

Getting Organized: Research, Files, Findings

Class 2: Creating a Research Plan for Cluster Research

Rhonda R. McClure, rhonda.mcclure@americanancestors.org

(Original work compiled by Ann G. Lawthers)

What is Cluster Research?

Cluster research is a technique used to learn more about an ancestor by examining records left by the ancestor's community or cluster. There are two different approaches for this type of casting of a wider net:

- **F**amily and Friends
- **A**ssociates
- **N**eighbors

The more traditional Cluster technique generally relies on:

- Surname, occupation, or birthplace
- Locality (town, county, state)
- Age (when seeking households of interest for parents)

FAN and Cluster Research are useful for:

- Time periods when records were scarce
- Finding the origin of an immigrant ancestor
- Separating the identities of people with the same name
- Finding a maiden name
- Burned county research

A Cluster Research Plan includes all the principles of research planning and applies them to a larger group of individuals.

Who is in the FAN Club?

Family

Family includes the immediate family (spouse(s), children, parents, siblings), the extended family (grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws, aunts, uncles, stepparents, etc.), as well as others of the same surname who live in the same communities or a nearby community.

Family may be found in all the usual sorts of records. However, you will be approaching them with a somewhat different eye.

- **Census Records:** Look at all persons enumerated in a household. Look for people with the same birthplaces. Consider other households of the same surname living in the same town/county. Look for individuals with the same or similar profession.
- **Probate Records:** First look a will that lists heirs and the administrators. The Division of Estate papers may list heirs, though no relationship may be listed. All records in a probate file are important, including the list of debtors.
- **Land Records:** Consider frequent land transactions between the same individuals. Identify the frequent use of same witnesses. Check to see if a large amount of land sold for little money and flag the phrase “in consideration of love and affection.”
- **Church Records:** What was the religious affiliation of your ancestor. Check records for church admission. Identify the witnesses of baptisms/marriages.
- **Cemetery Records:** Find individuals buried around your ancestor
- **Local Histories/Genealogies:** Comb these works for list of early/prominent settlers and where those settlers were from. When did they come to the area? Look for individuals with similar origins.
- **City Directories:** Identify other households of the same surname living on the same street/town/city. Find individuals with similar professions (skilled work). Be one the lookout for people with different surnames living at same address, e.g., in-laws.
- **Naturalization Records:** Look for individuals with a similar birthplace or surname, individuals with a similar occupation, or individuals living at the same address. Are the witnesses familiar?
- **Newspaper Articles/Obituaries:** Obituaries may provide information on next of kin. Check the society section for individuals visiting family members and for participants in a wedding ceremony
- **Town Records:** Identify other individuals or families who arrived in an area around the same time as well as individuals and families with the same surname

Associates

An Associate is a person who is well-known to your ancestor and interacts with them on a regular basis. Associates may be witnesses or informants (marriages, death certificates, deeds), executors and others listed in probate records, signers of affidavits, business associates, and members of the same church

Associates may be found in birth, marriage and death records as witnesses, land records as witnesses, probate records as executors or debtors, and military pensions as those who swore affidavits. In the census, people of the same occupation in the same community may be associates. Check the business records of your ancestor for the patrons at a store or a blacksmith’s shop. Look at lists of church members. Who else attended the same church? And finally, go to the county and local histories for who else is in the same town at the same time?

Neighbors

Neighbors may be the family next door or individuals buried in the same cemetery. Neighbors may be people who attended the same church as your ancestor or owned land abutting that of your ancestor. Neighbors may have even traveled to America on the same ship as your ancestor.

You find neighbors in the census, city directories, land records, tax lists, county histories and passenger lists.

Developing a FAN Research Plan

Step One: The first step in developing a FAN Research Plan or any Research Plan for that matter is to organize your previous research. You can incorporate the [Research Plan Form](#) and to help you organize, consider downloading the [annotated research log](#) from American Ancestors. In the research log template, the rows are the major types of records you may use (e.g., vital, census, cemetery, probate, etc.) and the columns are the research log. Both templates are customizable to be useful to your personal style of tracking information. The columns in the research log template include source, objective, name, dates examine, place, relevant record, notes, citation.

