



SOLUTIONS FOR MISSING OR SCARCE RECORDS

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This session will explain strategies for overcoming research barriers caused by lost or destroyed records, poor record-keeping, or a simple lack of records.

MISSING-RECORD SCENARIOS

- ✗ Burned courthouse, church, or home
- ✗ Records lost through war, vandalism, neglect, or intentional or accidental destruction
- ✗ Frontier or other area with inconsistent record keeping
- ✗ Ancestral family left few records
- ✗ Ancestors who were enslaved
- ✗ Area, time period, or religion without vital records
- ✗ Access restrictions
- ✗ Researcher is unaware of alternative sources
- ✗ Researcher does not know how to find and use evidence

SOME TYPICAL SURVIVING RECORDS

- ✓ Tax lists
- ✓ Church minute books or other records
- ✓ Court order books, minutes, or papers
- ✓ Militia records
- ✓ Voter records
- ✓ Letters, diaries, and other personal papers of community members
- ✓ Store accounts or other commercial records
- ✓ Leases or other landlord records
- ✓ Newspapers
- ✓ Gravestones or burial records
- ✓ Legislative or gubernatorial petitions
- ✓ Other manuscripts, not mentioned above, that may be in private hands, historical societies, or archives

MISSING-RECORD STRATEGIES

Search Strategies

- Search subordinate and superordinate jurisdictions, especially for the following—
 - State and town records, if county records are missing (for example, court, military, and tax records may be found at different levels, or copies of county-level records)
 - Diocese, if parish records are missing
- Search surrounding jurisdictions.
- Research relatives, neighbors, and associates, especially those who moved to areas with more records.
- Search reconstructed records, if available.
- Search records after the period of destruction.
- Search well after the ancestor's lifetime.
- Search archives, historical societies, libraries, and other repositories that may have information from the jurisdiction with missing records.

Record-Location Strategies

- Use finding aids for manuscript materials and newspapers, like the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and WorldCat.
- Study research guides and periodicals for the state, county, and region.
- Join the genealogical and historical societies for the region with missing records.
- Review case studies demonstrating successful research in the area with missing records.
- Follow any trail the records suggest—
 - Records implying the existence of other records
 - Records suggesting migration of your research subjects and their relatives, neighbors, and associates, especially to jurisdictions where records may be more complete
 - Records referring to other jurisdictions where records may be more complete

Record-Use Strategies

- Focus on evidence buried in the surviving records as well as information obvious on the surface—
 - Direct evidence
 - Indirect evidence
 - Negative evidence
- Analyze lists for evidence of relationships.
- Attend to details in surviving records.
- Read between the lines.
- Understand applicable laws and customs for every record you use.
- Understand the purpose and context of every record you use.

Case-Building Strategies

- Synthesize evidence fragments from disparate records.
- Apply the Genealogical Proof Standard to conclusions based on indirect evidence and negative evidence.

Study Strategies

- Review case studies, especially those explaining successful research in the time and place with record shortages.
- Review case studies that demonstrate case building and the use of evidence.
- Study historical and genealogical society periodicals covering the area with missing records. Look for indications of surviving records, and research strategies, not just for your ancestors.
- Study genealogical guidebooks and periodicals for the area.

The **Genealogical Proof Standard** requires that proof statements, summaries, and arguments be:

1. Carefully reasoned
2. Written out
3. Based on the following—
 - i. A reasonably exhaustive search
 - ii. Complete source citations
 - iii. Thorough analysis of the evidence
 - iv. Resolution of any conflicting evidence

See Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2014), 1–2.

SELECTED CASE STUDIES

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15. Leary, Helen F. M., Elizabeth Shown Mills, and Christine Rose. "Evidence Analysis: Definitions, Principles and Practices." Audiotaped seminar, 1999 National Genealogical Society Conference in the States, available as NGS017 (Hobart, Indiana: Repeat Performance, 1999), with printed matter of the same title published in *Virginia: Where a Nation Began: Program Syllabus* (Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 1999): 41–48.
16. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Building a Case When No Record 'Proves a Point.'" *Ancestry* 16 (April–May 1998): 26–31.
17. ———. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007.
18. ———. "Working with Historical Evidence: Genealogical Principles and Standards." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 87 (September 1999): 165–84.