

Good research methods are essential if you are to locate the best information about your ancestors and if you are to come to the right conclusions about them. We've all been guilty of making errors or omissions in our research at some time or another. Some of these common mistakes can take us down the wrong road, sometimes putting us on the trail of someone else's ancestry altogether.

In "Along Those Lines . . ." this week, let's identify and define some of the most common research wrong turns.

Use of Limited Resources

First, you have to realize that you can only locate so much information by looking at only a few types of records. Census records, family Bibles, marriage and death certificates are good places to start, but there are so many other sources that can yield clues. These include probate packets, land and property records, tax rolls, court records, ships' passenger lists, immigration and naturalization records, Social Security and Railroad Retirement records, city directories, military service and pension records, and publications of genealogical and historical societies, to name a few. The key is to not limit yourself; there are so many alternate resources to be studied.

Believing All You Read

Not everything you read is accurate. A healthy dose of scepticism is a valuable research tool. Census records are a great example of information to be questioned. Census data is only as accurate as the enumerator made it. If he or she was too tired or lazy to make the trek to your ancestor's farm or up that five flights of stairs to their apartment, he or she may have asked neighbours for the information required to complete your ancestors' profile. Published biographies and genealogies, and a great deal of information found on the Internet can also contain discrepancies or errors. You should always verify, confirm, or corroborate facts found in one source with another source whenever possible.

Using Abstracts, Extracts, and Transcriptions

Records copied and published by others are often fraught with problems. Transcription and handwriting interpretation errors are common. More than that, however, are the problems resulting from someone else's interpretation of a document. One will abstract I recently encountered contained spelling errors of surnames, omissions of some other heirs' names (including those of slaves), and included no description of the division of property. I strongly urge you to follow up on your find of abstracts and transcriptions with a look at a copy of the

original documents. While many abstractors and transcribers do excellent work, you can often find additional important information (and errors) when you examine the documents yourself.

Name Variants

It is uncommon today for people to change their names. In other times, however, people changed their names without going through a legal process. Some ancestors of mine named WHITEFIELD decided to change the spelling of their surname to WHITFIELD. Names were also written or recorded incorrectly. Perhaps the person writing the name wasn't a good speller or simply misheard the name. My great-great-grandmother's given name was Hepsedah, and her name appears in the 1870, 1880, 1900 and 1910 censuses as Hepsedah, Hebsedah, Lizzie and Hezzie, respectively. Start your research with a list of possible alternate spellings of names and be on the lookout for these and others. I might never have found a record for a great-grandfather HOLDER had I not looked at a record for a Mr. HALTER.

Using the Wrong Map

A great deal of time is wasted by people who don't use the correct map when doing their research. As countries grew, counties or provinces were subdivided into new ones and boundaries changed. Wars and political conflicts caused boundaries to change as well. If you are looking for a marriage record, make sure you write to the correct government office that might hold that record. First use a current map to determine where the event took place. Then locate a map of the same area from the time when the event occurred. If the location is now in a different county or other governmental jurisdiction, contact or visit the old one for a copy of the record.

Place Name Changes and Lost Places

Many researchers give up when they encounter a place name that no longer exists or, worse yet, they make assumptions. Somewhere there is a map or other reference that includes the place name and can tell you where it was. Using the correct map is always important, and locating these obscure towns and villages can be essential in locating records you need. If an old atlas or gazetteer doesn't help, look for alternative records. One of these might be old post office or railroad station site listings. It was through an 1895 Post Office Directory that I found the community of Sheva, NC, a small package express stop. As a result, I now know precisely where to continue research on specific ancestors whose letters in the 1880's were postmarked there.

Missed Opportunities for Good Information

Your relatives are some of your best resources. Time and again you hear how important it is to interview all of your relatives. Their recollections of names, places, events, and details can be invaluable starting points for other research. They also may have important written

materials in their possession that they might be willing to loan to you or make copies for you. These include Bible records, letters, diaries and journals, military records, wills, deeds, marriage certificates, and a host of other materials. I've had excellent experience here. I obtained a wealth of document copies from a first cousin once removed for an entire line. An elderly aunt who no longer had room for a ten-pound box of family photographs and who thought no one wanted them gave them to me rather than throw them away. Other relatives have shared copies of Bible records, made photographs of gravestones, and have recounted many stories of their and my families. Don't miss the opportunity to investigate what your relatives have to share!

Keeping Track of Where You Found Material (Or Didn't Find Anything)

A great deal of time is spent duplicating research. It is important to keep track of what resources you have investigated in the past, even those that yielded nothing of value, so that you don't duplicate your efforts. A research log or research calendar can help you record your progress. You can maintain your log by surname, by individual, by geographic area or whatever organizational method makes you most effective. Using one of these, such as those found at

<http://www.ancestry.com/save/charts/researchcal.htm> Or
<http://www.genrecords.com/forms/genealogyresearchlog.pdf> can be enormously helpful.

Failure to Re-examine Previously Located Materials

One of the research techniques most overlooked by genealogists is re-examining materials they have previously obtained. As you uncover new facts, it is important to assess and compare the new information with what you already know, and assess the viability of the old and new facts. Do they agree? Do they complement one another? Is there a discrepancy? Is one source better or more reliable than another and, if so, why? Does one source make the information furnished by other, or both, questionable? It is very important to continually reassess the facts you have acquired. Sometimes they all fit together to form a great tapestry of your ancestor's life. Other times, however, the pieces don't fit together and new data may raise even more questions than the answers it provides.

These are some of the more common of the research wrong turns. There are others, of course, and the whole reason for writing "Along Those Lines . . ." is to try to help other researchers make better research decisions and to perhaps investigate other record types. Please take some time to reassess where you might be making some wrong turns or might improve your own research methods. After all, a little course correction can always be a good thing.