
FINDING MIGRATING FAMILIES: TRACING ELUSIVE ANCESTORS USING CLUSTER RESEARCH

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Social historians estimate fifty percent of the U.S. population moved once every ten years in the nineteenth century.¹ It's not surprising that researchers of American families encounter migration problems and "lost" ancestors. Understanding history, geography, migration factors, and how to use cluster research can help us find where families came from and where they went.

"A thorough knowledge of history and geography is an essential ingredient in tracing an American family."

—Lloyd de Witt Bockstruck²

MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

The more we know about history, motivation, and social context of migrating ancestors, the better we are able to recognize patterns and clues that will help us find families who moved.

Migration Factors

"In America we can say that migration is a part of our way of life. We are all but a few generations removed from our immigrant ancestors . . ."

—Everett S. Lee³

Most genealogists are familiar with the concepts of "push" and "pull" factors that affected migrating ancestors. Reasons for migration are complex. So, it's difficult to generalize. Over the past 150 years in America, however, several theories of migration have developed.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines migration as "movement of people within and across boundaries, such as county, state, or country lines."⁴ Dr. Everett S. Lee, a twentieth-century sociologist and demographer, defines migration more broadly as "a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence" with no restriction on distance, time, or whether the act is involuntary as in cases of enslaved persons' forced removals. Lee excludes continually nomadic peoples with no permanent residence.⁵ Both definitions well suit genealogists.

Locating relevant records generally requires knowledge of a residence location, political boundaries, and time period to determine record availability. Lee's theory says four factors affect the decision to migrate.

- Conditions in the area of origin
- Conditions in the area of destination

Cited websites were viewed 20 January 2025.

1. James W. Oberly, "Westward Who? Estimates of Native White Interstate Migration After the War of 1812," *Journal of Economic History* 46 (June 1986): 431–440, esp. 431.

2. Lloyd de Witt Bockstruck, *American Settlement and Migrations: A Primer for Genealogists and Family Historians* (Baltimore, Md.: Clearfield, 2017), 5.

3. Everett S. Lee, "The Turner Thesis Reexamined," *American Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1961): 79.

4. "About Migration/Geographic Mobility and Place of Birth," *United States Census Bureau* (<https://www.census.gov/topics/population/migration/about.html>).

5. Everett S. Lee, "A Theory of Migration," *Ekistics* 23, no. 137 (April 1967): 212.

- Intervening obstacles
- Personal factors⁶

Every factor has a potential to keep people in an area, attract people to a new area, or force people away from an area. Some factors apply universally and some are unique to an individual. Conditions that attract a young, single man can be different than those that draw a large family or elderly empty-nesters.

Theory of Streams and Counter-Streams

Migration occurs in well-defined and observable streams and counter-streams. People move along specific routes toward specific destinations because of available transportation infrastructure and localized opportunities in new areas. See References #4 (Eldridge) and #5 (*FamilySearch*) for trails. Information flow between origin and destination affects the efficiency of a migration stream. Migrants write letters home; newspapers publish advertisements to attract settlers.

For each major migration stream, a counter-stream develops with migrants returning to their original location. Reasons for counter-stream movement include

- destination conditions not as favorable as expected,
- destination conditions change, and
- new contacts between origin and destination locales create new business opportunities to draw migrants back to their origins.

The strength of the counter-stream is affected by reasons for migration, particularly negative ones. This migration principle is apparent in an ancestor's behavior. Most mid-nineteenth-century Irish famine immigrants never went back to live in Ireland. Most African Americans who fled the South in the Great Migration of the early twentieth century did not return.⁷

Some Sources for Identifying Cluster Members

- Church associates—membership lists, sacramental registers, church histories
- Jurors—court minutes, jury lists
- Land owners—plats, patents, deeds
- Military comrades—muster rolls, pensions, regimental histories
- Neighbors—census, directories, tax rolls, land ownership maps
- Petitioners—court minutes and order books, legislative records
- Sureties—bonds for marriages and probate administration
- Taxpayers—local and state rolls
- Witnesses—wills, deeds, court minutes and order books

Understanding migration principles helps us develop hypotheses about a migrating family's origin or destination. For more on migration theories, see the References #7 (Hall and Ruggles), #9 (Lee), #10 (Lee), #11 (Matkin-Rawn), #14 (Molloy), and #17 (Thomas).

