

HOW DO YOU TEAR DOWN BRICK WALLS

THE BASICS

Remember Your First Steps

- a. Are you creating family group sheets as you go along?
- b. Is your research organized so you can find it again whether you use paper files, genealogical software on your computer or on the Internet/in the cloud?
- c. Have you talked with relatives to find out what they know about your family?
- d. Take a closer look at the records you've already accumulated. What are you missing? Did you note all the information on the record, even if it wasn't what you were looking for at the time?
- e. Did you save the names and places *exactly* as they appeared or did you "correct" the spellings anywhere in your work? Note variant spellings, whether names of people or places. There may be other records that can only be found under the "wrong" spelling.

RESEARCHING

Records: Remember Indexers

When you are working with anything online, especially records, there is always at *least* one person between you and your original record – an indexer or transcriber. That person has to go in and transcribe names from the original. It's easy to get it wrong. How accurate the transcription of a name is depends on the legibility of the handwriting and how experienced the indexer is. Once you actually go from the typed name to the original online record, make a copy of the entire record. If it's a census record, copy a couple of pages around your ancestor's family. Those neighbors may come in handy down the line. Cite *exactly* where you found the record.

Think Beyond Vital and Census Records

Remember there are more to records than birth, marriage and death records and the Federal Census. If you put your question in the form of the *information* you are trying to find, rather than the record you are looking for, it will be easier to think of alternative sources for your information. The book [The Source](#) discusses all types of genealogy records, one record at a time. It's a good place to look for overlapping information.

Use People Surrounding Your Ancestors

Start with what is known as whole family research. (Think family group sheet.) Take note of every member of a specific household, even if they are not listed as relatives. That older woman with a different last name living with your ancestor's family is often a relative and sometimes a mother-in-law. Mothers-in-law bring you back another generation on the female line. That boarder staying with the family may end up as a brother-in-law or sister-in-law. Extraneous people may not be all that extraneous.

If whole family research doesn't work, you expand to FANs, short for friends, acquaintances, and neighbors. When you are looking at census records, take note of people living near your ancestors. They may be relatives or may become relatives through

marriage. If your family of interest has emigrated from another country and you can't find where they came from, check their neighbors. They may originally have all come from the same geographic area, even the same village, town or city. Also check local directories in this country. They may list where your ancestors lived and may list what they did for a living or where they worked. In city directories you can also discover what churches or temples were nearby. This may lead to ancestors' religious records. Special local collections in libraries or historical societies may have records of fraternal societies and clubs they may have belonged to. When all else fails, follow the money. Someone in a family always gets taxed for something. Local tax records may give needed information.

Go Local: Discover the History, Boundaries and Border Changes of Your Ancestors Towns

Learn about the history and political geography (boundaries and borders) of the area your ancestor lived, not only while they were there but also the period leading into and out of that time. Sometimes finding or creating a timeline of events can help you make connections you might otherwise miss. Local history is fascinating and makes your ancestors come alive. They are no longer just names on a page.

Use People Surrounding You.

- a. Ask a friend who knows little or nothing about genealogy about what you want to find out. Sometimes just explaining the details to your friend can give you needed clues or even an answer. There are other times when friends actually come up with a solution, simply because they are thinking outside the genealogical box.
- b. Are you having trouble thinking of alternative spellings? Ask friends how to spell it (whatever "it" is.) Just say it. Don't spell anything for them. Five friends may give you five different spellings. That's a good start for your alternate spelling list.
- c. Talk to relatives *again*. What else would you like to ask them.

Crowd Sourcing

Call in groups of potential experts. These include societies of genealogists and family historians; local historians and libraries located in the areas where your ancestors once lived; family and surname societies, groups with an interest in a particular location.

Check for genealogy clubs near where you live. They usually have members with varied experience – from very little to many years. Often their ancestors came from all over the world. About the only thing they may have in common is where their members live now. They may be able to help you with their problem.

Books

Not everything is online. Personally I find it easier to learn how to do something by using a book, especially when it comes to tackling aspects of research I haven't done before. I definitely find it a lot more interesting learning about a place's history by reading a book or an article. Check out a library's online catalog by playing with keywords. When you come up with a book that looks promising, you can click the subject listings given for that book to find other books. When using your local library's catalog, do not limit yourself to just your library. Search your network, in our case, the Minuteman network.

Any library anywhere should let you into their online catalog. I find the Library of Congress can be a great resource when I'm not finding something locally. I again play with keywords

or use the name of the town (ex. Rehoboth (Mass.) – genealogy) or county or province (ex. Bristol County (Mass.) – Genealogy) or the family surname (ex: Newcomb family) as a subject heading. When you find a book anywhere in the continental United States, you can request it through your local library's interlibrary loan librarian. Take note: Always look at the online catalog of the library where your ancestor lived. Library of Congress does not have everything, especially if it's locally published or the result of a special local project.

