



What am I missing? Recognizing Research Holes in Available Sources

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Joy Reisinger Lecture Series

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)

One bedrock tenant of the Genealogical Proof Standard is reasonably exhaustive research which

- “emphasizes original records providing participants’ information for all evidence that might answer a research question about identity, relationship, event, or situation;” and
- “examines all potentially relevant sources minimizing the risk that undiscovered evidence will overturn a too-hasty conclusion.”¹

Reasonably exhaustive research is characterized by the following qualities:

- “Yield at least two sources of independent information items agreeing directly or indirectly on a research question’s answer.
- **cover sources competent genealogists would examine to answer the same research question**
- provide at least some primary information and direct, indirect, or negative evidence from at least one original record
- **replace, where possible, relevant authored narratives, derivative records, and information that is secondary or undetermined, and**
- yield, where possible, data that indexes and databases identify as potentially relevant.”²

For any research question

1. Begin by summarizing what you know about the person. A timeline will place him/her in specific places at specific times.
2. Identify any sources applicable only to the time period in which the person lived. Think military records. These will not be discussed in this lecture.
3. Identify sources applicable to the locations where the person lived.
 - a. Use location-based resource guides which will give a history of the area, research repositories, and specifics of governmental requirements. We may be fortunate in having non-governmental resources such as journals, diaries, or items in special collections. But most records left by our ancestors are those required by

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, Second Edition (Nashville, TN: Ancestry.com, 2019), 1–2.

² *Ibid.*, 85.

governmental entities especially the local government. These records will constitute a large share of the research process and are the focus of this lecture.

- b. Research guides may be books or websites, but keep in mind that they usually are incomplete. They may be general or detailed. Older guides may still be useful in explaining the records available because the records themselves have not changed. But our modern research problem of how to access the records has greatly changed. Variable avenues of accessing records probably accounts for a large part of why people have holes in their research. Because researchers don't know that anything is missing, they don't recognize the holes.
 - c. Research guide examples: "FamilySearch Research Wiki," *USGenWeb*, *Cyndi's List*, National Genealogical Society's *Research in the States Series*, *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer*.
4. Learn about the records pertinent to the location. Many will be universal record types (probate, land, court, etc.), but they vary in specifics because of different laws, record-keeping practices, and court jurisdictions. Counties are bound by state statutes. Learning about the records in one county will translate to other counties in the same state, although actual practices of court clerks will cause some differences. Understanding the process of how the records were created helps the researcher know what records are likely to be found. However, understanding the quirks of the records in each location comes from experience.
 5. Access the location-based sources:
 - a. **Original records are the first recorded reports of an action, event, or observation.**
 - b. **Derivative records derive from manipulation of earlier records by abstracting, indexing, and transcribing, etc.**³

Access the location-based sources: derivative and original records

Abstracts and indexes comprise much of available derivative records

Abstracts and indexes serve as gateways to the original records. They are not intended to be the final research destination. They can direct our research path making it more efficient.

Why use abstracts and indexes? They index information not indexed internally in original records.

Usually only the primary parties are indexed in the original records. My ancestor Henry Dukes appears in exactly one Orange County, North Carolina, record as the primary party: his marriage bond. But he appears as witness, bondsman, and estate purchaser in other records only known to me because of abstracts. Appearances in records in these lesser roles help develop connections with others who may lead to parental associations.

Accessing abstracts and indexes

"FamilySearch Digital Library": <https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/>

Also by <https://familysearch.org> > Search > Books

Also by <https://familysearch.org> > catalog > enter [state, county/town] Under each category, sources are listed with authors shown. For published abstracts and indexes, look for the names

³. Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2013), 11.

of people as authors. Original records (to be discussed) are labeled with the government office that created them. Unless you are at the Family History Library, these books are not available unless they are part of the “Digital Library,” but they do tell you that they exist so that you can find them in another, more conveniently located library.

WorldCat: access from database collection of your local public library.

Enter a county and state to begin and select from a drop-down menu a “subject” search. Click on one resource of interest in the resulting list. There are Library of Congress standards for entering subjects, but there is some variability in their construction and may be hard to remember. Clicking on one book in the search results that is obviously genealogical for the location of interest will show the subjects used for that book. Click on the subject indicating the location to retrieve other books with the same subject.

For each volume, click on “Libraries Worldwide that own item” to determine a convenient location. Many genealogy books are not available for check out or inter-library loan except

- Midwest Genealogy Center will inter-library loan volumes for which they have more than one copy. They will also copy index pages and pages of interest by communicating directly with them.
- St. Louis County Library will inter-library loan books which are part of the National Genealogical Society Book Loan collection. This designation appears in the notes fields of the catalog entry.

After finding a book of interest in WorldCat that is held by one of those libraries, go to their catalog to determine if it’s possible to borrow it.

