

Climbing Your Branch of the FamilySearch Family Tree

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Participants in this class will learn how to evaluate the accuracy of their branch of the FamilySearch family tree, resolve problems, and take steps to correctly document accurate information. Participants should have a free FamilySearch account and have connected themselves to the collaborative tree before attending this session.

INTRODUCTION

The *FamilySearch* family tree is “the world’s largest online family tree.”¹ When working on “your” tree, you are contributing to this tree with the aim to help create “a global, unified family tree for mankind.”² The big advantage to collaborating on the *FamilySearch* tree is that different descendants of your ancestors may have more information about them than you do. Working together will help you create a more complete and accurate tree than you could on your own.

The collaborative nature of the *FamilySearch* tree can bring frustration to some. Because information about your ancestors has often been added to the *FamilySearch* tree by other users, many people wonder about the accuracy of the information. Others get frustrated when changes get made to “their” ancestors. Presenting ideas for overcoming these challenges is the topic for this session.

NAVIGATING FAMILYSEARCH

Prior to climbing your family tree, you will need some navigational skills. *The Family History Guide* is a great resource to help you learn the basics of using the *FamilySearch* website:

<https://thefhguide.com/goal-tiles-fs.html>

Key *FamilySearch* skills that you will be using as you work on your family tree include the following:

1. Editing details

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/where-can-i-find-the-source-details-in-family-tree>

2. Standardizing dates and places

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-enter-dates-and-places-into-family-tree>

¹ “FamilySearch Family Tree,” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/overview> : accessed 4 January 2023).

² Ibid.

3. Adding and removing relationships

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-add-a-child-to-family-tree>

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-add-a-spouse-or-partner-in-family-tree>

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-add-a-parent-in-family-tree>

4. Adding and Detaching sources

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/using-source-linker-to-attach-sources>

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/session/3-easy-ways-to-document-your-ancestors-life-at-familysearch>

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-detach-a-source-from-a-person-in-family-tree>

5. Merging and unmerging individuals

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-merge-possible-duplicates-in-family-tree>

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-undo-a-merge-in-family-tree>

THE **FAMILY** ACRONYM FOR FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

Last year at RootsTech, I introduced my F-A-M-I-L-Y acronym for family history research. We will be utilizing the steps in this acronym as we climb our branch of the FamilySearch family tree.

F - Find someone to research.

A - Analyze what is already known.

M - Use a Map and Timeline to place your ancestor in a specific time and location

I - Instant Records

L - Look for Additional Records

Y - You did it!

To watch my Research 101 presentation, visit

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/session/research-101-tools-and-techniques-for-beginning-genealogists>

FIND SOMEONE TO RESEARCH

Effective genealogy research focuses on one problem at a time. Here are the steps to take to approach your tree in an organized way:

1. Choose a familial line to work on.
2. Focus on one generation at a time, starting with the most recent generation and moving backward in time. Decide how far back you want to verify each line before you move on to another line. Various approaches are valid:
 - a. Decide to verify each line to a certain level, say the great-grandparent level. After verifying all information for all lines leading up to each of your great-grandparents, work to verify all 2x great grandparents, etc.
 - b. Go back on one line until you hit a problem spot – one that will require a lot of extra research before you can move on. Once you get every line to that point, you can revisit previous lines and work on in-depth research projects as needed.

ANALYZE WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN

1. Examine all details and sources about the individual you are studying.
2. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Are there complete names, dates, and places for each vital event for this ancestor, their spouse, and their children?
 - b. Are there documentary sources that corroborate this information?
 - c. Do any details conflict?
 - d. Have any family members been missed?
 - e. Have extra people who don't belong to this family been added?
3. Examine every source that has been added to your ancestor.
 - a. Determine whether the source belongs to that person.
 - b. Look for details or family members “hiding” in the sources. Not all information from every source gets automatically added to a person's profile when attaching sources. Take the time to add all additional details for your family members to their **Details** page.

You may want to take notes as you do this to help you stay organized. Use whatever is most comfortable for you – a pen and paper, a word document, or a spreadsheet are all viable options.

RESOLVING CONFLICTING INFORMATION

After familiarizing yourself with the information on the person's profile page and in their sources, it is time to check for accuracy, look for missing information, and resolve conflicts. This is where something called **Evidence Analysis** comes into play. Evidence analysis is the process by which we determine the reliability of the evidence. Looking at records with an analytical eye can help us form valid conclusions and resolve conflicts that may arise as we research. Evidence analysis begins by assessing the physical condition of each record and making note of such aspects as legibility. Is it possible to misinterpret what the record says because time or damage has affected its state?

