

# ERRORS IN ORIGINAL RECORDS? HOW TO SPOT THEM; WHAT TO DO

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**O**RIGINAL RECORDS SOMETIMES CONTAIN ERRONEOUS INFORMATION. *How do you spot the error? What do you do if you suspect or discern an error? What do we mean by “original record”? What do we mean by “error”? This presentation will answer these two questions, help you differentiate between “original records,” “original sources,” “primary sources,” “copies of original records,” “derivative sources,” “secondary sources,” “tertiary sources,” “derivative sources,” etc., and show you some examples of errors in original records and suggest ways you can deal with such errors.*

What are “errors in original records”? To discuss this properly, we need to define what we mean here by “original record” and “error.” We do not mean to enter into the debate about what is and is not an “original record” for purposes of genealogical analysis or whether the term “original record” is helpful in evaluating genealogical evidence; we mean here simply to give a useful definition for our purposes so we can discuss some of the things you can do when you discover an “error” in an “original record.” (There are two endnotes at the conclusion of this present syllabus leading you into that debate.)

## “ORIGINAL RECORD”

Although genealogists and historians differ on what is meant by the term “original record,” we will here, for our purposes, define “original record” as follows:

*An expression that is written, digitally recorded, engraved, or otherwise fixed in a tangible medium—be it on papyrus, paper, vellum, stone, computer disk, or other electronic storage device—setting forth information based on the testimony or report of one or more witnesses given at or very near the time and place when and where an event occurred or a status or condition existed, which expression is set forth primarily for the purpose of memorializing the specific event, status or condition.*

Sorry about so much detail. Here’s an example with an explanation. A priest writes down that he has performed a marriage ceremony joining John Doe and Mary Roe in holy matrimony in St. Stephen’s

Catholic Church in Provo, Utah. Twenty minutes after performing the ceremony, he records those facts not only in his parish register but also at the same time both on a church-prepared certificate to give to the couple and on a State of Utah certificate of marriage form set forth on the bottom of the marriage license that had been presented to him by the couple prior to the ceremony, with the groom’s brother and the bride’s father signing their names in the parish register, on the church-provided certificate for the couple, and on the county’s form, in all three records separately attesting to the facts of the wedding. The parish register marriage record (to be kept by the church), the county marriage certificate (to be kept by the county clerk), and the church-prepared certificate of marriage (to be kept by the newly married couple) are all “original records” of the marriage. Each is an “original record” because each expresses in writing on paper information about the wedding ceremony based on the testimony of witnesses given at or very near the time and place when and where the wedding occurred, each being a record set forth for the purpose of memorializing the event. <sup>[See endnote 1]</sup> No one of these three records is either a duplicate of any other in the sense of having been copied from any one of the others or having relied on the information recorded in any of the others (each derives its information independently and directly from the three witnesses—the priest, the brother, and the father) and thus each of the three records can indeed be said to be an “original record.” <sup>[See endnote 2]</sup>

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If the above wedding had instead taken place in Russia or Germany, conducted by a Lutheran pastor or a Catholic priest in the mid 1800s, the pastor or priest simultaneously or shortly thereafter likely would have created a record of the marriage ceremony in the *Kirchenbuchduplicaten* (the church book duplicates), which he would have recorded for the civil authorities at or near the time he recorded the marriage in his own parish register. Such records are “duplicates” of the “original records” and often while being more legible than the original parish register will differ from the original parish register because of transcription variations. Thus, the original parish register is the “original record” and the church book duplicate is a “copy” or “duplicate record.”

In my definition of “original record,” I include a few phrases that are important:

1. “An expression”—a “record” is something that conveys information from one person to others by expression in language;
2. that is “written, digitally recorded, engraved, or otherwise fixed in a tangible medium”—the expression can be conveyed in any medium that can be seen or felt;
3. “be it on papyrus, paper, vellum, stone, computer disk, or other electronic storage device”—whether it be a headstone or a book the tangible medium conveys the words of the expressed message;
4. “setting forth information based on the testimony or report of one or more witnesses”—a “witness” (further defined below) is one who saw or heard or both saw and heard an event (or who has intimate knowledge of a condition or situation);
5. “given at or very near the time and place when and where an event occurred or a status or condition existed”—witnesses who testify to or assert facts that happen at or shortly before the time of their report (and often in the same place) provide a degree of believability;
5. “which expression is set forth primarily for the purpose of memorializing the specific event, status or condition”—an original record informs about an event; other included information is tangential.

## A WITNESS HAS “WIT”!

What is a “witness” and why is the participation of a “witness” central to an “original record”?

**Wit**<sup>1</sup>—“The capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding; keen intelligence; *origin*: Old English *wit(t)*, *gewit(t)*, denoting the mind as the seat of consciousness, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *weet* and German *Witz*; also *to wit*.<sup>2</sup>”

**Wit**<sup>2</sup>—“*Archaic* verb *wot*, to have knowledge; *origin*: Old English *witan*.” (The Apostle Paul said, “I wot not” (Phil. 1:22), meaning “I did not know.”)

