

Using Technology to “See” Research More Clearly

Peg A. Ivanyo

peg@allthingsrelated.com

Introduction

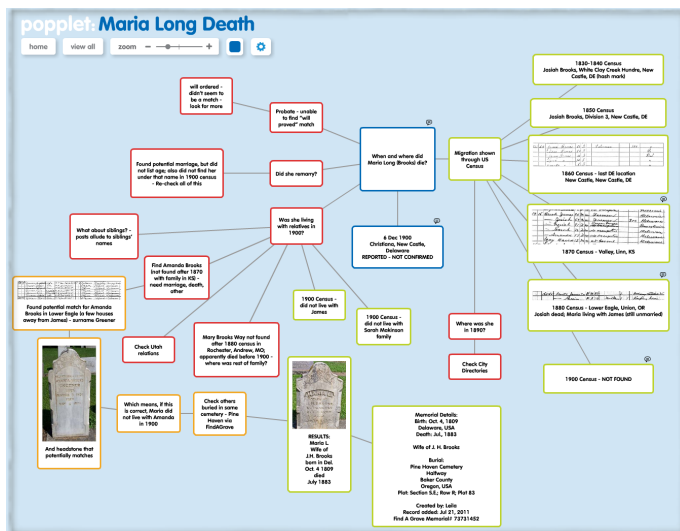
Ever have a difficult time remembering where you stand on a project? Wonder how you missed something that later seemed so obvious? Or felt that the piles of details were difficult to sift through or impossible to fit together? Even with well-organized research logs, well-sourced databases, and clearly written reports, it is easy to get lost in the mass of information and overlook important clues that should be pursued.

This class will explore the use of three simple tools - mind-maps, spreadsheets, and timelines - that provide a different view and bring a fresh perspective to the work. They won't replace the essentials, but they will provide a thirty-foot view of a project and enhance focus. If a picture is worth one thousand words, then a genealogical visual aid is priceless, as it will often reveal hidden clues, relationships, and lead us to "the rest of the story."

Tackle a Brick Wall with a Mind-Map

Mind-maps are not a “new” tool. While Tony Buzan coined and trademarked the word combination in the 1970s, people have been brainstorming, diagramming, and generally capturing ideas on paper, restaurant napkins, and chalk boards for years. Some say the technique has been used for centuries. Studies show that effectiveness, creativity, and educational memory increase with the use of a mind map. They are frequently used for business, writing, project management, and even note-taking.

It is only natural, then, that literally dozens of apps would be developed to enhance the process, replacing paper sketches with dynamic, colorful works of art. While not originally developed with the genealogist in mind, the problem-solving nature of genealogical research makes a mind map application a perfect addition to our toolbox.



Which one to use? With over 50 programs to choose from, and an unlimited number of individuals writing about or demonstrating how to create a mind-map, it is important to feel confident finding our own path. While publications and videos/webinars are a great resource, hands-on experimentation is crucial in order to sort out personal preferences. Pros and cons of a handful of programs and styles will be explored in class. The resource list provides information on where to begin your personal search for your perfect program.

How does it work? One Example: The question “When and where did Maria (Long) Brooks die?” was the question I wanted answered. For decades, all published information about Maria placed her death in December 1900 in Christiana, Delaware, citing a “will proved.” Recent personal research, however, traced Maria and family west from Delaware to Kansas by 1870 and to Oregon by 1880. Examination of the will cited by so many revealed it was the wrong Maria Brooks!

Using a mind map to organize this project moved me from staring at a hodgepodge of information spanning five states and several decades to having clarity of vision and purpose. With past research results diagrammed, it was easy to brainstorm next steps and potential research paths. The diagram became a working document, allowing me to capture new information and images as each research step was completed. Not only did this make quick work of the brick wall, but I continue to reap the benefits in ongoing research.

How to Get Started: Mind-mapping tools come in all varieties, from simple to massive, free to expensive. If you are a self-starter, you might experiment with Popplet.com (shown in example) for quick success. Since you simply enter information as you find it, recolor items as needed, and drag to reorganize, you should find the tool to be quite intuitive. If you prefer more detailed explanations about procedures for other programs, including those demonstrated in class, then a book or a webinar (see resources) may be helpful.

