

# Coming to A Conclusion...Based on What?

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## I. Genealogical Research Is Not Just Collecting Records! It Is Also Coming to Conclusions

- A. Coming to a conclusion helps identify defensible records that confirm each piece of evidence!
- B. What do we do in genealogy research?
  - 1. Choose an ancestor and formulate a question.
  - 2. Gather records containing evidence. [Don't stop here!]
  - 3. **Compare** pieces of evidence.
  - 4. Comparing requires **more than one record** for each piece of evidence!
  - 5. **Evaluate** each piece of evidence solving any conflicts.
  - 6. **Come to a conclusion** and explain.
- B. What is a **piece of evidence? A research question's tentative answer.**
  - 1. Each document contains many pieces of evidence, such as:
  - 2. Full name(s) of children, parent(s), spouse(s)—first, middle, last
  - 3. Date elements—day, month, year
  - 4. Place elements—city, county, State
  - 5. Others elements, eg: military units, school names, cemetery and church names, etc.
- C. First seek **Direct Evidence**—an information item or record that seems to address a research question and answer **by itself**.
- D. Conclusions may be straightforward.
  - 1. You make them all the time without thinking much about them because several direct evidence records provide identical evidence.
  - 2. For example, parent's names and relationships for a child born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may be found and verified with the child's birth certificate, the 1940 and 1930 censuses, or many other quality records.
  - 3. We simply state this information in the text and cite all sources.
- E. But what if pieces of evidence conflict? Genealogy also prefers defensible information which does NOT ignore the differences, but explains differences to the best of our ability!

## II. Defensible Quality is Preferred in Genealogy Research. Three Criteria for Defensible:

- A. **ORIGINAL record:** Report of an action, observation, utterance, or event often, but not always, created at the time of the event or soon after and NOT based on a prior record (derived.)
- B. **PRIMARY evidence:** A report of an event related by an eyewitness or participant and NOT HEARSAY, obtained from someone else, or secondary.
- C. **INDEPENDENT informant:** Sources or information items with unrelated origins, which reinforce, rather than duplicate, each other.
- D. Source: Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (New York and Nashville: Ancestry.com, Turner Publishing Co., second edition, 2019, 2021) Order on Amazon.

**III. Many Records Exist for Each Piece of Evidence!**

- A. Make a list of record types available for the piece of evidence you’re interested in. For example, DEATH DATE might be found in records such as: civil death certificates or death registers, church register, tombstone and cemetery plot card, obits both English and foreign language, probate file or land distribution, Social Security, military, burial permits, funeral home, monument company, coroner, business, school, or organization.
- B. Need record list suggestions? Print as many copies as you want of a free check list from St. Louis G.S. <https://stlgs.org/media/freeforms/r114-source-checklist-2015.pdf>

**IV. To Evaluate which Pieces of Evidence are the Most Defensible, Organize Creating A Simple Spreadsheet or Table/Chart Format**

- A. For EACH PIECE of Evidence, such as Date of Birth shown below.

<i>SOURCE</i>	<i>EVDC DOB</i>	<i>RECORD= ORIGINAL</i>	<i>EVIDENCE= PRIMARY</i>	<i>INFORMANT= INDEPENDENT</i>
1900 census	c1850	yes or no	yes or no	Yes, no, official/name

- B. Need to verify a date? Use an online perpetual calendar to find the correct year, such as <https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/>
- C. Replicate the format for other pieces of evidence, changing columns to reflect each new pieces of evidence. For example: Date of Birth, then Place of Birth, Date of Death, Place of Death, Place of Burial, Name of Father, Name of Mother, Name of Spouse, etc.
- C. Questions to answer on the chart:
  1. When was the record created? At the time? [ORIGINAL] Or was it derived from another record?
  2. Was the informant present and participating at the time of the event? [PRIMARY]
  3. Who was the informant? Does he/she differ from another records’ informant? [INDEPENDENT]
  4. How old was he/she at that time? Under 5 or older and suffering from dementia?
  5. How old was he/she when relating the event to you? Ditto too young or old?
  6. Was he/she biased? Or was there a reason for him/her to lie?
- D. Can a Derived record contain primary evidence? For example, the date and place of funeral and burial in a newspaper obituary needs to be accurate or people won’t arrive!
- E. Does an Original record contain errors? Many do, particularly if there’s reason to lie.

**V. Still Not Reached A Defensible Conclusion?**

- A. Continue collecting records from your list until you confirm the conflicting piece of evidence with more than one defensible record.
- B. Have you examined every possible available source?
  1. Use that list! Identify and obtain missing records.
  2. Are there any more records that might verify the piece of evidence?
- C. If no Direct evidence exists or can be found, try Indirect or Negative Evidence.
  1. **Indirect evidence:** Information items that seem to answer a research question only when combined.

2. **Negative evidence:** Evidence arising from an absence of a situation or information in extant records where that information might be expected.

#### **VI. Write the Conclusion(s) Now! You're Likely to Forget It If You Don't!**

- A. Explain each different piece of evidence. For example, when considering both date and place, write paragraphs for each.
- B. State the verified and the sources that confirm it.
- C. Cite all contributing sources.
- D. Long conclusions are usually placed in footnotes so as not to detract from the flow of the text.
- E. Mention any unresolved issues and explain.
- F. Explain if indirect evidence has been combined to support direct evidence in order to arrive at a conclusion.
- G. It is always acceptable to caveat conclusions, leaving room to change your mind when you later discover new records helping better explain a situation.

#### **VII. Coming to Conclusions Creates Defensible Genealogy**

- A. Pose a question. What sources do you have? Which are missing?
- B. Use a chart to organize the evaluation for each piece of evidence.
- C. Examine each piece of evidence, asking:
  1. Is the record Original?
  2. Is a particular piece of evidence Primary?
  3. Is the informant Independent?
  4. Are conflicts resolved and explainable?
- D. Write your analysis and conclusion now! It may change with another record later and you will want to remember what you originally thought and why.
- E. Not all pieces of evidence always agree, but require many records to solve conflicts and come to conclusions.
- F. A defensible quality genealogy doesn't ignore conflicting evidence.
- G. Coming to conclusions by identifying the best records and verifying each piece of evidence creates genealogy research which doesn't ignore conflicts and is defensible!