The verb forms “wot” and “wit” mean to have knowledge. Apart from “intuition” and other supernatural or spiritual means, people generally acquire knowledge through one or more of the five physical senses: tasting, smelling, feeling, seeing, hearing. The latter two—seeing and hearing—are generally the main ones through which we acquire the type of “knowledge” that makes us “witnesses” to human events.

For example, if you *see* and *hear* the performance of a baptism, you *know* it occurred and thus you are a “witness” (a “wit”-ness) to it. If you hear someone tell you that a birth has occurred down the street, to what are you a witness? You are a witness to the fact that someone told you; you are not a witness to the birth itself. Thus, if one and one-half centuries after the fact you are reading a record written by a town clerk in the archives of a small village in Northern Italy and you see that the record states that the father presented himself to the clerk on such-and-such a date telling the clerk that there was born in the father’s home on the prior day a baby boy by the name of Guido, the father who signed the record was a witness of the birth and the clerk was a witness of the father’s report though not of the birth.

## EXAMPLES

In the presentation for which this present syllabus is a resource I will discuss numerous examples of errors in original records. Here I mention only three of them:

1. Maria Catharina Eules and Johann Christopher Schad were married on 20 Apr 1739 in Seligenstadt, Hessen-Darmstadt, Germany (FHL film 949061,

item 2, page 82). The marriage record, as originally written, erroneously stated the name of the groom was “Theodor” Schad, who happens to be Johann Christopher’s brother. The very page on which the original entry had been made, the one written in 1739, subsequently was corrected, in pencil, by a genealogical researcher, in about 1934, nearly 200 years after the marriage. (The handwriting of the penciled-in notation matches the handwriting of the manuscript of an unpublished Volume II (2 Band) written by Dr. Ludwig Seibert, author of *Sippenbuch der Stadt und Zent Seligenstadt* (1 Band, Seligenstadt: Druck und Verlag Gustav Sprey, Jr., 1934), to refer instead, and correctly, to Johann Christophor Schad.)

2. The marriage record for Theodor (the erroneously named brother)—who himself married on 3 Jul 1739 to Maria Elisabeth Reuss (FHL film 949061, item 2, page 83)—itself also has an error, erroneously attributing the surname “Scheid” instead of “Schad” to Theodor’s father, Johann Adam Schad. The “Scheid” surname given in Theodor’s marriage record is not a mere misspelling of “Schad,” for in Seligenstadt, for 300 years and more, the “Schad” and “Scheid” surnames uniformly were distinct from one another and correctly recorded as such.

3. For the following example I am indebted to Carol Baxter (aka “The History Detective”) of St. Ives, NSW, Australia (<http://www.carolbaxter.com>). Her excellent analysis of most all available records about a family about which researchers for many years have tugged and pulled, establishes that there was an error in the baptism record of twins born in 1814. The twins were named in the baptismal record as “Mary Ann Douglas, Daughter, and Joseph Douglas Son of William and Mary Douglas of Wilberforce, Twins / Born at Wilberforce November 14th, 1814 and were Christened at Windsor December 18th 1814. . . .” No other record ever again refers to a child in this family by the name of “Joseph” and yet numerous other records refer to both Mary Ann and her sister Elizabeth, one even stating that Mary Ann and Elizabeth were both 10 years of age and placing a bracket in the margin next to their names and ages, clearly suggesting the twin relationship.



## WHAT TO DO

1. Have you noticed how we have become rather monosyllabic in our communications? Talk show hosts manifest impatience at answers that exceed ten words. We want information and we want it now. We detest reasoned explanation and dialogue; we shun methodical analysis. So what to do when you suspect an error in, of all things, an “original record”? First, adopt the attitude that runs against the societal expectation: look at all of the sources you can possibly find, look at them critically, and do so with the thought in mind that you will be taking upon yourself the task of setting forth a full and complete analysis of as many sources as you can find pertinent to the supposed error, that you will be presenting your thoughts in full sentences and ordered paragraphs, and that you will be explaining not only what evidence you rely on to reach your conclusions but also discussing how you have reached your conclusions. Do not be afraid to assign yourself the task of explaining in great detail why you think a mistake was made. Note that this first step is merely one in which you change your attitude. Adopt the attitude of the “detective.”

