Does That Even Make Sense?

Daniel R. Lilienkamp, JD
History & Genealogy
St. Louis County Library

Online family trees have grown from a curiosity known only to tech-savvy genealogists to common-place items readily available to researchers. They can be found on Ancestry, Findmypast, FamilySearch, Rootsweb, and a host of other websites.

Finding an online tree for your family can be exciting! Someone else has already done the work for you. This can save you months or even years of research. Instantly you are back 5, 8, 12, or even 30 generations.

Or are you?

Are online family trees a blessing?….or a curse? Some online trees appear well-researched with good source citations. However, the majority have sketchier origins. A few make claims that are downright ludicrous. How do you tell the difference?

If you want to incorporate someone else's research into your tree you must evaluate it and prove its validity. This is true regardless of where the information comes from. The same types of problems can occur whether you are talking about an online tree, a published family history, or notes made by your great uncle in 1960 that you found among your mother's papers.

How do you do it? Below is a step-by-step approach to evaluating someone else's work.

STEP 1: ARE THE CLAIMS MADE BY THE AUTHOR OF THE TREE BIOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE?

Everyone knows the laws of biology prevent certain things. Children cannot be older than their parents. A mother must be living at the time of the child's birth. Both mother and child must be in the same place at the time of the birth.[1] Both parents must be living at the time of conception. Although it is possible for a child to be born after their father's death, anything

more than nine months is suspicious.[2] If you find either of these things in an online tree, something is clearly amiss.

What might cause this type of common-sense conflict? It definitely is not evil intent or deliberate error. In many cases the conflict may be a simple transcription error. It can be very easy to make mistakes when you are copying information from one document to another. The conflict could also be faulty research or bad analysis. This might be caused by multiple people being conflated into one individual or a single person misidentified as two or more people.

Some evidentiary conflicts are due to repetition of an error. With the ease of copying digital information from one tree to another, an error might appear across dozens or even hundreds of trees. Because all of these trees are copies of one another, all of the trees are one source. Do not mistake trees in multiple places as separate sources.

STEP 2: DO THEY CLAIM DESCENT FROM MYTHOLOGICAL, RELIGIOUS, OR ANCIENT PEOPLE?

A frequently encountered problem is the inclusion of mythological, religious, ancient, or historical ancestors. It is not possible for anyone to trace their ancestry back to Beowulf, Norse gods, Greek heroes, or figures from the Hebrew Bible. There are no records. Pedigrees that attempt to make such connections are based on wishful thinking, questionable stories, and vague traditions. There are stories of people conducting séances to learn their family histories from dead relatives. Those who engage in this type of "research" include this type of information in their family trees. They mean no harm. They even derive great personal satisfaction and happiness from their conclusions. Nevertheless, they are doing a disservice to other researchers.

Genealogy is a record-based study of one's ancestry. Writing in *Ensign,* Robert C. Gunderson, the first supervisor of the Royal Identity Unit of the Utah Genealogical Society, when asked about extending an ancestral line back to Adam, explained "it is not even possible to verify historically a connected European pedigree earlier than the time of the Merovingian Kings (c. A.D.450–A.D. 752)."[3] For most families, the records will end much more recently than for European royalty.

STEP 3: CHECK THE SOURCES

Any tree that does not include its sources must be treated as suspect. This does not mean the data is necessarily incorrect, simply that there is no way to evaluate it.

Even if there are no sources, the claims made in a tree can be considered clues for further research. Most likely the author did not make up the whole thing. They may have based it on actual documents but did not know how to attach them to the tree. It might also be based on

oral tradition that was passed down through their family. By all means attempt to contact the author. Probably they are a distant cousin. Amazing things can happen when distant relatives begin sharing information and documents. Nevertheless, before adding anything to your own tree you would be wise to look for sources and evaluate them yourself.

If the tree does include sources, you should look at the actual documents yourself. Aside from the fact that having a copy of your great-great grandmother's marriage record is pretty cool, you will need to analyze the document. Does it in fact relate to your great-great grandmother? It could be some other individual with the same name. This can be true even if the name is relatively rare. Also consider other factors. Does it make sense based on what else you know? Typically people do not marry at the age of three. Women generally do not give birth at the age of 80.

If the document seems valid, you will need to consider the type of information it provides. Is it primary or secondary? Is the source an original record or a derivative source? Does it provide direct, indirect, or negative evidence? Who recorded it, when, where, why? All of this will determine whether or not you should include the data in your own tree.[4]

STEP 4: APPLY THE GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD (GPS)

To prevent genealogical conclusions from becoming erroneous, the Board for Certification of Genealogists developed a standard to help researchers develop logical reasoning and good results. They state:

> To reach a sound conclusion, you need to meet all five components of the GPS:
> 1. Reasonably exhaustive research
> 2. Complete and accurate source citations
> 3. Thorough analysis and correlation
> 4. Resolution of conflicting evidence
> 5. Soundly written conclusion[5]

What does all of this mean?

Reasonably exhaustive research means you have done a thorough job of researching and you are confident that you have not missed anything.

Complete and accurate source citations allow you to find documents if you need to check them again. It also allows others to validate your work.

Thorough analysis and correlation means you have considered and understand all of the documents together and are able to draw logical conclusions.

Resolution of conflicting evidence shows that you can logically explain any and all discrepancies between the documents. If you have been thorough, you will almost certainly have some conflicting evidence.

Soundly written conclusions preserve your reasoning and logic. If new information comes to light you will be able to check your reasoning against it.[6]

CONCLUSIONS

Are there any benefits to online trees? Of course there are. They can be a great way for cousins to meet and collaborate. They can also provide clues for research.

When looking at online trees, it is important to consider the quality of the research that the author has done. If you want to use them to add individuals to your own tree you need to understand that as you are doing so you need to prove two things: you need to prove the person you are adding exists, and you need to prove the relationship you are asserting exists. Without both of these the tree will devolve quickly into nonsense. To accomplish this, apply some common sense, thorough analysis, and back it up by following the Genealogical Proof Standard. This approach will lead to good results.

Notes

1. In 2018 it might be possible through the use of a frozen embryo or some other miracle of modern medicine for a biological mother to be deceased or perhaps be alive and living in an entirely different geographical area, but for most of human history and certainly for the time anyone is researching their ancestors it was not.

2. As with the above note, twenty-first century may make this possible now, and potentially a problem for researchers in the future, but for the time period anyone is currently researching it is not an issue.

3. Ensign: *I've heard that some people have extended their ancestral lines back to Adam. Is this possible? If so, is it necessary for all of us to extend our pedigrees back to Adam?* February 1984. (https://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/02/i-have-a-question/ive-heard-that-some-people -have-extended-their-ancestral-lines-back-to-adam-is-this-possible?lang=eng: accessed 8 December 2017).

4. Pastports: *An approach to evaluating family histories and family trees*, January 2015 (https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/ files/01_2015.pdf: accessed 15 February 2018).

5. Board for Certification of Genealogists: Genealogical Proof Standard . (https://bcgcertification.org/ethics/ethics-standards/ accessed 15 February 2018).

6. Lilienkamp, Daniel R. Everything you know is wrong. Germans in St. Louis , November 2017, St. Louis Missouri (https://www.slcl.org/sites/ default/files/Everything%20You%20Know%20is%20Wrong.pdf pp2-4: accessed 15 February 2018).

St.Louis County **Library**

www.slcl.org