PERSI: PERiodical Source Index (on Findmypast)

Indexes magazine articles which contain abstracts and indexes to local records. Although a search by surname can be done, it can be more fruitful to search by a location. This is a subject index. Only surnames, location, record type, or how-to topic are indexed. Some, but very few articles are attached to the indexed entries. Search for the publication at your local library or genealogical society. Or request a copy through inter-library loan or by requesting directly from an entity that holds copies of the periodical.

Local libraries, historical societies, and genealogical societies

Not all libraries are part of WorldCat. Not only that, but libraries often have finding aids that are not published, not cataloged, and available only at their physical locations. The best way to identify all relevant location-based resources is to visit a library, genealogical society, or historical society in the area of interest. The one-of-a-kind finding aids may be listed as resources on the websites. Some libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies have created electronic versions of these finding aids on their websites. But many have not.

Limitations of abstracts and indexes

Abstracts and indexes can contain errors in misinterpretation, errors in transcription, omissions, and additions. Abstracts and indexes may decontextualize information. We cannot see connections that are obvious in native groupings of the information if the compilation reorganizes the information.

Abstracts and indexes are limited in coverage:

- There may be few or none for the geographical region of interest.

- What time period is covered?
- Which records are included?

Research holes are created when genealogists rely only on abstracts and indexes, internet searches, and *Ancestry* (or other electronically searchable database collection). We are grateful for all the hard-working people who have voluntarily abstracted records that help speed us on our way to efficient research. **We benefit from using them as long as we recognize their limitations.**

Read the introductory material for any website or book for abstracted records. Good compilers who recognize the value of reasonably exhaustive research will give details of materials extracted and their context.

In your research log (you're keeping one, right?):

- Write the citation.
- Extract the information from front matter or by observation including coverage of particular record sets, legal statutes referenced, date range covered, any missing or difficult-to-read pages, abbreviations used, and any idiosyncrasies mentioned by the author. Your own observations are more important when the compiler gives little information.
- Explain any deficiencies or conflicting information in a comparison of the coverage of the derivative records with the coverage of the original records.

Compare the coverage of the abstracted records with the coverage of the original records. From home, this can be done by accessing the FamilySearch digitized microfilm collections of governmental records or the inventories from state or regional archives. Understand what you have not researched by learning what is available elsewhere. Because even the FamilySearch digitized microfilm and the archives inventories are incomplete, a comparison eventually must include the records available only locally.

Original records

Because abstracts and indexes are error-prone and coverage is limited, our research will necessarily have gaping holes if these are all that are viewed. The solution is to turn to the original records. Viewing the original records will correct any errors and fill in the gaps.

The best way to know what you are missing in the abstracted records is by comparing the coverage with the coverage of the original records. This is most easily BEGUN by using *FamilySearch* or state archives information since they are accessible from home. You may be able to solve your research problems with the *FamilySearch* digitized records but recognize that there are almost certainly more records locally.

Accessing the original records

- **FamilySearch:** <https://familysearch.org/> > Search > catalog > [state, county/town]
 - Because the *FamilySearch* catalog is organized by the natural research divisions, going to the location's listing in the catalog will give you all of the holdings categorized by record type.

- Expand sections for categories of records to explore the available sources. Some may show that they are searchable, but many are not. Use the internal indexes of the records and browse when necessary.
- **State archives**
 - Some state archives have either the original records and/or microfilm. The State Archives of North Carolina is probably the best centralized repository of all records for its state largely in original records but also for microfilm for original records still in the counties. Most other states cannot claim the same.
- **Local (courthouse, archives, genealogical or historical society)**
 - In many courthouses, the records may be perused. Browse the shelves. Utilize the internal indexes to access the specific records. Probate records are indexed by deceased, but also sometimes by executor or devisees. Deeds are indexed by grantors and grantees. Court records are indexed by plaintiffs and defendants. Your understanding of the processes that created the records is important so you know what records you might expect to find. For example, court docket books lead to court files, probate books lead to estate files, deeds showing sheriff's sales or partition suits lead to court records or tax records.
 - W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) inventories from the late 1930s and early 1940s are thorough and well done. Often courthouse staff know little about the older records and may just repeat things that are not true: "Everything was destroyed in a fire." Evidence of the existence of the records when the WPA inventoried them can make you more persistent in trying to locate something specific.
 - Check other local repositories (libraries, genealogical and historical societies) for original records that have been transferred.

Expect the original records to be in the courthouse. If the area is open to researchers (usually), browse the shelves to determine what other records might be there that you don't know about. Peruse the record inventories of state or regional archives to determine what they might hold. View the websites of local genealogical and historical societies to see what might have been transferred to them.

In your research log

- Write a citation.
- Write observations about the records including the types of things an author of a published abstract might write: the time period covered, any missing pages or skipped dates, any physical features that made the records hard to read. Notations at the beginning or the end of the book may give additional explanations.
- Extract/abstract/transcribe records. Photograph if allowed.

