
WHY DID IT SAY THAT?

AND OTHER CONTEXTUAL CLUES

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Contextual Research Drives Understanding

While it is impossible to always know the exact “why” for our ancestor’s actions and decisions, we can glean important relevant understanding with a study of the place, reasons for document creation, and cultures. This can drive an uneducated “maybe” into a better “possible” or “likely” interpretation of situations.

Presentism

As we study the history of our ancestors, this lecture cautions against presentism. The concept of presentism is to attempt to understand the past filtered through a lens of modern understanding, mores, culture, and experience. We do not need to agree with ethical decisions and ideas of the past, but we must avoid interpretation bias by focusing on the circumstances and morals of each era, rather than the ideals of our own time. Admittedly, this is a challenge all historians face. Remember that our ancestors did not have the benefit of hindsight. Putting our ancestors into the context of their own sphere, cultures, and time can assist in avoiding hasty generalizations.

Types of Contextual Understanding

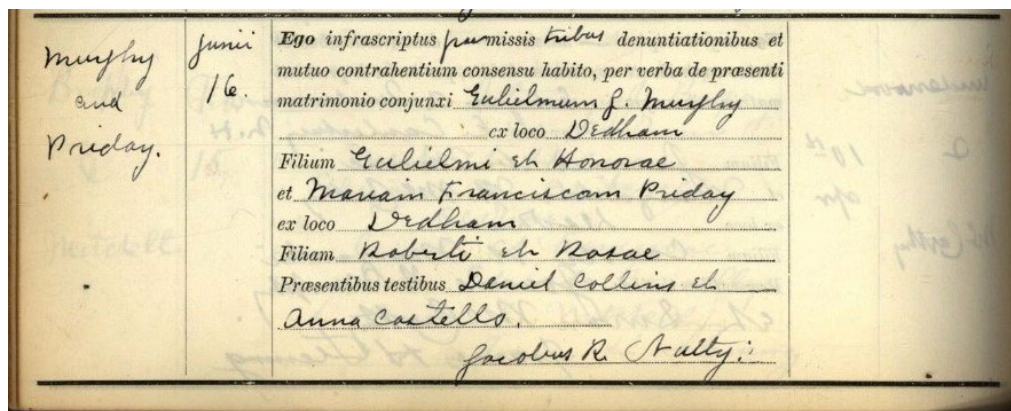
Terminology Relevant to the Document Look up words that are unfamiliar for their relevance to the document time and purpose, including foreign languages.	Document Creation & Purpose Most documents were created for a specific purpose, and the information relates to its creation and usage. Know history of “why.”	Relevant Laws for Document Creation Many documents are prescribed by federal law, local law, religious doctrine, or traditions which have changed over time.
Context of Time, Location, & Culture Create a locality study for the area: repositories, record loss, geography, culture, & customs. Use <i>FamilySearch Wiki</i> .	Understanding the Informant Information in source documents is provided by an informant. Who are they relative to the ancestor and likely to know the answers?	

Terminology Then to Now

Some words in early documents are familiar, but some are not. Some terms mean something completely different in context of the source. Here are some examples.

Appurtenances	That which belongs to something else, such as rights-of-way, outbuildings, gardens, etc., belonging to a property.
Boilerplate	Standard legal language which is often repeated in contracts (deeds and wills).
Bounds	Physical objects on the land; trees, streams, buildings, wells, etc.
Chain	Measuring device for surveyors (usually called a Gunter's Chain) measuring 4 poles/perches/rods or 100 links; total 66 feet.
Chattel	Personal property, animate or inanimate; may describe enslaved people.
Consideration	Price settled for a contract, property, or real estate.
Indenture	Formal contract for a transaction between at least two parties. Early original deeds featured uneven cuts at the top or bottom because two copies of the deed were written on a single sheet, both signed, and then the grantor and grantee were each given half. If any question of fraud occurred (such as someone showing up with another deed for the same property), the cuts could be compared as evidence. This process was known as indenturing; cutting or indenting the edges of multiple documents so that they would tally with each other.
Instrument	Formal written document that is legally enforceable.
Messuage	Dwelling house with its outbuildings and adjoining lands.

