



Maximizing Your Use of Genealogical Evidence



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Evidence lying below surface information can solve simple and complex genealogical problems. Examples will show how to discover evidence and use it to advance genealogies.

I. Defining and Categorizing Evidence

Information. Statements about an event, person, place, relationship, situation, or time. Researchers glean information from sources. Information becomes *evidence* when a researcher uses it.

Evidence. Information, or an inference from information, that we use to address a genealogical question.

- ✓ Evidence is an intangible mental concept because it arises only when we use information to make inferences about past facts.
- ✓ Conceptually, evidence is a mental link between a present-day source and an historical fact.
- ✓ Evidence can be a mere possibility or hint. Evidence can agree or disagree, and it can be direct or indirect:

Agreement. Different evidence indicating the same fact or compatible facts. Despite agreement, it can be wrong.

Disagreement. Evidence indicating competing or mutually exclusive facts. All the evidence could be wrong, or one or many of the items of evidence could be right.

Direct evidence comes from what a source *says*. It is evidence that appears to answer a genealogical question all by itself. That answer could be specific (like an exact birth date) or it could be general (like a range of years). Direct evidence can come from an authoritative source or informant, an unknown source or informant, or somewhere in between. Direct evidence can be right, and it can be wrong.

Indirect evidence. Indirect comes from what a source *implies* or *does not say*. It is information, or an inference from information, that cannot alone answer a genealogical question; instead, researchers must combine it with other evidence. That answer could be specific (like an exact birth date) or it could be general (like a range of years). Indirect evidence can come from an authoritative source or informant, an unknown source or informant, or somewhere in between. Indirect evidence can be right, and it can be wrong.



Genealogical evidence is like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. We initially might not know where it fits in the puzzle we're working on, or even whether it belongs in that puzzle.

2. Finding Evidence

Without a research question, genealogical evidence does not exist.

All information in any source, regardless of its quality, has potential to become evidence.

1. Start with a focused genealogical question: What do you want to learn about an ancestor?
2. Search broadly to locate all sources likely to provide evidence to help answer that question. Leave no potentially useful source unexamined.
3. Create a citation before you examine the source. (Later, your citations will help establish the credibility of your conclusion from the evidence you find.) Record the source's date, title or description, the place it was created, and the place it is now located.
4. Read each source carefully, ensuring that you understand (a) everything it says, (b) when, where, and why it was created, (c) who created it, (d) the roles of *all* the people named in the source, and (e) their likely motivations for filling those roles.
5. As you examine each source or review your notes, identify all information that might pertain to your genealogical question or to any potentially related question:
 - ✓ To identify direct evidence, focus on what the evidence says
 - ✓ To identify indirect evidence, focus on possibilities the information—or the absence of information—suggests or allows for.

3. Evaluating Evidence

Genealogical evidence is a possibility, not a conclusion.

6. Give greatest credibility to evidence from sources created soon after the events they report.
7. Evaluate the motivations and credibility of the informant who provided the information from which you identified the evidence. Give greater credibility to informants with eyewitness information and all the characteristics of credible informants.
8. Give greatest credibility to evidence that agrees with other evidence items.
9. Give no credibility to evidence that cannot be corroborated with other evidence items.

4. Using Evidence

Citations help you establish the credibility of your conclusion from the evidence you find.

10. Compare and contrast one source's information with information from related sources to reveal evidence none of them provides when evaluated alone.
11. Compare and contrast different sources for the same people and similar sources for different people.
12. Compare evidence with relevant implications of economic, historical, legal, religious, and sociological information.
13. Base conclusions on the sum of evidence with all conflicts resolved.
14. Explain those conclusions in a fully documented essay and you will have achieved proof.

5. Examples of Skillful Use of Genealogical Evidence

Learn how to find and use genealogical evidence from other researchers' examples.

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. Findlen, George L. “Using Questionable Sources Productively: The Parents of Rial, Edwin, and George Plummer of Alna, Maine.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (September 2008): 165–76.
4. Fox, Judy Kellar. “Three Decades Missing: Catharine (née Keller) (Kuhnley) Wolfe—A Compilation of Indirect Evidence.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (June 2008): 85–100.
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7. ———. “‘A Solid Gang of them’; An Illinois Morse-Trammell Family’s Reactions to Scandal.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (June 2004): 105–18.
8. ———. “The Three Identities of Charles D. McLain of Muskegon, Michigan.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (June 2008): 101–120.
9. ———. “Uncovering Ancestors by Deduction: The Husbands and Parents of Eleanor (née Medley (Tureman) (Crow) Overton.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (December 2006): 287–304.
10. Lennon, Rachal Mills. “Jonathan Turner—More than a Name: A Carolina Case Study in Dissecting Records.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 97 (March 2009): 17–28.
11. ———. “The Wives of Jonathan Turner: Identification of Women in Pre-Twentieth-Century South Carolina.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (December 2004): 245–55.
12. Litchman, William. “Scattered Pieces: Assembling a King and Queen County, Virginia, Taylor Family from Scanty Records.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 91 (September 2003): 183–95.
13. ———. “Widows, Stepkin, and Support Networks: Clues to the Unknown Father of Miranda (Taylor) Morris.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 84 (March 1996): 17–27.
14. 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.
15. Randall, Ruth. “A Family for Suzanne.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 95 (December 2007): 281–302.

6. Source Material on Use of Genealogical Evidence

Learn how to find and use genealogical evidence from articles, books, and guides.

16. Board for Certification of Genealogists. *The BCG Application Guide*. Washington D.C.: privately printed, 2014.
17. ———. *Genealogy Standards*. Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2014.
18. Greenwood, Val D. “Evaluating Evidence.” *Genealogical Journal* 25 (1997): 380–85.
19. ———. *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy*, 3rd edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2000. [See especially chapter 4, “Evaluation of Evidence.”]
20. Ingham, Norman W. “Some Thoughts about Evidence and Proof in Genealogy.” *The American Genealogist* 72 (July–October 1997): 380–85.
21. Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2014.
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23. Leary, Helen F. M. “Evidence Revisited—DNA, POE, and GPS.” *OnBoard: Newsletter of the Board for Certification of Genealogists* 4 (January 1998): 1–2 and 5.
24. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “Building a Case When No Record ‘Proves a Point.’ ” *Ancestry* 16 (April–May 1998): 26–31
25. ———. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2007. [See especially chapter 1, “Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis.”]
26. ———, editor. *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001. [See especially Donn Devine, “Evidence Analysis;” Helen F. M. Leary, “Problem Analyses and Research Plans,” and Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Proof Arguments and Case Studies.”]
27. ———. “Working with Historical Evidence: Genealogical Principles and Standards.” *Evidence: A Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 87 (September 1999): 165–84.
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