Refresh Your Family History Research
Carol Whitton
whittoncarolyn514@gmail.com

GOOD BASIC RESEARCH TECHNIQUES
1. Collect Family Information.
2. Begin with yourself. Regardless of ethnicity, your family history begins with you!
3. Work backwards in time, starting with the most recent.
4. Verify the connection of each direct-line ancestor to his/her parent first.
5. MAKE A RESEARCH PLAN!
6. Start collecting basic records—census and vital records.
7. Find:
   Multiple sources (two records for each piece of evidence are essential; more is better),
   Original documents,
   All name spelling variations for both surnames and given names.
8. GUARD AGAINST ASSUMING!
9. Broaden; Avoid Tunnel Vision: seek every family member, not just the direct line!

LEARN KEY GENEALOGY DEFINITIONS
- ORIGINAL RECORD: Report of an action, observation, utterance, or event made at the time of the event or soon after and NOT based on a prior record or derived.
- PRIMARY EVIDENCE: A report of an event or circumstance by an eyewitness or participant, NOT hearsay, obtained from someone else, or secondary.
- INDEPENDENT INFORMANT: Source or information with unrelated origins which reinforce, rather than duplicate, each other.

KEEP ORGANIZED RESEARCH NOTES. EASIER ON A COMPUTER.
1. One page per source
2. Where & when researching?
3. Who/what sought?
4. How organized? Is each part indexed?
5. **Citation: Avoid repetitive entries, include a full citation to copy!**
6. Scroll the records; recording Individual Citation Details (CD) for each item found.
7. What did you do with each item found? =Copied image or not.
8. Copy citations onto each image at bottom, adding CD separately for each.
9. File these notes in sub-folders clearly named "notes—of place or person X."

LEARN PARTS OF A CITATION AND APPLY THEM
- **A partial citation** might be located somewhere else; but doesn't say where you were when!
- **See:** Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (Baltimore : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2024), fourth edition. Or online: https://www.evidenceexplained.com/
- **Citation's Four Parts:**
  1. Creating Repository (Congregation, Cemetery, Courthouse, etc.)

2. Citation Details (where to find each entry within book or repository)
3. Repository Viewed (FSL, Ancestry, any other online site, etc.)
4. Obtained Repository (where #3 got the record, eg: NARA, a State Archive, the original creator, historical society, museum, etc.)

- **Format for applying each part with correct punctuation:**
  City, State, Creating Repository name, *Original Record Title;* vol:pg, event date, event type, participant name(s), item #; digital image Repository name or abbreviation, "title of collection page," (repository URL : accessed date); citing Repository name or abbreviation, City, State, and any identifying numbers available.

START ONLINE, BUT AVOID ONLINE PITFALLS

Online searching:
1. Focus on an ancestor for whom you have a name, date, and place.
2. Initially, ignore the general search box; turn off search for non-historical records, such as family trees, stories, photos.
3. Search for historical records only at first.
4. Seek a specific record type, such as: censuses, marriages, or deaths.
5. Seek every family member.
6. COMPARE THE RESULTS TO WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE.
7. For "leaf" suggestions:
   (1) Examine each one-by-one, also comparing to the data you already have. Don't accept all!
   (2) Ask: does this fit what I have?
   (3) Might it fit if I find more information on the family?
   (4) Should I reject it because it's a different person?
8. If there are NO "leaf" suggestions or too few to be useful, TURN ON other types of search such as trees, stories, photos. Try Facebook and social media too. All will add some information, but BE CAREFUL and always remain skeptical!

Common Pitfalls:
1. People of the same name, of differing ages or from other places.
2. Age inconsistencies: marriages at age 5, children born after mother's death, marriages after death, etc.
3. Place unlikely: Generally moving too far, too fast for the time period. In 1780s NJ sons moved to OH, daughters remained NJ, but father died SC!

GOOD GENEALOGY RESEARCH IS MORE THAN COLLECTING RECORDS

- **Evaluate each piece of evidence**.
  1. KEY=DOES NEW EVIDENCE AGREE WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE?
  2. Who gave the information? An eyewitness or was it second-hand?
  3. Did the eyewitness report at the time of the event or much later? And, was he/she old enough to remember, but not yet too forgetful?
  4. Could there be bias or untruth in the information?
- **Analyze and resolve inconsistencies**.
  Always find at least two sources with identical evidence!
  Consider what other records might contain the same evidence? And, obtain these.

