

# 5 Steps for Fact-Checking Online Trees

Andrew Koch  
Editor, *Family Tree Magazine*

## BACKGROUND

- Lies spread quickly, without regard for accuracy. Online trees have made genealogy much more accessible, but they've also made it easier for faulty information to spread quickly.
- The major genealogy websites allow you to search profiles created by other users, and compare them to people in your tree:
  - **Ancestry.com:** Public Member Trees [www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1030](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1030), which are included in record hints
  - **FamilySearch:** The Family Tree [www.familysearch.org/tree/overview](http://www.familysearch.org/tree/overview), or "Find Similar People" from the Tools section of the profile view
  - **MyHeritage:** Family Trees [www.myheritage.com/research/category-5000/family-trees?s=552266111](http://www.myheritage.com/research/category-5000/family-trees?s=552266111), which are included in Smart Matches
- With all that misinformation, we need a framework for evaluating if the details from other users' family trees are accurate.

## STEP 1: Confirm the profile is a reasonable match

How does the suggested profile compare to what you already know about your ancestor? Begin by filtering out matches that differ on key biographical details, like you would for record hints. Especially consider:

- Names
- Ages
- Birthplaces
- Places of residence
- Relationships

Some differences between sources are to be expected (name spellings, etc.), and it's possible another user knows more about your ancestor than you do. But dismiss—at least for now—profiles that list your ancestor in a wildly different place or family group.

Create a timeline of your ancestor's known life events to help you visualize how the details in the other family tree fit in.

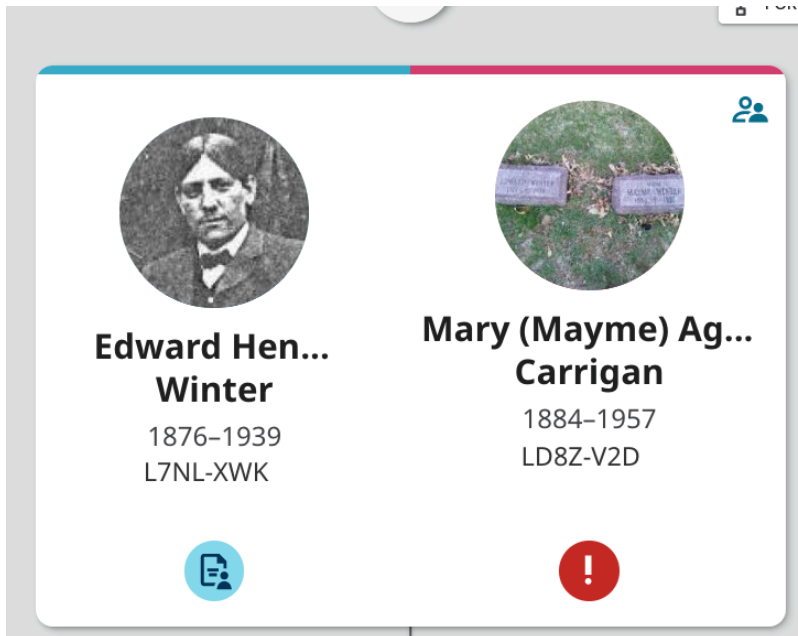
## STEP 2: Rule out impossibilities

Look for obviously wrong claims that other users have made. For example:

- Children being born before their parents
- Mothers giving birth at too young or too old of an age
- People living in two places at once

The major tree websites each have tools that check for these kinds of errors in your tree:

- Ancestry.com's tree-checker tool is in beta as of December 2023.
- MyHeritage has a Consistency Checker report under the Family Tree menu.
- FamilySearch indicates errors using a red exclamation point icon.