Online databases

All electronic indexes are derivatives and must be verified with the originals. However, the indexes might link to other derivative sources or to the original records.

Use care in evaluating the accuracy and completeness of sources obtained through online database searches. Although broad searches across the entire database collection may yield some unexpected records, it will also fill our screens with lots of unrelated garbage. Generally, if we are attempting to use “relevant” sources, we will target particular collections within those databases. One way to do this is to discover what collections are contained in the database that might pertain to our research locale. <https://ancestry.com> > Search > Card Catalog. Enter a state in the Title field. Filter by category to narrow to the record type desired. Click and examine.

There will be two types of results. They both will have search boxes, but some will allow browsing the images in the collection and one type does not have this feature because it is solely an index.

The screenshot shows the search interface for 'Massachusetts, U.S., Compiled Birth, Marriage, and Death Records, 1700-1850'. The page has a search bar with a 'Search' button and a checkbox for 'Match all terms exactly'. Below the search bar are input fields for 'First & Middle Name(s)' and 'Last Name'. There are also dropdown menus for 'Day', 'Month', and 'Year' for 'Birth', 'Marriage', and 'Any Event', along with 'Location' dropdowns. A section for 'Add family member' includes tabs for 'Father', 'Mother', 'Spouse', and 'Child', each with 'First & Middle Name(s)' and 'Last Name' input fields. There is also a 'Publication Info' section with a 'Location' dropdown and a 'Keyword' field. On the right side, there is a 'Browse this collection' section with a list of towns: Abington, Acton, Andover, Arlington, Ashfield, Attleboro, Auburn, Barre, Becket, and Bedford. Below that is a 'Related data collections' section with a link to 'Massachusetts, U.S., Birth Records, 1840-1915' and a brief description.

Although you can enter terms into the search boxes, you will better understand what records are included (so that you can identify holes!) if you browse. your specific location may not even be included, and you would walk away thinking that there was no record for your ancestor in the specific record set.

Click on the location of interest. Click on each title and browse the images. Understand what is included. Compare with what is on *FamilySearch*. Often these searchable databases on *Ancestry* use *FamilySearch* microfilm. It can be challenging to figure out which records correspond to which *FamilySearch* microfilm. The titles on *Ancestry* are almost always wrong. These are original records, so record observations in your research notes.

In this example, the database claims to be for “town and vital records.” Does the search engine include other entries in the book that are not vital records? Test the indexing by selecting names from the images of the original pages to electronically search. Try it with more than one name to be sure that names were truly not indexed. Relying on only the indexed records means that much information is untapped.

Other databases can also be searched to discover limits. I've searched for Smith or Jones in a particular county to discover that the county was not included in the census database. I've searched a database for land warrants entering only the county to discover that the county was not represented even though records exist. Search using only years (as I did with the Missouri Judicial database for Greene County, Missouri) helps to determine coverage.

Almost all internet electronic databases are limited in some way

- The cover of the volume might not be shown leading to a less-than-accurate citation.
- The titles given by electronic database providers are often at the least truncated, and the worst wrong.
- The type of document is often incorrectly identified (particularly with the probate collections).
- The digitized film might be chopped up into years instead of the archival arrangement by volume.
- Using only searchable database collections leads to a complacency and assumption that all the records are included.

Search > Birth, Marriage & Death

Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988

Search Match all terms exactly

First & Middle Name(s) Exact...

Last Name Exact...

	Day	Month	Year	Location
Birth	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="City, County, State, Cour"/>
Death	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="City, County, State, Cour"/>
Lived In	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="City, County, State, Cour"/>
Marriage	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="City, County, State, Cour"/>
Any Event	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="City, County, State, Cour"/>

Browse this collection

To browse this image set, select from the options below.

Event Town

Title

- [Births, Marriages and Death Proprietors' Records](#)
- [Town Meeting Minutes, with Births, Marriages, and Deaths](#)

Just because *FamilySearch* has a searchable collection does not mean that it is complete. Browsing records is an undervalued research technique.

Recommendation: Even if an original record is found on a searchable database, go to the *FamilySearch* catalog entry by location to better understand the records and to be sure that other associated records are identified. Citing a *FamilySearch* source rather than a subscription database source for the same record makes it more accessible to others.

Are you missing records that might be available?

Recognizing research holes requires a thorough knowledge of the records available.

- Understanding the records requires research.
 - Sources must be analyzed individually whether derivative or original.
 - Record sets across several access points must be correlated.

It's a research project itself to determine what sources are available to answer a research question.

Self-imposed and defeating limits

- Assuming nothing will be found in a particular source and not looking.
- Not understanding time constraints or following time constraints too rigidly
- Not understanding that administrative boundaries are not barriers beyond which people did not venture.
- Not extending the research beyond the individual (AKA “FAN” research)