

BRICK WALL GENEALOGY

What is a brick wall in research? It's anything that gets between us and what we want to find out.

Who builds them?

Often, we do.

What are some of the ways brick walls are built?

-Through misinformation.

- 1. Faulty family stories**
- 2. Faulty transcriptions and indexes – This includes hand written notes, printed transcriptions in books or articles, and online transcriptions and subscription indexes.**
- 3. Mistakes in the original records (census records most egregious)**

-Not enough information

- 1. You don't have enough information to differentiate two people with the same name. Which one is yours?**
- 2. You can't make the link between generations. You are missing clues such as other family members, dates, locations.**

-Too many database results/options

You are using too basic (broad) a search within your database for the topic or person you are searching. In other words, you are searching through every record the database has to offer. The search pulls up way too many hits, no matter how remote and may actually be missing what you are looking for.

What you need to do:

Narrow your search by including additional information, such as spouses, children, places and/or dates. (This is where your family group sheets comes in handy.) If you don't have some of this information, you need to narrow your search by what you do have. Databases such as Ancestry and FamilySearch allow you to narrow your search to a specific record or type of record, a specific place, and/or a date range.

You have a far better chance of finding the George Smith from Ashton under Lyne, England married to Philomene in the 1871 English census than you do George Smith, England.

-Sloppy research

Examples:

- 1. You did not take note of *all* the information that was included in the documents you already researched. You missed something or someone critical.**
- 2. You neglected to focus on details such as nicknames, place names, dates (who, where, when) for other family members.**
- 3. You did not cite where your information came from. You can't find it again. [This is easy to forget. Even experienced genealogists can get so excited by a find that they forget to note where they found it.]**

-Making assumptions [In research "assume" is a four letter word. If you assume anything, you have a 95% chance of being wrong.]

Examples:

- 1. All original records have reliable information. Actually they are notorious for inaccuracies. Census records are the worst for this.**
- 2. All digitized and microfilmed records have been copied in their entirety. [Microfilming and digitizing is an idiot's job that absolutely *cannot* be done by an idiot. It is too easy to skip over pages.]**
- 3. My ancestor always lived in the same place and went to religious services in the same town they lived in, etc.**
- 4. My ancestor had a very uncommon name. There could *not* be two separate people. Just because it's uncommon to you, does not mean it was uncommon for that period and place.**
- 5. My ancestors' names were always spelled the same way. This may be one of the assumptions that gets beginners into the most trouble. Between census takers, indexers, handwriting, and your surname as it makes its way through history, nothing is certain. Did you know when Shakespeare signed his name, he never spelled it the same way twice?**

-Impatience

- 1. Not sourcing information**
- 2. Not filing information/records**
- 3. Adding parts of someone else's tree to yours without verifying the other person's sources. If they don't have sources, don't use it. When you add someone to your family tree, do it ancestor by ancestor, family by family, one by one.**
- 4. Taking down only the one piece of information you are looking for without checking the rest of the record. (See Sloppy Research above.)**
- 5. Not stopping and considering the ramifications of the new information you have found. How does it relate to your ancestor, to other people in the family? How does it impact your family's history? Does it call into question other information you have found?**

-Lack of knowledge or skills relating to research methods

Types of information you may need to know:

- 1. Why were specific records created and used during particular times and places and how were they recorded? (They were NOT created for genealogists.) Genealogy books for specific locations as well as local history resources will help with this.**
- 2. What *specialized* records exist only for a specific locality and time?
Did your town of interest keep its own local census records independent of federal, state, or county? Are they online? Did you know the federal government collected information for special agricultural and manufacturing census schedules, but only for certain census years? It included smaller gardens, not just large farms.**
- 3. What records exist, but not online? What other records no longer exist? How do you know the records you are looking for ever existed?**
- 4. In the United States, what records are kept by the federal government, by the state, by the county, and locally? Take a look at [Ancestry's Red Book](#) (organized state by state).**
- 5. Are there other types of records that cover some of the same information as that of the record you are not finding? Take a look at [The Source](#) (organized by record type).**

- Not Understanding the Importance of Local and National History

What we think of as history to your ancestors was current events. Learning more about it could give you just the lead you need.

Did you know that those Englishmen that settled different parts of the Atlantic coast of what is now the United States came from specific, different English Counties? If you had colonial English ancestors, that could help you track them back to England. [see *Albion's Seed* by David Hackett Fischer]

Did you know that the mass migration of Puritans from England to New England took place from 1620 to 1640 and then collapsed? Almost the entire colonial population explosion in New England came from families who came over in these twenty years. A lot of families were related to each other. There was not another major migration until the Irish came here during the Potato Famine.

Knowing about vast migration routes such as the Jewish diaspora sparked by the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 or the reasons for simpler ones from one town to another, may help you trace seemingly untraceable ancestors or at least figure out why you are having such a hard time tracing them. (Example: Living conditions in Dukinfield, compared to Ashton under Lyne in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Friedrich Engels helped explain the movement of mill workers from Dukinfield to Ashton under Lyne.)

-Nothing is etched in stone

- 1. Names: Know alternate spellings and misspellings of surnames (last) and given names (first).**
- 2. Political Geography: Borders of towns, counties, states, provinces and nations, as well as other geographical designations within those areas, change. That will affect where you find records.**
- 3. Words: Historical context changes over time. This definitely includes word meanings and the meanings of unfamiliar historical words. If someone called another person a black Republican during the Civil War, would you know what it meant?**

-It's rare, but sometimes you really do have an ancestor that does not want to be found.