

Inferential Genealogy: Deducing Ancestors' Identities *Indirectly*

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This session will show and explain how family historians can accurately deduce ancestors' identities and many aspects of their lives by digging below "surface information" in genealogical records and combining information from several sources. Useful in many situations, inferential methodology is especially helpful where records do not state relationships.

"INFER implies arriving at a conclusion by reasoning from evidence."

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003), s.v. "infer."

KINSHIP DETERMINATION is the process of figuring out the identity of an ancestor's parent, spouse, or child. It is the opposite of "KINSHIP ACCEPTANCE"—the uncritical use of kinships determined or accepted by others. INFERENTIAL GENEALOGY is one form of kinship determination.

"Accepting" versus "Determining" Kinships: The Pros and Cons			
KINSHIP ACCEPTANCE		KINSHIP DETERMINATION	
<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Quick	Unknown accuracy and error prone	Can succeed where records don't specify kinship	Accuracy unknown (but not error prone)
Simple	Bypasses useful sources	May succeed with record shortages	Could be premature
No thinking required	No thinking required	Uncovers useful sources	Can be complicated
No special knowledge needed	Conveys false certainty	Probably accurate	Requires special knowledge
Short-term enjoyment	Unexplained	Long-term enjoyment	Requires explanation
Satisfies uncritical consumers	Disappoints critical consumers	Conveys appropriate uncertainty	Time consuming and possibly expensive

“Givens”

1. Genealogists seek knowledge of ancestral kinships.
2. Many records state kinships; many do not.
3. Even if a source states a kinship, it might be wrong.
4. No category of sources is error free.
- 5. Inferences can reveal correct kinships, even when sources have them wrong.
- 6. Inferences can determine kinships that no record states.
7. Visibly inferred kinships are more likely to be correct than kinships stated without reasoning.

What can be Inferred?

Names
Dates
Relationships
Occupation
Place of origin
Religion
Identity
All kinds of genealogical data



Differences between Stated and Inferred Genealogy

STATED	INFERRED
Often comes from one source	Comes from many independent sources
Limited to sources stating kinship	Not blocked by lack of sources stating kinship
Greater chance of error	Less chance of error
Requires blind acceptance or duplicating research	Usually includes a convincing rationale
Unknown accuracy	Accuracy evident in explanation and documentation

How to Infer Kinship Accurately

1. Search broadly—“beyond the person, family, event, or situation in question. Thorough research gathers sufficient data to test—and to support or reject—hypotheses concerning identities, relationships, events, and situations”.¹
 - a. Do not neglect sources and records in which the person of interest is not named.
 - b. Include records created well before and after the lifetime of the person of interest.
 - c. Use records at all levels from local to national.
 - d. Include surrounding jurisdictions, especially if you do not find records where they “should” be.
2. For every seemingly pertinent source you find, ensure that you understand why it was created and the laws, regulations, and customs governing it.
3. Compare records of interest to similar records of people not of interest; note the differences.
4. For every seemingly pertinent record ensure you understand the parties’ motivation or rationale for creating that specific record:
 - a. Consider all possible unmentioned “triggering events”—for example, a death, marriage, migration, or inheritance.
 - b. Consider what each party had to gain by participating in the record’s creation or the event it documents.
 - c. Attempt to understand why and how every person named in the record participated in making it or in the event it reports.
5. Attend to clues underlying “surface” information, like proximity, naming patterns, and chronology.

1. Standard 17 in Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2014), 14.

6. Look for patterns and parallels across records pertaining to the same person, event, or property:
 - a. Arrange records concerning a person, event, or property in a timeline.
 - b. Use a matrix, spreadsheet, or table to compare sources, people, dates, places, and property.
 - c. Plot land to reveal neighbors and coheirs.
7. Note paradoxes in records, including:
 - a. Unexpected statements or information differing from that in similar records of other people
 - b. Discrepancies between the record and similar records of other people or other records pertaining to the same event
 - c. A seeming omission from the record
 - d. Any puzzling terminology or other aspect of the record or the information it contains
8. Follow records of processes (like land holding and probate) from beginning to end.
9. Consider both kinds of evidence—direct and indirect, including negative and circumstantial.
10. Resolve all conflicting information.
11. Consider provenance, diplomatics, and the possibility any record has been altered.
12. Recognize your assumptions as such.
13. Write—and document—your conclusions.