- **Immediately WRITE conclusions to inconsistencies,** so you don't forget them.
- **Keep an open mind.** If evidence is found later revising initial conclusions, **Rewrite.**

ANSWERING A SPECIFIC QUESTION—Where they came from? Who were the parents?
- **Review your timeline**
  Ask what do you have already—census, marriage, death, city directories.
  But is that ALL the available records online? NO.
  You're NOT STUCK!
  You need more CLUES from either more records or more people or both.
- **Who will provide more clues?**
  1. Gather all record types for the couple you've already found.
  2. And all their children's records too.
  3. Review: Look for missed clues in what you already have.
  4. Then, gather records of Friends, Associates, and Neighbors (FAN): that is anyone named in each of the family's records already found.
- **Records and repositories to search for more clues:**
  1. Locate all available unused records:
     a. Don't forget to use StLGS's free checklist **https://stlgs.org/media/freeforms/source-checklist-2024.pdf**
     b. Courthouse originals: Military, Deeds, Local court records, Tax, Voter Registration [all online at FSL!]
     c. Local: Cemetery records, Funeral homes, Religious, County history, History/Biography books, Newspapers at local library or genealogical society, repositories of local knowledge.
     d. Manuscripts: Organization memberships, School records, Business applications and records, Store Ledgers, Family Bibles, Diaries/journals/letters of other people at local and state Historical Societies, museum, or University Library.
     e. Also check U.S. Genweb https://www.usgenweb.org/--background information, plus.
     f. Advantage of the State Library and an Archives=all counties' original records and books together in one place.
     g. Each State also has designated an official newspaper repository collecting all available newspapers, which may be a University, Historical Society, or Archive.
     h. Records are available elsewhere too: PERSI, NUCMC, online book sites, etc.
  2. Organize a list of specific records you want to find.
  3. Check each repository thoroughly.
     a. Review every page of each website.
     b. Click each link. There will be some you haven't yet heard about!
     c. What's unusual?
     d. Which looks best for your needs?
  4. Email and ask questions! Email is more likely than calling to reach the best person to answer each question on the first try.
- **Should I alternately, try a record search with Artificial Intelligence (AI).**
  1. Yes, try Family Search Library/labs: Full-Test Search experiment
     a. Big advantage: if there is something, it will be items FSL has but hasn't indexed such as court order books, which are time consuming to examine page by page..

b. Search very broadly first—"McCl*" in Keywords only; or try other words, besides name, in keywords as search terms, such as an occupation.
c. As needed narrow by adding first name, state or county, time period.
d. Remember the transcription is not always perfect; check it!
e. Read directions: you can eliminate other names, eg: -John.
f. Check again every week; more is being added rapidly.
g. Disadvantage: you can't yet eliminate other people of the same name; eg: other George Washington McClintocks.
2. Trying other Ais online
   a. May be faster than searching each repository yourself.
   b. Try more than one AI site to see if the results differ.
   c. FORMAT YOUR QUESTION CAREFULLY to get what you want.
   d. Q: "all genealogical record types available from any repository in the U.S. for Memphis, Shelby county, Tennessee in the 1870s." Too broad. Yielded some, but not all, the basic record types found at local Courthouse, Archive, Library; State Library & Archives, and on FSL, including all censuses!
   e. Be much more specific: "records for only 1870s for Shelby Co, TN…particularly items not online, such as cemeteries, funeral homes, schools, dock side employers, and temperance societies." This yielded new items, but only in TN, no records that might be misplaced in another State.
   f. Although AI is improving rapidly, it isn't yet ideal for research.
   g. Always double-check the results.
   h. Could still be faster than searching each site separately.
   i. Advantage: Can email a repository asking about a specific known record set.

CREATE THE BEST QUALITY FAMILY HISTORY
▶ Start with yourself and work back. Connect each generation to the ancestor.
▶ PLAN your research.
▶ Verify each piece of evidence with multiple records.
▶ Check all spellings.
▶ Guard against assumptions.
▶ Recognize and avoid online pitfalls.
▶ Seek ALL records for EVERY family member and associates as needed.
▶ Create a family timeline. Include associates as needed.
▶ **Persevere!** If an ancestor didn't provide the needed information, someone else did!
▶ Please create a full citation, so you & others can figure out where you found it.
▶ Evaluate each piece of evidence—day, month, year, city, county, state, etc.
▶ Resolve all discrepancies. Now write down your thinking. Update as new information is found.
▶ Locate every state and local repository. Use their online catalogs and links.
▶ Be thorough; contact or visit all repositories!
▶ After you've been thorough, return to the unanswered question—Who were the parents. Then try to work from 1840 back in Indiana using all families of that surname, with helpful clues.