



BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS® REISINGER MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

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What is context?
Why do we need it?
Where do we find it?
How do we use it?

OVERVIEW

Raw facts do not tell a story. They may not even tell the truth about what they do relate.

As researchers, we seek original documents that offer us "the facts." But facts are impish devils, and historical records do not speak for themselves. They cannot explain themselves. They are inert objects created by individuals of a different time, a different culture, and who-knows-what mindset. If taken at face value, records and their "facts" can deceive, mislead, or confuse us.

The only voice that documents have is the voice we give them. With every document we find, and every story we tell, we have a choice:

- We can take what we see at face value, report it devoid of context, and run the risk of misrepresenting the circumstances. Or ...
- We can seek the context we need to understand the record, the event, and the person.

This session will explore both internal and external types of historical context. The case studies used to illustrate each type range widely across the corners of America and treat families of various ethnicities—European settlers, free people of color, and the enslaved.

Developing Context

Context is not ...

- "Setting the stage" with scenery.
- Using canned timelines to add historical events into the lives of our "characters."
- Spicing up narrative after the genealogy is compiled.

Context is ...

- An essential component of the first requirement of the Genealogical Proof Standard: reasonably exhaustive research.
- The foundation on which we build each and every case for identity and kinship.
- The lens through which we need to view and interpret all information we find.
- The application of the norms of recordkeeping to each document we find.
- The application of laws and customs for each place and time.

Context is what holds together the random threads of information we find for each person and the strands of evidence we use for each conclusion.

Types of Context

Internal context is drawn from records themselves—i.e.,

- from the physical characteristics of the individual record and the set of records to which it belongs.
- from the silent clues and patterns we glean by thoughtfully analyzing the information and the circumstances of the record and the record set.

External context is drawn from our study of relevant

- activities
- culture and customs
- economics
- education & literacy
- geopolitics
- historical events
- language
- laws
- maps
- migrations
- occupations
- religious activities and perspectives
- Social and political situations

Did you notice that the Wordle in our title graphic does not include "Name"?

Key Principles to Be Developed with Case Studies

- Actions may not mean what they seem to mean.
- Individual words may not mean what they do today.
- Documents may not mean what their information seems to suggest.
- Documents, when put into context, have a lot more to say than the simple words we copy from them.
- Each document we happen to find is part of a *process*; we need *every* record in that process.
- The things that laws required and the things that communities did were often not the same.

Further Reading

(Supporting Material for the Case Studies)

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Addisons of Elbert, Franklin & Gwinnett Counties, GA (c1780–1835): Preliminary Survey." Report. 10 March 2018. Archived at Mills. *Historic Pathways*. <https://historicpathways.com> under "Research" tab.

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_____. "William Mills (c1695–1766) of Goochland, Albemarle & Amherst Counties, Virginia; Spouse: Mary [—?—]: Research Notes." A work-in-progress updated 1 Sept. 2021. *HistoricPathways* under "Research" tab.

_____ and Gary B. Mills. *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*. Rev. ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. Particularly pp. 30–31 for discussion of P. Metoyer's will.