DNA Research Can be an Avenue of Research

a. Advice: Do *not* undertake DNA testing unless you are prepared for the unexpected. You can get one of three results: what you expect, a nice surprise, or a very unpleasant shock.

b. Y-DNA uses the male sex chromosome to trace male lines. It must be combined with your male family surname research and your family tree if you are going to make good use of your DNA results.

c. mtDNA is the female sex chromosome. Anomalies are far rarer in mtDNA than in Y-DNA. Therefore it is not used to trace female lines.

d. Autosomal DNA includes everything else that is not a sex chromosome. This is what you test to look for cousins. You will not find all cousins here. Remember that you inherit only half of your DNA from your father and half from your mother. Which DNA you inherit will vary even between you and your brothers and sisters. The further back you go, the less you share. But you will share some, often enough to make some connections. Who you connect with also depends on which cousins submitted their DNA to the company/group you are using.

Keep Learning: None of Us Ever Knows Enough

Now really, do we really want to know *everything*? How boring is that?

Both browsing and targeted research are useful tools for learning about your family and about the history of their communities, as well as how to proceed with your research.

Browse genealogy "how to" books and magazine articles at the library and/or online. Attending conferences online or in person can be extremely useful, both for the classes and the contacts you make.

Look for online classes. [FamilySearch](#) has many that are just five or ten minutes long. And they are free. Don't hesitate to fill in their search box for what you want to learn. They have many more classes than those listed on their first Help Center page. (Link provided above.)

For your targeted research have specific questions and goals to guide your search. For example: How do I learn to do immigration research for Irish immigrants? What can I learn about census records that would cover the early 20th century? Why did my Maine ancestor join a Massachusetts regiment in the Civil War? What's the best way to organize my records? I'm missing some of my research.

Shanks Mare, Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers: Doing Your Research In Person

In other words, after you have done your homework, you might want to make travel plans. *Of course* you ***always*** check in advance about what a repository has, when they are open, and who can help you once you get there. And don't forget to ask if they have other suggestions for local research.

Take a Break: Let Your Subconscious Take Over

Work on or think about something totally unrelated to what is beginning to drive you nuts. (Sometimes just living your life forces you to do this.) People who do a lot of research over time or have shorter, very intense periods of research, will tell you that sometimes the brain needs a rest. It actually takes this time to assimilate all the material you've been feeding it. Suddenly the brain appears to just pop out your answer or at least a new route to explore.

Hire an Expert

If you decide you want to go this route, make sure you get someone who really knows what they are doing in the specific area or subject you want them to research. The New England Historic Genealogical Society on Newbury Street in Boston keeps a list of genealogists with subject specialties. Their website is <http://www.americanancestors.org>. You can also check the Association of Professional Genealogists at <https://www.apgen.org>.

COMPUTERS

Computer Based Hardware Can Be a Tremendous Time Saver

This includes laptops, iPads, tablets, smartphones, printers, digital cameras, scanners. What are you comfortable using? Think about price, ease of use, reliability, your level of experience. If you are not comfortable with the hardware, how are you going to deal with the software and the Internet?

Computer Based Software: If You Use It, Take the Time to Learn Your Program

Family tree software can help you sort and keep track of your research. Be prepared for a learning curve. You can often take software for a free spin to see what you think. Check out the Top Ten Reviews website for the [Best Genealogy Software of 2017](#). They have recently changed their website and combined genealogy software for PCs and for Macs into one graph. Use the scroll bar directly under the graph to see which is which. (It was easier to find this information when the software for PCs and for Macs were on separate pages in my not so humble opinion.) You should also be able to find a link to the company's website. Most company let you sign up for a free trial run before you have to buy it. There is usually a nominal price for PC software. Apple tends to be more expensive.

The Internet: Pick and Choose

Subscription (\$\$\$) Databases such as Ancestry (free in library), Heritage Quest (free in library), MyHeritage (Personal Subscription), FindMyPast (Personal Subscription) can help you find records, build online family trees, etc.

Free Databases and websites such as FamilySearch.org (free huge record database), SteveMorse.org (immigration census, etc.), DeadFred (photograph sharing and identification) mostly tend to be by subject. You'll find suggestions for likely websites online, in magazine articles, in classes. Besides these basic ones, you'll find you develop your own favorites depending on the specifics of what you are researching.

Social Media such as Blogs (One Rhode Island Family, Clue Wagon, Nutfield Genealogy), Facebook (keep it very limited), Twitter (to follow libraries, archives,

individuals), wikis (Family Search), and podcasts (Genealogy Guys) can be useful. By the way, genealogists tend to run much friendlier sites than most social media.

Internet (Cloud) storage such as Dropbox (Free to start, strictly storage) and Evernote (Free to start, note taking, storage).

Tip: When using **websites and databases, it helps to learn what each does and does not cover.** See if they have an "About" or a "Learning Center" tab or its equivalent. Explore their homepage. Did you know Ancestry has message boards? Do you know what message boards are? Play with their search functions. You don't have to limit yourself to a person's name. You can often funnel down to a smaller record base within a larger database. Or you can add family members, dates or locations. Be willing to play and explore. Puttering with a site is not a waste of time. It will actually save you time in the long run. See if your local public library gives you free access to some of the subscription websites.

Tip: **Go back often** to websites and databases that are updated frequently. New records are being added constantly as they are being digitized and indexed by sites such as Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org.

OUR OWN CROWD SOURCING

Have you used something successfully that I have missed here?

Do you see anything here that might help your research that you haven't done or thought of before?

Have used any of these tips successfully in the past? Any stories about it?

What questions do you have?