In addition to the physical condition of the record, genealogists need to be able to answer three important questions:

1. **When and how was the source created?** Was it created close to the time the event happened, or many years later?
2. **Who provided the information for the source?** An eyewitness to the event? Someone who learned the information by hearing it from someone else?
3. **Do the facts in the source directly or indirectly answer the research question?**

As genealogists, we idealize original sources created close to the time of the event, with information provided by an eyewitness, that directly answers the research question. Of course, sometimes these types of sources don't exist, and we often utilize what is available to draw valid conclusions.

For further study, refer to my six-part blog series, "Basics of Evidence Analysis," at <https://alicechilds.com/?s=Basics+of+evidence+analysis>

MAP AND TIMELINE

Utilizing a timeline for each ancestor will help you spot missing information easier. A timeline is automatically generated for each person on *FamilySearch* and can be accessed by clicking **Time Line** on their profile page menu. This timeline is created from details and sources that have been added to that person's profile.

Toggling on the **Maps** button on the **Time Line** page will allow you to see the timeline events on a map. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the location where your ancestor lived. The *FamilySearch Research Wiki* is a great resource. Here you will find important information like the dates vital records began being created and boundary changes that would impact where your ancestor's records will be held.

INSTANT RECORDS

Without sources, there is no way to test the validity of information that has been added to your ancestor's profile on the *FamilySearch* tree. If the sources are few, or no sources have been attached, your next step will be to find sources to document your ancestor's life events. The first thing to do is to capture what I call **Instant Records**. These can come in the form of record hints or broad database searches that provide quick results.

RECORD HINTS

Computer algorithms use the dates, places, and relationships associated with your ancestor to find additional records that might pertain to that ancestor. These records are then provided to users in the form of Record Hints. Our job is to analyze those records based on the information we have learned about our ancestor and determined if the computer has found a record that

does belong to our ancestor. If there are record hints for an ancestor, they will appear in the Research Help section on right-hand side of the Details page of an ancestor's profile.

- To learn more about analyzing records hints, see Alice Childs, AG, "Research 101 Step 4: Instant Records," blog post, 20 February 2023, *GenealogyNow* (<https://alicechilds.com/research-101-step-4-instant-records/> : accessed 11 January 2024).

BROAD DATABASE SEARCHES

Perform broad searches of the *FamilySearch* (and other website) database to harvest some easy-to-locate records. Simply navigate to your ancestor's **Details** page and click the *FamilySearch* icon in the **Search Records** box at the right of the page.

- To learn more about broad database searches, see Alice Childs, AG, "Research 101 Step 4: Instant Records," blog post, 20 February 2023, *GenealogyNow* (<https://alicechilds.com/research-101-step-4-instant-records/> : accessed 11 January 2024).

LOOK FOR ADDITIONAL RECORDS

Once you have picked up the easy-to-find "instant" records, you may have the information you need to verify your ancestor's details and generational link to their family members. If you need additional documentation to back up the facts on the tree, it is now time to look for additional records. Three methods will help:

1. Look for **Home Sources**. These are records, photographs, books, family bibles, etc. that are found in the homes of your ancestor's descendants. Ask close family members what they have and if they will share/upload.
 - To learn more about Home Sources, see Jessica Neaves, "How to Use the Hidden Treasures of Home Sources for Genealogy Research," blog post, October 11, 2022, *Heritage Discovered* (<https://www.heritagediscovered.com/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-using-home-sources> : accessed 11 January 2024).
2. Utilize the **FamilySearch messaging system** to contact people who have added the information. Perhaps the person who added the details to your ancestor's profile is in possession of birth, marriage, and death certificates, a family bible, or other helpful sources.
 - To learn more about using the FamilySearch messaging system, see "How do I send a message to someone who contributed to Family Tree or Memories," FamilySearch help article, 4 October 2023, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/how-do-i-contact-or-message-a-user-who-contributed-to-family-tree-or-memories> : accessed 11 January 2024).
3. Search specific record collections that are likely to contain answers to your research questions. Use *FamilySearch's Record Finder* for your ancestor's locality to determine what types of records might hold the information you seek.

