
From Questionable to Credible: Analyzing and Verifying Genealogical Sources

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OVERVIEW

How should we handle sources of questionable reliability? What should we do when we come across an unsourced published genealogy or family lore? Do we accept it as true, toss it, or verify it? This session provides actionable steps for evaluating and analyzing undocumented sources, offering a strategy to transform questionable sources into credible genealogical evidence.

WHAT ARE QUESTIONABLE SOURCES?

All sources should be considered questionable! This presentation focuses on particularly dubious sources such as a *FindAGrave* memorial, hints in an online tree, a published genealogy, or an unsourced biographical sketch. Skills from this presentation can be applied to all sources.

WHY MUST WE VERIFY?

When we come across a questionable source, we do not want to accept it as is because if we assume everything is correct, then we risk having incorrect information. On the other hand, if we ignore a questionable source, we could miss out on key details that we might not be able to find anywhere else. Instead, our goal should be to analyze the source and try to verify the information in it.

Just like all records, questionable sources can be completely accurate, partially correct, or totally wrong.

ACTION PLAN

We frequently hear that we must analyze our starting point information, but how exactly do we do it? This session introduces an action plan for treating questionable sources. We will go step-by-step together through an unsourced biographical sketch found attached to a family tree.

Step 1: Critique the source

- **Cite the source.** Everything must have a citation! You cite sources so you can find them again. In addition, the citation itself will reflect the questionable nature of your source.
- **Source analysis.** Assess the source's likely accuracy, integrity, and completeness. Ask yourself questions such as, "Is the source an authored work or record? Original or derivative? What is the history, provenance, and purpose? What about the physical characteristics? Are there blemishes? Is it legible?" These questions will help you think through the creation and evolution of your questionable source.
- **Information analysis.** In addition to analyzing the source as a whole, think about the information items contained in the source. Ask yourself questions such as, "Can I identify the informant? Are they reliable or do they have a bias? Would they be reporting primary or secondary information?" These questions will help you think about where the information from your questionable source came from.



Step 2: Organize the information

- **Make a transcription.** Transcriptions should be an exact rewriting, word for word, of a record. Not all questionable sources will require a transcription, but if you have a handwritten or hard-to-read source, you will want to have a clear transcription for your reference. For example, it would be helpful to transcribe a family bible record or a letter from a relative relaying family history.
- **Make a timeline.** Separate the material contained in the questionable source into discrete information items. By organizing the information items chronologically, it becomes a timeline. A timeline allows you to see gaps in time or overlapping events that could indicate a conflict. For example, if a couple were married nine years after a child's birth, it would make the author's reliability overall more suspect.
- **Track family members.** People do not exist in a vacuum. To research an individual, you must research their family. For example, if there are multiple men in a county by the name of John Johnson, you want to know which John Johnson each record is pertaining to. People interact with the same people time after time, so knowing the family might help you distinguish between the men.



Step 3: Seek to verify

Sort information items into buckets based on the expected degree of difficulty to verify. Different people will bucket items differently based on their research experience in the records groups and geography. You can always move information items from one bucket to another as you work.



- **Bucket 1.** Items that are easy to verify. This includes contacting the source creator. For example, contact the manager of a *FindAGrave* memorial or calling a cemetery office. Easy-to-verify items might include vital records or land transactions. Execute bucket 1.
- **Bucket 2.** Items that are harder to verify either because the research is more complicated or because you are not familiar with the geographic area or record group. This might include a repository where you have never researched. Planning might require researching extant record availability. Plan for bucket 2.
- **Bucket 3.** Items that are speculative or difficult to verify. Consider if you want to include information whose best source is the biographical sketch for example, or if you will decide not to include those items. Evaluate bucket 3.

RESOURCES

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