Use Spreadsheets to Create a Visual Outline

Other than research logs, we don’t often think to turn to a spreadsheet to record our research. However, using a spreadsheet to capture, compile, and correlate information could lead us to clues we might have missed otherwise. In the very simplest of uses, those nice little cells act like boxes to store bits of related information until further analysis or research can take place to complete the picture. Care should be taken to set up the date fields correctly to assure successful sorting of data.

- **Demographic analysis:** Extraction of census data for all households in a small community, or a substantial number of pages surrounding the ancestor’s listing in a larger community, will provide sufficient data to analyze the socio-economic status of an ancestral family and the community they live in.
- **Migration Clusters:** Such a study can also provide information about points of origin, migration, ethnic origins, education, and length of residence for the members of the community, revealing clusters of families traveling and settling together from a common point of origin or faith.
- **Census Summary:** Summarizing census data for all members of one family can reveal migration patterns, potential locations for deaths or marriages, and where additional research may be required.
- **Surname Extraction:** Capturing vital information such as christenings for all with a common surname within a certain distance of an end-of-line

Name		1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1900	1910	1920	1930
Josiah Brooks	b: 1805 DE d:			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-White Clay Creek	DE-New Castle	DE-New Castle	KS-Linn Valley					
sp: Maria Long	b: 1810 PA d: 1900 DE			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-White Clay Creek	DE-New Castle	DE-New Castle	KS-Linn Valley	OR-Lower Eagle				
1. Mary Brooks; Way	b: 1828 DE d:			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-White Clay Creek	DE-New Castle	DE-New Castle	MO- Washington	MO- Rochester				
2. Rachel Brooks; Skidmore	b: 1830 DE d: 1853 PA			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-White Clay Creek	PA-Phila. & DE-New Castle							
3. Anna Maria Brooks	b: 1832 DE d: 1853/55			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-New Castle								
4. John Brooks	b: 1838 DE d: abt 1857			DE-White Clay Creek	DE-New Castle								
5. James Brooks	b: 1843 DE d:					DE-New Castle	DE-New Castle	KS-Linn Valley	OR-Lower Eagle	OR-Pine			
6. Sarah Brooks; Makinson	b: 1846 DE d: 1924?					DE-New Castle	DE-New Castle	KS-Linn Valley	OR-Lower Eagle	OR-Pine	OR-Eagle Valley		
7. Amanda Brooks	b: 1851 DE d:						DE-New Castle	KS-Linn Valley					

ancestor's residence into a spreadsheet creates a sortable table that will provide leads to family relationships.

- **DNA:** From tracking chromosome matches to logging contacts, a spreadsheet is your new best friend.
- **Immigration data, FAN Club research, and more**

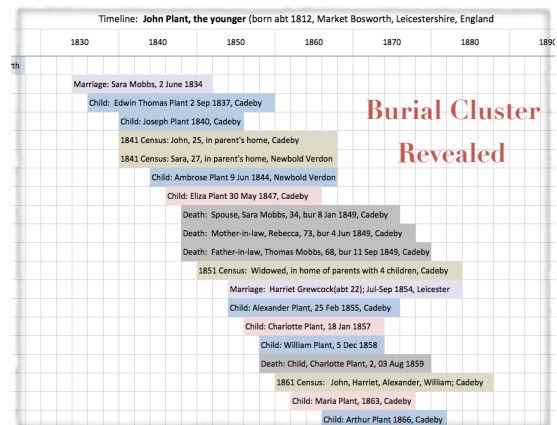
Use Timelines to see Historical Context

Timelines may be created to showcase the life of an ancestor, to track historical changes that affected their life, or both. By overlaying political events, social history, and geographical boundary changes, we begin to “connect the dots” on issues that previously eluded us. Timelines may also provide clues to migration directions and impetus, death patterns, naturalization delays, and more. While creating one may appear to be a tedious process, the act of putting it together alone could lead to puzzle-busting clues.

What type to use or create? Consider the following:

- **Purpose.** Why are you creating the timeline? To document the storyline of an ancestor's life for a family website? To solve a problem? To view an ancestor in social and historical context?
- **Who is the central focus?** Are you following a single individual, sorting out multiple families, or trying to differentiate individuals with the same names?

Getting Started: Don't be afraid to experiment with the options to find a system or two that work well with how you see things. Then create or bookmark a template for a quicker start on the next one. Even the most basic timeline created in a word processor or spreadsheet will quickly reveal points missed and areas requiring additional research.