- Sign into *FamilySearch* and navigate to **Search > Research Wiki**.
- Type the state or country where your ancestor lived in the search box.
- In a box on the right-hand side of the page (under Beginning Research) you will find a link to **Record Finder**. Click that link.
- Scroll down to find a list of topics until you find what type of information you seek. Record Finder will tell you the best records to search for and give you links to a list of record collections of that type. It also gives alternative records that you can use if you don't find anything in the "Best" records.

HOW TO ATTACH RECORDS TO YOUR ANCESTOR'S PROFILE

Finding the records is only the first step. Be sure to attach any records that belong to your ancestor to their *FamilySearch* profile. You can do this in one of three ways.

1. **Source Linker** – If a record is discovered on the *FamilySearch* website, you can use what is known as Source Linker to attach the record to your ancestor's profile. This tool is quite intuitive and walks you through the process step-by-step.
 - To learn more about how to use Source Linker, see Alice Childs, AG, "Research 101 Step 4: Instant Records," blog post, 20 February 2023, *GenealogyNow* (<https://alicechilds.com/research-101-step-4-instant-records/> : accessed 11 January 2024).
2. **Record Seek** – RecordSeek is a browser extension that makes it easy to attach records from other websites to your ancestors' *FamilySearch* profiles in just a few clicks. To learn more, read the following articles:
 - Alice Childs, AG, "Use RecordSeek to Quickly Record a Website as a Source at FamilySearch and Ancestry," blog post, 22 January 2021, *GenealogyNow* (<https://alicechilds.com/use-recordseek-to-quickly-record-a-website-as-a-source-at-familysearch-and-ancestry/> : accessed 11 January 2024).
 - Alice Childs, AG, "Family History on the Go: Using RecordSeek Mobile," blog post, 5 February 2021, *GenealogyNow* (<https://alicechilds.com/family-history-on-the-go-using-recordseek-mobile/> : accessed 11 January 2024).
3. **Add a new source manually.**
 - Navigate to your ancestor's profile page, then click on the **Sources** tab.
 - Click **+ADD SOURCE** at the top of the screen, then select **Add New Source**.
 - Enter in the details about the source. Be sure to include a link to the web page if you found the source online.
 - If you have a digital copy of the record that you would like to upload, select **Add a Memory**.
 - In the citation field, be sure to add enough information that someone else could easily retrace your steps to find the record. Include the full URL to any source discovered online.
 - To learn more about source citations, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, third edition, revised, (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2017).

HOW MANY SOURCES ARE ENOUGH?

Many researchers wonder, “How many sources are ‘enough?’ One...two...ten?” There is no magic number to aspire to. Instead, seek **independent sources**, or sources that originate from different entities with information provided by different people. If direct evidence is discovered in original sources of independent origin, the number of sources needed to prove a conclusion might be smaller than if indirect evidence is utilized.

- For further study, see Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “Reasonably Exhaustive Research: Quantity or Quality?” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*. 12 March 2015.
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map> <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/quicktips/reasonably-exhaustive-research-quantity-or-quality> : 2024.

YOU DID IT!

With every generational link that you document, take a step back, pat yourself on the back, and celebrate! This is hard work, but the steps you are taking will help tell the accurate story of your ancestors’ lives. Great work!

TAKING STEPS TO PREVENT CHANGES FROM BEING MADE TO CORRECT PROFILES

Once you have completed the hard work necessary to verify the accuracy and completeness of your branch of the FamilySearch tree, you can take some steps to ensure that others don’t introduce problems into the tree.

- If you have harvested and added all details and relationships and corroborated them with valid documentary evidence, other users will be able to get a better picture of the ancestor’s life and avoid attaching incorrect records or performing incorrect merges.
- Add an Alert Note: Scroll down on your ancestor’s profile page until you see the **Notes** field on the right. Click **Add Note**. Choose to make the note an “Alert Note” that will be displayed at the top of the page to encourage users to read the note before making changes. Here is a possible note you can use:

Title: Please Read Before Making Changes

The details and relationships of this person have been carefully analyzed and verified using original historical documents. Please take the time to study this documented information before making any changes.

- Keep a backup copy of your work in genealogy software like RootsMagic, Legacy Family Tree, Family Tree Maker, or others.
 - For an overview of different genealogy softwares on the market today, see <https://familytreemagazine.com/resources/software/online-tree-vs-genealogy-software/>.