- Foreign Languages.** There is more to translating between languages than just knowing the words. Phraseology, culture, and era feature into the meanings. There are a variety of meanings in the same language when it originated in different countries (example: Spanish language-based countries).



Example: Guilemum J Murphy (groom), son of Gulielmi Murphy.¹ The word endings of *-um* and *-i* are not accidental, and similar to saying "Jr" or "Sr," but is a little more than that. Simply stated, the accusative singular *-um* or *-am* (feminine) and *-ae* points to "something else doing a verb on it" such as belonging to someone else, in this case, being the possession/son/wife of the person listed with the genitive singular *-i*. This roughly translates to the anglicized names William J. Murphy, son of William.

¹ AmericanAncestors (<https://www.americanancestors.org/DB2726/rd/58280/182/1427172868>), img. 182, "Massachusetts: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston Records, 1789-1920" > St. Mary (Dedham) Marriages 1877-1908 > entry for Gulielmum J Murphy et Mariam Franciscam Priday, 16 Junii 1904, page 182.

Researching Context

Some research to find the context of a record may be complicated, and other times may be surprisingly simple. Here are some ideas and examples to broadening understanding.

- **Censuses.** The information found in federal or state censuses are always suspect, yet this is such an important source which is readily available and consistently recorded that we cannot dismiss them out of hand. A wonderful resource for context are the instructions to enumerators found at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires.html>.
- **History of Events.** Many books are published on the history of events, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s or specific military units in different wars. Look for them at local or university libraries. Online sources for historical books (published before 1924 as of this writing) are at *Google Books* (<https://books.google.com/>), *Internet Archive* (<https://archive.org/details/internetarchivebooks>), and *HathiTrust* (<https://www.hathitrust.org/>). Another wonderful source for historical journal articles is at *JSTOR* (<https://www.jstor.org/>).
- **Law.** Law is everything to many of the sources used—social norms, church law, town policies, county courts, state law, federal or military law. Local or federal governmental acts affect our ancestors' ability to participate in events or limit them from doing so. Investigate relevant laws or take the chance of missing evidence that can clear up conflicts.
 - Historic Law books can be found at university libraries or online, try *HathiTrust*.
 - Articles in genealogical society journals (national or state) often refer to laws as part of their cases. Example are the excellent articles in the [*National Genealogical Society Journal*](#) or the [*New York Genealogical and Biographical Society Record*](#).
 - Check the document! A surprising number of documents are pre-printed with instructions for filling it out and text of relevant laws. Examples are death certificates or military benefit applications (pension or bounty land).
- **Genealogical Books.** Whether you purchase a book about general information or specific, or check them at your local library or FamilySearch Center, authors tend to lay out the history of the record sets and how they changed over time. Two examples are Val Greenwood's *American Genealogy* or Christine Rose's *Courthouse Research for Family Historians* (see bibliography).
 - Index books on a subject usually have an introduction that explains the context of the records and related laws.
- **Source Citations are About Context.** We speak of "crafting" citations, which appropriately indicates that the process of citing our source takes skill and deliberation. The most important factor to writing a reliable citation is an understanding of the document, where it came from, where it is now, who created it, its limitations, and how to find it again. When we look for the parts to include, we are looking more deeply into the source itself. This concept is well described by Elizabeth

Shown Mills in her “QuickLesson 26: Thinking Through Ancestry.com Citations” at <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-26-thinking-through-an-ancestry.com-citation>.

- **FamilySearch Wiki.** The [FamilySearch Research Wiki](#) is a wonderful tool to become accustomed to either new areas for genealogical research or unfamiliar cultures.

Informant = Information

Some research to find the context of a record should be complimented with the question of the “who.” Information comes from facts written in record sources. The key is to know who the information came from—who was the informant? How likely was the informant to know the true facts expressed in the source? How long after the event were the facts written? Was the informant a disinterested observer (such as a court clerk) or a relative with an invested interest in the events (such as a court case)? Contextualizing is everything for information.

- **Question the Information.** Who was the informant, and did they have personal knowledge or secondary knowledge of the event? Is it impossible to tell who was the informant (undetermined)? Could a known informant have been influenced by bias or trying to avoid detection of the true facts?

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