Using Your Computer for Genealogical Analysis

Rhonda R. McClure, rmcclure@nehgs.org

Many genealogists are guilty of using their computer more as an electronic family group sheet or as glorified 3x5 index cards. Recording of names, dates, places, and relationships seeming to be the only reason to have a laptop on a research trip or the only reason to have genealogical software on your computer.

Understanding Genealogical Analysis

In the abstract we know what the words *analysis* and *genealogy* mean, but perhaps we should take a moment to read the actual definitions (as found at Dictionary.com):

Analysis:

1. The separating of any material or abstract entity into its constituent elements
2. This process as a method of studying the nature of something or of determining its essential features and their relationship

Genealogy

1. A record or account of the ancestry and descent of a person, family, group, etc.
2. The study of family ancestries and histories
3. Descent from an original form or progenitor; lineage; ancestry

If we put those two concepts together, then *genealogical analysis* could be:

- The individual study
  OR
- The study of interrelationships of all of those families.

Tip: When you move beyond your genealogy program, then you remove the need to force an individual into a family, thus opening possibilities.

To Prove or Disprove, That Is the Question

We all start with a hypothesis when it comes to a family or the parents or lineage of an individual. And many times, we want that hypothesis to be true (e.g. Mayflower descent, Revolutionary War soldier, royal connection). As such, perhaps we look at the records or information we find with the hope or anticipation that it proves what we want. Sometimes it is better to try to disprove that hypothesis.

Genealogical Software Programs

Genealogical software programs are designed to arrange individuals into family units. The interfaces usually display the information we have entered into family groups or multi-generational charts (aka pedigree charts) showing the connections from child to parent or the descent from immigrant to great-grandchildren. They do not always offer an easy method for recording information about unrelated individuals, or perhaps we are too focused on connecting an individual to the tree to see that perhaps they don't really belong.

The Art of Analysis

Analysis is intended to look at a person, family, migration pattern, or record collection and identify not only what it is telling you but also what it may have omitted. Some of the questions you should be asking are:

- What life events am I missing for an ancestor?
- What records may exist to fill in those missing life events?
- Have I accounted for his or her whereabouts from birth to death?
- What Records haven't I searched?
- How does my relative relate to others who are listed in his records?
- Why was that record of my ancestor recorded?
- Where did the compiler of that book get his or her information? Is it from a previously published book? Can I find the original mention of the event or story?
- Why might my ancestor not be listed in a particular record group? And what could that tell me to further my research?

As we look for our ancestors in a variety of databases and published records it is important to also ask ourselves about those records and databases and determine just how complete they truly are.

Warning: Do not be swayed by shaky leaves or accept a link suggestion. Research it.

Genealogy Programs

Genealogy programs have come a long way in their development, and yet we sometimes don't take advantage of their full potential. Many of them include features to focus our research, including:

- Timelines
- Determining what individuals or events are linked to a specific source we have used
- To-do lists or research logs
- Source critique
- Identifying all those born (or died, etc.) in a given place

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- Identifying end-of-line individuals

Beyond Genealogy Computers

In the last couple of decades, a number of programs have been developed to track the research rather than the people. It is through a concentration on the records that you may solve a genealogical brick wall. There are many programs that you may find useful:

- Ancestral Sources (Win) - http://www.ancestralsources.com/
- ByGones (Win) - http://userwebs.rmci.net/bygones/
- Clooz(Win) - https://clooz.com/
- Custodian for Family Historians (Win) - http://www.custodian3.co.uk/
- Genota (Win) - http://www.genota.com/
- GenSmarts (Win) - http://gensmarts.com/

You may have noticed that all of these programs run on the Windows operating system. If your Mac supports Windows emulation, then you may be able to use these. It's a good idea to try before buying if at all possible.

General Notebook Programs

If you prefer not to use a Windows program on your Mac or you don't want to spend a lot of time learning a new program, it is possible that you already have valuable software programs that can serve you in your genealogical pursuits just as they do in your day-to-day life. Here are some recommendations:

- Aquaminds NoteTaker (Mac) - https://www.aquaminds.com/
- Evernote - https://evernote.com/
- Goodnotes - https://www.goodnotes.com/
- Google Keep - https://workspace.google.com/products/keep/
- Microsoft OneNote - https://www.office.com/
- Notability (Mac) - https://support.gingerlabs.com/hc/en-us
- NoteLab (Windows/Mac/LINUX) - https://java-notelab.sourceforge.net/

Office Productivity Programs

Word processing programs, spreadsheets and database programs can all be used when working on your genealogy, and you may already be comfortable using them for your occupation. However, you may have compartmentalized those programs as something just for work. They have become cheaper as the years have gone on, and there is a free open-source one that can be beneficial.

- Apache OpenOffice - http://www.openoffice.org/
- Microsoft 365 Copilot - https://www.office.com/

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- Apple iWork - https://www.apple.com/iwork/

Tip: Look into Google Docs, especially if you have a Gmail account.

Applying to Your Family

When you are researching your family history, there may be things that pop up that cause you to go, "Hmmmm." These are the times when you want to ask the questions and seek out additional information.

Tip: Always dig deeper for a better understanding.

Timelines

In addition to asking questions, timelines are an excellent method for not only tracking what you know about your ancestor(s) but also tracking historical events and putting the family you are researching in context to the events around them.

To effectively work both into a single timeline, you may want to consider the following

- When creating the timeline
  - Begin with ancestral events
  - Then add general events pertinent to period and locality
- Consider color coding (may want to include a key)
  - One color for ancestral events
  - Additional colors as appropriate for specific events of importance (ie., attacks, epidemics, battles)
- Include a column for notes (may want to color code text in the notes)
- Include source citations for all facts listed in the timeline

Consider This…

These programs are intended to offer you methods for looking at the research you accumulate from a different perspective which may offer different research avenues. To achieve more, you need to do more than scratch the surface of your ancestry. Analysis is paramount to your level of research success. Your computer can be used to help you achieve that level of analysis, if you truly embrace the power. Don't rely on questionable match suggestions, think about the records and what they are actually offering in the way of information.

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