

Extracting Evidence: Strategies for Analyzing Genealogical Sources

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In this interactive session, participants will learn how to determine the reliability of evidence and employ decision-making skills when encountering conflicting details in their research. Participants will practice principles of evidence analysis using in-session polls, then participate in a “choose your own adventure” style case study to see the value of evidence analysis in action.

Introduction

As genealogists, we use a variety of records to help us learn more about our ancestors and answer research questions. Gaining understanding about these records and how and why they were created will help us analyze them correctly and draw valid conclusions. The principles presented in this syllabus are widely known and accepted as standards in the genealogy field. Two resources outline these principles in greater detail:

Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition, revised (Nashville, TN: Ancestry.com), 2021.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 4th edition (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company), 2024.

Basics of Source Analysis

The Source: The source is the container that holds information about our ancestors. Sources come in many different formats but generally include physical or digital books or documents that have been created for various purposes. When analyzing the source itself, we should ask ourselves “How and when was the source created?” We can categorize sources three ways:

- *Original Sources* are the first recording of the information, created near the time of the event by a reliable scribe. These sources can be handwritten or typed.
- *Derivative Sources* are handwritten or typed transcripts of the original. Abstracts that only include part of the original information are also considered derivative records.
- *Authored Sources* are sources in which an author has pulled together various pieces of information from multiple sources into a new format and included their own conclusions or thoughts along with the facts from the original sources.

The Information: The information is what we see in the source – facts about the person of interest. To analyze the information, we ask ourselves the question, “Who provided the

information?” The informant was not necessarily the person who recorded the information (although they could have been). Many times, a scribe wrote the information received from the informant. It is most common that the informant is not named in the record, but we can often surmise who might have provided the information based on our knowledge of laws and practices of the time. We can categorize information in one of three ways:

- *Primary*: The information was provided by an eyewitness to the event. We need to think about whether this eyewitness had any reason they would have wanted to falsify the information.
- *Secondary*: The information was provided by someone who heard the information from someone else. Like the old game of “telephone” details can change or get lost in the process of retelling.
- *Undetermined*: It is impossible to know who provided the information. Even if we think we know who most likely provided the information, we must remember that we do not actually know most of the time.

The Evidence

Evidence is our interpretation of the information contained in the record. Evidence is based on a research question. It is important to remember that even though evidence points to a conclusion, the evidence might be right or wrong. To analyze the evidence, we need to ask ourselves whether the information provides a direct answer to our research question. There are three categories of evidence:

- *Direct*: The information provides a direct answer to our research question.
- *Indirect*: The information in the record cannot, by itself, answer the research question, but when combined with other pieces of evidence, the answer can be determined.
- *Negative*: The lack of information in the record helps us answer the research question. For example, a child who was enumerated as a two-year-old in the 1900 census who was not enumerated with the family in the 1910 census is negative evidence that the child may have died between 1900 and 1910.

Genealogists prefer to use original sources with information provided by eyewitnesses, but such records often do not exist for our ancestors. By correlating multiple sources, we can draw valid conclusions from “less desirable” records.

Evidence Correlation

Once you have analyzed each record independently, it is time to begin correlating the evidence—bringing together information and evidence from multiple sources to draw conclusions. We must never rely on information from just one source. Below are some principles to put into practice as you are correlating evidence:

Evidence Independence

If the information you have was all provided by the same informant, the evidence is only as reliable as the most reliable source. We aim to gather information that has been provided by multiple different informants, resulting in a body of evidence to weigh before drawing conclusions.

Background Information

Helpful evidence comes not only from records that name our ancestors, but also from sources that do not name them. Here are a few things to consider when analyzing and correlating evidence:

- *Historical Context*: What was going on at the time the record was created? What types of things might have influenced our ancestors' actions and the records that were created for them?
- *Geography*: Boundary changes and other geographical factors might dictate where records were created for our ancestors.
- *Customs*: Knowing the customs of the places our ancestors lived can help us draw conclusions about the evidence we gather.
- *Laws and regulations*: Laws and regulations affected how and why various records were created. Knowing more about these will help us formulate correct conclusions.

Resolving Conflicts

As we are researching, we will invariably find conflicting information about our ancestors. We need to seek to resolve conflicts by weighing the evidence. We need to be careful not to disregard any information simply because it does not fit with our preconceived ideas about what might have happened. As we consider all aspects of the record, we will be able to see which side of the conflicting evidence is correct. If we cannot see a resolution, we need to find additional records to help us draw a valid conclusion.

Conclusion

As you practice analyzing the sources you use to document your ancestors' lives, you will become increasingly proficient at being able to draw valid conclusions. Remember, even when a conclusion has been made, there is always a chance that a new source might be discovered that could overturn the conclusion. And that is a good thing. More information is always better!