Resources: Many online and software databases can produce a timeline. Some, like Ancestry trees provides a timeline of individual events connected to sources. Others integrate historical data. Some, such as OurTimeLines, offer a view of world events over a period of time, but won't integrate with ancestral data. Others, such as Genelines (Windows only) interface with various ancestral databases to chart ancestors against historical background. You can even find step by step instructions online to create your own, including how to make a photo timeline to illustrate a person's life, and work toward identification of others.

Final Thoughts

With all the technology that surrounds us, there really is no excuse for struggling with stacks of papers and handwritten notes to find the clues, decipher the path, or analyze the data. The challenge is often more directed toward keeping up on what is available and how to use it. I personally tend to select a product to use based on the research problem at hand rather than one product to use across the board. That way I can personalize my research in a way that truly helps me “see” things more clearly.

Resource List

Mind-Mapping:

1. Arons, Ron. *Mind Maps for Genealogy: Enhanced Research Planning, Correlation, and Analysis*, Oakland: Criminal Research , 2014.
2. Freeplane, open source software application similar to FreeMind, but with collaboration, location-based mapping, and add-ons. *Freeplane*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeplane>
3. Gee, Vic, "Who Invented Mind Mapping: Questions of Origin," *Software for mind mapping and information organisation*. <http://www.mind-mapping.org/mindmapping-learning-study-memory/who-invented-mind-mapping.html>
4. Henry, Alan. "Five Best Mind Mapping Tools," *Lifehacker*, <http://lifelifehacker.com/five-best-mind-mapping-tools-476534555?>
5. O’Gara, Jacob. "Organize your Thoughts and Ideas with this List of the 15 Best Mind Mapping Tools," *Digital Trends*, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/best-mind-mapping-tools/>
6. MacEntee, Thomas. "Mind Mapping Your Research Plans and Results," *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*, familytreeweinars.com
7. Popplet: "Try it Out," the easiest way to get started, popplet.com, popplet.com,
8. SimpleMind, an easy to use downloadable app; has both free and paid versions, *simplemind*, simpleapps.eu/simplemind/
9. XMind 7, more complicated, downloadable app; *XMind*, www.xmind.net
10. Wikipedia. "List of concept- and mind-mapping software"; provides list of both free and paid software as well as freeware options; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_concept-_and_mind-mapping_software

Spreadsheets:

1. Baldwin, Jen.. "Using Excel in Genealogy," *Ancestral Breezes*, ancestralbreezes.blogspot.com/2014/04/using-excel-in-genealogy.html
2. Crandell, Jill. "Microsoft Excel: A Little-known Genealogy Research Tool," *Center for Family History and Genealogy*, presentation given at RootsTech - best source for understanding dates, spreadsheet limitations and uses, and how to copy and paste data. https://www.rootstech.org/bc/content/pdfs/Class-Syllabus/RootsTech/RT1618_MSEExcel-ALittleKnownGenealogyResearchTool_Crandell.pdf?lang=eng
3. Genealogy Junkie. "DNA Spreadsheets," on *Genealogy Junkie*. <http://www.genealogyjunkie.net/dna-spreadsheets.html>

Timelines:

1. Family Tree Magazine, "Quick Guide: Timeline Generators," <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/Quick-Guide-Timeline-Generators>; see also "Timely Tools," <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/timely-tools> and "Create a Picture Timeline," <http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/picture-timeline>
2. Genelines. "Use Timeline Charts to tell Amazing Family Stories." *Genelines software by progeny Genealogy*, windows based; <http://progenygenealogy.com/>
3. OurTimelines. "Create a Timeline (of 5 to 140 year span)," *OurTimelines.com*. http://ourtimelines.com/create_tl_2c.html
4. Przecha, Donna. "Using Timelines in Your Research: Putting Your Ancestors Lives in Context," *Genealogy.com*, http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/36_donna.html
5. Raymond, Robert. "Using Excel to Create Timelines," *FamilySearch Learning Center*, familysearch.org
6. Richard, Diane L. "Timelines as Genealogical Research Tools," Learn from the Experts, archives.com
7. Web-based programs include Tiki-Toki, www.tiki-toki.com, and TimeGlider, www.timeglider.com