CLUSTER RESEARCH

Also known as neighborhood research or the "FAN" [Friends, Associates, and Neighbors] principle, the method involves examining records left by neighbors and associates in addition to all known family members of a person. Cluster research can be used with an individual we can identify in a specific time and place.

Strategic Use for Cluster Research

Tracing migrants by finding origins of a group is more likely to be successful than locating a single individual, especially when record loss is a problem. Researching members of a person's social network increases the pool of available records for study and analysis, thereby increasing the probability of finding a

6. Lee, "A Theory of Migration," 212.

7. Ibid., 215.

solution to a migration problem. However, cluster research multiplies the genealogist's workload by each additional associate studied, so we want to use the method strategically. What are the benefits?

- Sometimes it's the *only* way to find an ancestor's homeplace and family.
- People on the frontier typically moved in groups. The chance for success improves with more cluster members to research.
- In areas with record loss, the records of an individual may not survive, but those left by an associate or a neighbor may.
- A larger pool of records to analyze and correlate increases the opportunity for success.

Six Steps for Success Using Cluster Research

1. Identify a unique research subject.
2. Develop a focused question.
3. Make a plan to mine the records of the subject's last-known location for relevant evidence.
4. Identify cluster members who were part of the subject's social network.
5. Mine the records of *each* cluster member for relevant evidence.
6. Correlate evidence to develop and test a hypothesis. Mine the records for evidence in the hypothesized place of origin / destination. If no solution, return to step 4 and widen the net for more cluster members.

CASE STUDY: SOUTHERN FRONTIER MIGRANTS

A case study illustrates finding the origin of a mid-19th-century Florida migrant when no known record provides an exact birthplace or identifies his parents. The case was solved by following six steps—each step building on the previous one.

A wide range of records at all levels of jurisdiction were mined for evidence—census, court, land, probate, church, military, maps, and private papers. Over twenty Florida associates and their families were identified and investigated, which lead to research on many more individuals in South Carolina. See Case Studies section #23 (Peters) for the reference.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Websites were viewed 20 January 2025. Issues of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly are available to NGS members at https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq_archives/ (requires member login).

References

1. Barone, Michael. *Shaping of Our Nation: How Surges of Migration Transformed America and Its Politics*. New York: Crown Forum, 2013. A political analyst's view of America's mass migrations. Barone's work picks up where Fischer's *Albion's Seed* leaves off. See Reference #6 (Fischer).
2. Bockstruck, Lloyd de Witt. *American Settlement and Migrations: A Primer for Genealogists and Family Historians*. Baltimore: Clearfield Co., 2017. This slim volume covers the colonial and federal periods up to the late 1800s and makes an admirable attempt at a vast subject. Understandably not a comprehensive treatment, it is a survey and starting point for study with further reading suggestions.
3. Croom, Emily Anne. *The Sleuth Book for Genealogists: Strategies for More Successful Family History Research*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000. See chapter 3 "Broadening the Scope: Cluster Genealogy." The chapter includes case studies.
4. Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Southern Trails to the Mississippi*. Chesapeake, Ohio: Carrie Eldridge, 1999. The author has compiled atlases covering Appalachian, northern, and western trails; see other titles.
5. "US Migration Trails and Roads." *FamilySearch Research Wiki*. https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US_Migration_Trails_and_Roads.
6. Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Influential work on America's British cultural history includes migration and settlement.
7. Hall, Patricia Kelly, and Steven Ruggles. "'Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity': New Evidence on the Internal Migration of Americans, 1850-2000." *Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (2004): 829–46. Digital image. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3662857>.
8. Henningfield, Melinda Daffin. "Welcome the Neighbors: Solve Genealogical Problems through Neighborhood Research." *OnBoard* 22 (January 2016): 1–2, 7.