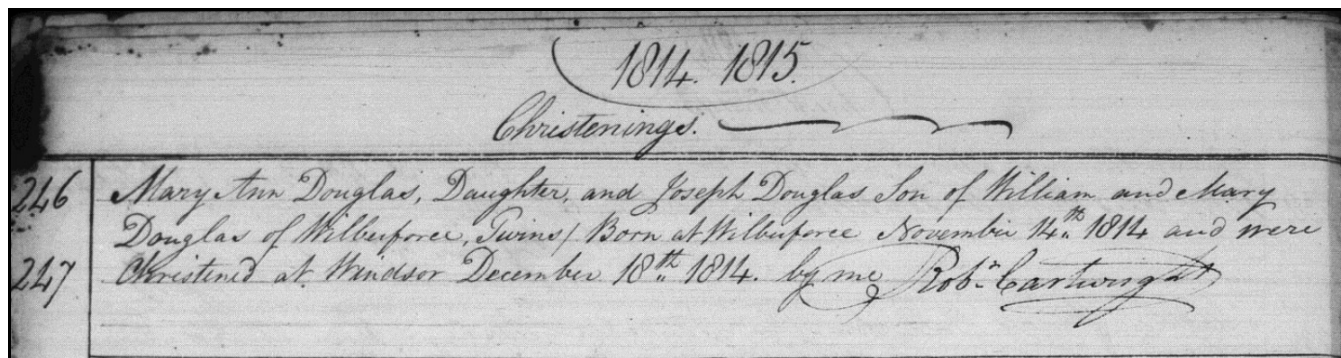
2. If you happen to have the very rare experience of actually handling an “original record” (and not just a photocopy or microfilm image of an “original record”), then, unlike in the example of the 20 April 1739 marriage record, do not make any changes or notations in the original record itself.

3. Put in your notes as accurate an explanation as possible describing the error you perceive, explaining from as many sources as you can find what you think the correct information is, and describing each source of information that you rely on to support any aspect of your analysis. Rely on helpful sources such as the Elizabeth Mills article referred to in endnote 2 (available at <http://snipurl.com/26ybd5d>), Bryan L. Mulcahy’s “How to Evaluate Genealogical Evidence” (available at <http://snipurl.com/26ybg2j>), and Natalie D. Cottrill’s discussion of records and sources (available at <http://www.progenealogists.com/sourcetypes.htm>). Remember that the record you are dealing with originated with one or more “witnesses” who apparently reported something they had seen and heard. So while you proceed confidently also tread carefully.

4. Publish your notes as widely as possible so that as many others as possible may benefit from your work. Invite responses. Be careful to couch your conclusions as tentative if you are not sure. Be willing to adapt to constructive criticism.

5. Note that Ancestry.com and other research tools often allow you to add alternate indexing information, giving you the option (in Ancestry.com, for

example) to choose either “transcription error” (indicating the incorrect information appears in the Ancestry.com index) or “incorrect in image” (indicating that the original document contains incorrect information, this latter option not changing the indexing, but instead adding a note that an error appears in the original record).



Register of Baptisms, St. Matthew's Church of England, Windsor, New South Wales, Australia.

1. My comment here about the definition I use for this discussion mostly agrees but in one small aspect disagrees with the definition and comment given by Helen F. M. Leary in her “Part 1: Definitions” Evidence Analysis, A Workshop, 1999 NGS Conference in the States, National Genealogical Society (Arlington, Virginia: NGS, 1999). Ms. Leary defines “ORIGINAL RECORD” as follows: “[T]he first paper writing created in response to a specific event or situation. An ORIGINAL SOURCE can be an ORIGINAL RECORD if written or electronically recorded. An original record is unique—there can be only one ‘first’—and therefore irreplaceable. The original record should not be confused with a DUPLICATE ORIGINAL or an OFFICIAL COPY. Although ‘original’ is sometimes used to refer to any record of which a copy has been made or from which information has been taken, a more-appropriate term in those cases is simply SOURCE.” My only point of disagreement is whether there can exist two or more “original records” of an event. Ms. Leary states “there can be only one ‘first’” and limits her definition of “original record” to “the first paper writing.” I say there can be and often are two originals without any one being a copy or duplicate of the other (and of course, parenthetically, an original need not be limited to “paper”).

2. In Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “Working with Historical Evidence: Genealogical Principles and Standards.” *Evidence: A Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 87 (September 1999): 165–84., Elizabeth Shown Mills refers to “original sources” and “derivative sources” and correctly differentiates the two while still allowing (though not stating) that two “original sources” might exist (because each, separately, would rely on information obtained from one or more “original informant(s)” (e.g., witnesses, whom she refers to on page 165 of her article). Clearly, the example here of the priest writing and the two witnesses signing three separate records without any one of the records constituting a “derivative source”—because no one of them contributes information that has been abstracted, duplicated, transcribed, or otherwise reported from information in a previously existing source—is not an instance of the priest creating any of the three records as a “derivative source.” Indeed, because Ms. Mills uses the phrase “previously existing source” in her definition of a “derivative source,” she conveys the same notion that Ms. Leary conveys (see endnote 1, above), namely, that it is the “first” record that is the “original source” and that “derivative sources” come later. However, even in so doing, Ms. Mills does not foreclose the possibility that there can exist two or more original sources. And, after all, in our example of the priest and witnesses participating in making three separate records contemporaneously with the wedding, we do not know in any event which one of the three records was “first.” Hence, in my definition, the sense of “originality” stems from the fact that the information imparted by the record has its “origin” in (“originates directly from”) the report of the “witness” or “witnesses” of the event (or constitutes the recordation of the report of the “witness”) rather than constituting the recordation of information taken from a prior record of the event.