

# Refresh Your Family History Research

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## 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.
4. Verify a connection of each direct-line ancestor to his/her parent first.
5. **MAKE A RESEARCH PLAN!**
6. Start with 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

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 for each.
9. File these notes in sub-folders clearly called “notes—of place or person X.”

## LEARN GENERALIZED PARTS OF A CITATION AND APPLY THEM

- **See:** Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (Baltimore : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2024), fourth edition.  
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/>
- **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:**
    1. City, State, Creating Repository, *Original Record Title*;
    2. vol:pg, event date, event type, participant name(s), item #;
    3. digital image online Repository name or abbreviation, “title of collection pg,” (repository URL:accessed date);
    4. citing Repository name or abbreviation, City, State, and any identifying numbers.

### **BEST PRACTICES FOR AVOIDING ONLINE RESEARCH PITFALLS**

1. Focus on an ancestor for whom you have a name, date, and place.
2. Initially, ignore the general search box.
3. Initially, turn off search for non-historical records, such as family trees, stories, photos.
4. Search for historical records only.
5. Choose a specific record type to seek, such as: censuses, marriages, or deaths.
6. Seek every family member.
7. Compare the results to what you already know.
8. Is this the correct person? Are the ages impossible? Is the location illogical?
9. Only if the found record fits your ancestor, look at each “leaf” suggestion one-by one, comparing the data you already have and asking—
  - (1) does this fit?
  - (2) might it fit with more information? Or
  - (3) should I reject it because it’s probably a different person?
10. If there are NO “leaf” suggestions with a record found, ONLY THEN turn on other types of search such as trees, stories, photos. They’ll add more, but watch out for problems.

### **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.**
  - Find at least two sources with identical evidence!
  - What other records might contain the same evidence?
  - Obtain these additional records.
- **Immediately WRITE conclusions to inconsistencies.**
- **Keep an open mind.** If evidence 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—census, marriage, death, city directories.

Not all available records.  
You're NOT STUCK!  
You need more CLUES.

- **Which ancestors do you ask for more clues?**
  1. Gather all record types for the couple you've already found.
  2. Ask all their children's records too.
  3. Review: Look for new clues in what you already have.
  4. Then ask Friends, Associates, and Neighbors (FAN): anyone named in records found.
- **Records and repositories to search for more clues:**
  1. Locate all available unused records, such as:
    - a. Originals: Military, Deeds, Local court records, Tax, Voter Registration
    - b. Local: Cemetery records, Funeral homes, Religious, County history, Newspapers
    - c. Manuscripts: Organization memberships, School records, Business applications and records, Store Ledgers, Family Bibles, Diaries/journals/letters of other locals.
    - d. Don't forget to use StLGS's free checklist  
<https://stlgs.org/media/freeforms/source-checklist-2024.pdf>
  2. Where are these records located?
    - a. U.S. Genweb <https://www.usgenweb.org/>--Background information.
    - b. Each locality has: a County Courthouse (original records), a Library (books and newspapers), a Genealogical Society (online indices; local knowledge), a Historical Society or Museum (manuscripts) and maybe a University Library.
    - c. Every State has a State Library and an Archives (all counties' originals/books together), a State Genealogical and/or Historical Society (state information), and an official newspaper repository (collecting all available state newspapers).
  3. There are records elsewhere too: check PERSI, NUCMC, online book sites.
  4. 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?
  5. Organize a list of records you want to find.
  6. Email and ask questions! Email is more likely than calling to reach the best person to answer each question.
- **Alternately, conduct the above record search with Artificial Intelligence (AI).**
  1. It may be faster than searching each repository yourself.
  2. Try more than one AI site to see if the results differ.
  3. Format your question carefully to get what you want.
    - a. Q1: "...all genealogical record types available from any repository for Memphis, Shelby county, Tennessee in the 1870s...."
    - b. Yielded only basic record types from the local Courthouse, Archive, Library, State Library & Archives, and FSL, but not Ancestry.
    - c. Q2: "...add the following record types if available: cemeteries, funeral homes, churches, newspapers, organizations, schools, businesses, store ledgers, family Bibles, diaries, journals, and letters by local persons."
    - d. Results still only online records.

- e. Q3: be more specific: "...records for only 1870s ...particularly items not online such as cemeteries, funeral homes, schools, dock side employers, and temperance societies....".
- f. New items; but still only in Tennessee, not throughout the U.S.
- 4. Conclusions:
  - a. AI isn't yet perfect, particularly as a research tool.
  - b. Always double-check its results.
  - c. Faster than searching each site separately.
- 5. Send email to each repository asking about specific known record collections. And continue expanding search until find all possible clues.

### **CREATE THE BEST QUALITY FAMILY HISTORY**

- ▶ Start with yourself and work back. Connect each generation to the ancestor.
- ▶ PLAN your research.
- ▶ Verify with multiple records.
- ▶ Check all spellings.
- ▶ Guard against assumptions.
- ▶ Recognize online pitfalls.
- ▶ Seek ALL records for EVERY family member and also associates as needed.
- ▶ Create a family timeline. Include associates' clues.
- ▶ Evaluate each piece of evidence—day, month, year, city, county, state, etc.
- ▶ Resolve all discrepancies.
- ▶ Write your thinking down now.
- ▶ Update as new information is found.
- ▶ **Persevere!** If an ancestor didn't provide the needed information, someone else did!
- ▶ Locate every state and local repository. Use their online catalogs and links.
- ▶ Be thorough; contact or visit all repositories!
- ▶ Only after you've been thorough, can you return to the unanswered question--Who were the parents?--and try to work from 1840 back in Indiana using all families of the surname. By that time, hopefully you have more clues to help.