9. Lee, Everett S. "A Theory of Migration." *Ekistics* 23, no. 137 (April 1967): 211–26. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43614502>. This preeminent sociologist and demographer's work presents his theory of factors affecting the decision to migrate and the characteristics of migrants.
10. _____. "The Turner Thesis Reexamined." *American Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1961), 77–83. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710514>. Lee reexamines Turner's 1893 thesis "The Significance of the Frontier in America," which emphasizes free public land as a migration motivator.
11. Matkin-Rawn, Story. "'The Great Negro State of the Country': Arkansas's Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Spring 2013): 1–41.
12. Meinig, D. W. *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*. 4 vols. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986–2004. Wide-ranging work on America from 1492 to 2000 in four volumes including maps showing migration and settlement.
13. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *QuickSheet: Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)*. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing, 2012.
14. Molloy, Raven, Christopher L. Smith, and Abigail Wozniak. "Internal Migration in the United States." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 173–96. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23049428>.
15. Otto, John Solomon. "The Migration of the Southern Plain Folk: An Interdisciplinary Synthesis." *Journal of Southern History* 51 (May 1985): 183–200. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2208824>. Covers migration of "plain-folk farmers and herders" across the "southern frontier," which the author defines as comprising fourteen states.
16. Owsley, Frank L. "The Pattern of Migration and Settlement on the Southern Frontier." *Journal of Southern History* 11 (May 1945): 147–176. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2198171>. Owsley was one of the first to study "plain folk" as a distinct group—non-slaveholding, White farmers and herders of the middling class who settled the frontier.
17. Thomas, William G. et al. "Reconstructing African American Mobility after Emancipation, 1865–67." *Social Science History* 41 (Winter 2017): 673–704. Digital image. *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90017933>. Study of African American movement immediately after Emancipation. Includes a three-page bibliography for further study.

Case Studies Featuring Cluster Research and Migration

18. Brasfield, Curtis G. "Tracing Slave Ancestors: Batchelor, Bradley, Branch, and Wright of Desha County, Arkansas." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly (NGSQ)* 92 (March 2004): 6–30. The author uses cluster research to reconstruct an African American family who came out of slavery.
19. Burdick, Mary G. "Parents for Joel Wooley of Ohio, New York, and New Jersey." *NGSQ* 109 (September 2021): 175–88. A family's westward migration after the Revolutionary War.
20. Desmarais, Catherine Becker Wiest. "From Baltimore, Maryland, to Burlington, Vermont: Hazen P. Day's Neighbors Bring Him Home." *NGSQ* 105 (September 2017): 181–190.
21. Hatton, Stephen B. "Using Networks to Backtrack the Migration and Identify the Parents of Jacob Wynkoop of Morgan County, Ohio." *NGSQ* 102 (June 2014): 111–127.
22. Litchman, William M. "Using Cluster Methodology to Backtrack an Ancestor: The Case of John Bradberry." *NGSQ* 95 (June 2007): 103–16.
23. Peters, Nancy A. "A Father for William E. Enfinger of Alachua County, Florida." *NGSQ* 109 (December 2021): 261–82. Despite "burned counties," broad research into the chain migration of a cluster of associates reveals a southern frontier migrant's homeplace and father.
24. Randall, Ruth. "Discovering Kin for Washington Graham of Arkansas and Missouri." *NGSQ* 109 (September 2021): 165–74. Explores the question of an enslaved man's possible involuntary, forced migration. Reconstructs the life of a freedman using records of associates, including former enslavers.
25. Saxbe, William B., Jr. "Building the Bird's Nest: The Parentage of John and Sarah (Briggs) Bowen." *NGSQ* 105 (March 2017): 57–74. Traces a family who were part of the "Yankee Exodus" from the eastern seaboard and Connecticut River valley into western New York after the American Revolution.
26. Wilcox, Shirley Langdon. "John Porter Langdon: One of Four Brothers to Settle in California." *NGSQ* 109 (September 2021): 217–236. Traces a family's westward migration to California in the 1850s.