Perhaps the biggest difference between a FAN Research Plan and other types of research plans, is that you will want to adjust the Research Plan Form to accommodate the addition of the Associates and Neighbors in addition to the information you put in for the family.

Step Two: The second step in FAN Research Planning is to consider what is missing and what do we want to learn.

Step Three: Third, compile the FAN club, keeping in mind the ultimate goal of your research. Not all FAN clubs are equal. Don't list every single neighbor from 10 pages of the census if you are fairly certain that those people cannot help answer your question. Focus your energy on potentially high-yield people initially.

Review all documents of your ancestor and make lists of:

- **Family Members** and where you found the information
- **Associates** and where you found them
- **Neighbors** and how you found them

The names that you find will populate your Research Plan Form or Excel workbook. When working in the Excel workbook, use different tabs for different people/families. As you collect FAN club members, keep a running list of questions/theories/hypotheses that arise—consider adding these to the Research Plan Form (working with both templates simultaneously). You are trying on ideas as to how your ancestor and this person may have interacted, which in turn will help you choose records to review. When researching it is always useful to have a theory that you are testing by the research, e.g., Person A came from the same county in Ireland as my ancestor. Similarly, keep a running list of the kinds of records that might help you test the theories you are developing.

Once you have compiled your first pass FAN club list, ask yourself whether you have considered. . .?

- Persons living at the same address
- Persons born in the same place, now living together in another place
- Persons with the same occupation
- Neighbors listed on tax records or deeds
- Witnesses to estates, deeds, marriage bonds, or naturalizations

Step Four: Identify what records you now need to pursue and to lay out a Game Plan. At this point go back to your objectives and the question/theories you have accumulated. Create a grid (or whatever works for you) for each FAN club person and what you are looking for.

Now you can take your research plan and do the Research!

Researching

As you research, enter your findings into your workbook. Also consider making notes next to each record about reliability. For example:

- Are you looking at an original or a copy?
- Who provided the information for the record? A participant in the event or someone else?
- Was the record made close to the time of event or at some time later?
- Who recorded the event? An educated or an uneducated clerk/person?
- Is the source reliable (with documentation) is the source uncited?

Creating a Cluster Research Plan

As with FAN Research, you can use both the Research Planning Form and annotated research log templates to identify what you know, focus your research, and track your hypotheses.

The biggest difference in a “cluster” search tends to be the wider area of inclusion. This often results in many potential families or households that you will need to keep track of, thus making it even more important that you record your goals and the active research you undertake.

The cluster approach goes beyond the those we consider close to our ancestor, throwing the search out to include perhaps anyone who:

- Has a child in the right age range in the 1790-1840 census (when searching for parents)
- Looking for others of a surname who are residing in the same county or state as you ancestor who shares qualities with your ancestor:
 - Born in same place or parents’ born in same place
 - Same occupation (though perhaps not living near your ancestor)
- Seeking information of a more historical nature:
 - Understanding how immigrants from a given country came to the area in which your ancestor did
 - Understanding how historical events (e.g., Industrial Revolution) affected your ancestor’s life and livelihood

With the cluster research approach, you may find that while your details about your ancestor included just his basic information and that of his wife and children, that the “Which records will I need?” and the “Search Strategy” sections of the Research Planning Form are where you find yourself having many items.

Likewise, you may need to avail yourself of additional templates for the abstracting of households in a census that fit your search criteria or creating spreadsheets or tables to assist you with tracking all individuals from tax year to tax year, or incorporating your family knowledge with that of historical information that applies to where your ancestor resided in the form of a timeline.

Because the cluster search consists of individuals far beyond your ancestors, you will not want to put them in your genealogy software program because at present they do not appear to connect to your ancestor. This is why it becomes necessary to accurately track all your active research in the annotated research log, making sure to include comments on reliability, idiosyncrasies, or variations in spelling, age, or birthplace. All of this will be ultimately used to assist you when you are analyzing what you have found. It will be during the analysis phase that you are likely to eliminate many of those households you abstracted from the census, for instance.

Knowing When to Stop

Set limits and realistic goals for yourself and stay organized. Trust your research. Be creative, not crazy.

Consider creating a written summary of your work which includes the goal of your research, your prior research, and then a summary of what you did and did not find. Address any anomalies or contradictions you found. Write a conclusion and provide a genealogical summary.