Strategies to Avoid False Inferences

- a. Trust no record in isolation.
- b. Recognize assumptions as such, and make no assumption you can't defend.
- c. Consult as many sources as possible; avoid shortcuts.
- d. Evaluate the quality of every source you consult and all evidence each source contains.
- e. Corroborate sources with independently created sources to the greatest extent possible.
- f. Accept an inference only when it meets the Genealogical Proof Standard (the sum of source-cited evidence, including resolved contradictions, from all potentially applicable sources and explained in writing).

Becoming an Inferential Genealogist (One Class is a Start but Not Enough)

- Attend* Take courses in advanced genealogical methodology, for example, that at Samford University, Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research (<http://www.samford.edu/schools/ighr/>) and the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy (<http://www.infouga.org/cpage.php?pt=314>).
- Study* Analyze articles demonstrating inferential genealogy, like those in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (<http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/ngsq>) and those on the Board for Certification of Genealogists website (<http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/worksamples.html>) until you understand the author's methodology well enough to use it in your own cases.
- Write* Compose proof summaries of inferences from genealogical evidence. Writing helps you see “holes” in your research and reasoning and develop sound conclusions.
- Submit* Ask experts to review your proof summaries and provide feedback. Submit for publication in a peer-reviewed and edited venue and for a credentialing evaluation.

Sample Case Studies Demonstrating Inferential Genealogy

1. Bell, Mary McCampbell, and MaryAnn Dickey McCrary. "Using Probate Law to Sidestep Missing Records: James Madison McCrary Shows the Way." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (June 2004): 89–95.
2. Brasfield, Curtis. "Tracing Slave Ancestors: Batchelor, Bradley, Branch, and Wright of Desha County, Arkansas." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (March 2004): 6–30.
3. Fox, Judy Kellar. "Three Decades Missing: Catharine (née Keller) (Kuhnley) Wolfe—A Compilation of Indirect Evidence." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (June 2008). In press.
4. Jones, Thomas W. "Uncovering Ancestors by Deduction: The Husbands and Parents of Eleanor (née Medley (Tureman) (Crow) Overton." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (December 2006): 287–304.
5. ———. "Dilley of Northern Virginia and Ohio: A Proposed Solution Hanging on a Single Word." *The American Genealogist* 79 (July 2004): 220–77.
6. ———. "Merging Identities Properly: Jonathan Tucker Demonstrates the Technique." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 88 (June 2000): 111–21.
7. ———. "Organizing Meager Evidence to Reveal Lineages: An Irish Example—Geddes of Tyrone." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 89 (June 2001): 98–112.
8. ———. "The Parents of Maxfield Whiting of Virginia and Kentucky." *The American Genealogist* 80 (July 2005): 195–200.
9. Litchman, William. "Using Cluster Methodology to Backtrack an Ancestor: The Case of John Bradburry." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 95 (June 2007): 117–26.
10. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "The Search for Margaret Ball: Building Steps over a Brick-wall Research Problem." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 77 (March 1989): 43–65.
11. Randall, Ruth. "A Family for Suzanne." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 95 (December 2007): 281–302.

Sources for Further Study of Inferential Genealogy

12. Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 20014.
13. Devine, Donn. "Evidence Analysis." In *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*, edited by Elizabeth Shown Mills. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001.
14. David Hackett Fischer. *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.
15. Jones, Thomas W. "A Conceptual Model of Genealogical Evidence: Linkage between Present-Day Sources and Past Facts." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 86 (March 1998): 5–18.
16. ———. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2013.
17. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Building a Case When No Record 'Proves a Point.'" *Ancestry* 16 (April–May 1998): 26–31.
18. ———. "Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis." In *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007.