapped by Native Americans in the 1600s, not only do you need to see what sources and records exist, but it becomes increasingly important to make sure that the records are not relying on each other. For instance, a compiled family history that was published in 1980 mentions that the woman was kidnapped by the Native Americans. If you are lucky, the compiler has included a source citation for this item. If it was a published volume, then your goal is to find something else that pre-dates the publishing date of the source used by the compiler.

When working on two people with the same name, you need to evaluate all records of anyone in an area with that name in an effort to position those of the same name. Can you isolate them by identifying the names of their wives? Can you separate them based on their occupations? Did they go to different churches?

Separation of individuals of the same name relies heavily on their connections, as found in the records, to other people and to specific addresses within the area. With each individual of the same name as your ancestor though, you must go through the process until you have been able to eliminate that individual. And then you move on to the next one.

Suggested Bibliography

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)