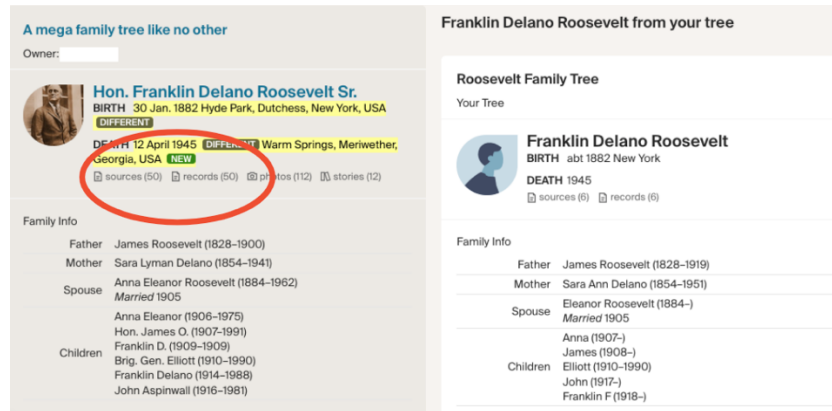


Screenshot of the FamilySearch Family Tree. The exclamation icon indicates FamilySearch has identified a data error in that profile.

### STEP 3: Look for citations

Did the other user cite any sources at all? If so, what are they? These may be record collections on the associated website, documentation the user has found elsewhere and uploaded to the website, or other users' trees:

- **Ancestry.com:** Listed with the record hint as Sources and Records, and in the Sources column of the Facts tab when viewing a profile
- **MyHeritage:** Records and Source Citations sections on profile page (Notes: Sections will only appear if user has added something in those fields.)
- **FamilySearch:** Sources tab on the profile page



Screenshot of an Ancestry.com record hint to a Public Member Tree

A profile that has no citations clearly indicates that you need to do more research. But you should also be wary if the other user has only used other users' family trees, or other compiled genealogies.

The quality of sources is generally more important than the quantity. Original, primary records are more reliable than indexes or transcriptions.

#### STEP 4: Review linked sources

If you can, look at the source yourself to make sure it says what the other user claims it does. Identify any slip-ups that might have led someone to draw the wrong conclusions, such as:

- Indexing errors: Data missing from an index or appearing in the wrong field
- Difficult-to-read handwriting that could be interpreted multiple ways


Remember, too, that sources may be reliable for some events, but not others. Tombstones were created shortly after a person's death by people with firsthand knowledge of the event; they're reliable for death information, but less so for birth information (since the person was likely born decades earlier).

#### STEP 5: Make a decision

Determine if the linked sources create a strong enough argument for the information in the person's tree. You should only attach details that you are able to verify; disregard any details that you can't.

If you do add information to your own tree, consider attaching the source itself (rather than the profile). Giving credit to the other user is important, but so is linking more directly to source documents (rather than someone else's interpretation of them).

In your family tree



**Henry Winter**

Direct ancestor (5 generations)

**Parents:** Thomas Winter, Rebecca Winter

**Wife:** Isabella Winter (born Garrett)

**Children:** Edward Winter


**Name**

First name: Henry

Last name: Winter

**Birth**

In  Web Site managed by



**Henry H Winter**

1853 - 1926

**Parents:** Thomas John Winter, Rebecca Winter

**Siblings:** Elizabeth Winter, Sarah Winter, Edith Winter, Roland Winter, Lilian Winter, Winter

**Wife:** Isabelle Winter

**Partner:** Winter

**Children:** Edward Henry Winter, William John Winter, Clara Schulte (born Winter), Thomas George Winter, Nellie R Winters

**Name**

First name: Henry H IMPROVED

Last name: Winter

**Birth**

Date: Sep 17 1853 NEW

Place: Cincinnati, Hamilton, OH, USA NEW

Screenshot of MyHeritage Smart Match “extract information” tool

## BONUS: Suggest edits

On FamilySearch, you can edit facts about any deceased person directly. The site encourages you to provide reasoning for your changes, as well as sources.

You can’t edit other users’ family trees on Ancestry.com and MyHeritage. However, you can private-message the other user to suggest revisions.

## ONLINE VERSION

[www.familytreemagazine.com/strategies/fact-check-family-trees/](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/strategies/fact-check-family-trees/)