

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: RESOLVING CONFLICTING EVIDENCE



Judy G. Russell, JD, CGSM, CGLSM

The *Legal* Genealogist

<http://www.legalgenealogist.com>
legalgenealogist@gmail.com

OVERVIEW: One record says her maiden name was Rankin. Another says Pugh. A third says Gentry. One record says she was born in Texas; others say she was born in Mississippi. Clearly, the evidence is conflicting. *Now* what? The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) requires that we resolve conflicts among evidence items, since we can't reach a credible conclusion otherwise. Sounds good ... but it's easier said than done. What exactly are we supposed to do with conflicting evidence? What standards do we follow? In other words, how do we do what the GPS tells us to do?

THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

Conflicts in genealogical evidence are the norm, not the exception. Resolution of these conflicts is required in order to meet the Genealogical Proof Standard: "Resolution of conflicting evidence substantiates the conclusion's credibility. (If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible.)" [Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 50th anniversary edition (Nashville, Tenn., : Ancestry, 2014), 2.]

THE DEFINITION

By definition, conflicting evidence is evidence in which it is not possible for all of the items to all be correct. The example used by the Board for Certification of Genealogists is that "Molly could not have been born in both Georgia and New York." [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, at 65.] By contrast, evidence is compatible if the items "agree even if differing in detail (for example, *Molly* and *Mary* may be variants of the same name)." [Ibid.]

Three types of conflicts may be presented:

- ❖ **Direct evidence** conflicting with **direct evidence**.
- ❖ **Direct evidence** conflicting with **indirect evidence** or **negative evidence**.
- ❖ **Indirect or negative evidence** conflicting with **other indirect or negative evidence**.

THE CHALLENGE

Conflicting data cannot be ignored. It has to be presented honestly, fully, without understating its significance or distorting its details. Only when conflicts are resolved can a genealogical conclusion be considered proved.

Genealogy's best practices require that we "gather all reliable information potentially relevant to the research question, including evidence items conflicting ... with other evidence items" [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 17, at 14] and require us not to ignore "potentially useful evidence—including indirect and negative evidence or evidence that might conflict with or complicate a working hypothesis..." [Ibid., Standard 40, at 24-25.] We're obliged to "attempt to resolve conflicts or incompatibilities among two or more evidence items" [Ibid., Standard 48, at 28], to understand that "not all conflicts can be resolved" [Ibid., Standard 49] and, in writing up our conclusions, to explain how we resolved the conflict or why it couldn't be resolved. [Ibid., Standard 58, at 25.]

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

FORMAL METHODOLOGY

Conflict resolution is a two-step process that requires, first, the identification of all evidence items on each side of the conflict and, second, "articulating a defensible rationale for setting aside" the evidence on one side. [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Standard 48 at 28.]

Four methods of conflict resolution — "defensible rationales" — appear in Standard 48:

- ❖ **Lack of corroboration (also called nonsubstantiation):** "only one uncorroborated evidence item or only one combination of related evidence items supports one side"
- ❖ **Quality of evidence:** "significantly more error-prone sources and information items support one side"
- ❖ **Explanation:** "explaining why evidence for one side is substantially less credible than evidence for the other side"
- ❖ **Any combination of any of the foregoing three methods.**

LESS FORMAL METHODOLOGY: HAROLD HENDERSON'S SIX STEPS

Another, less formal way of looking at the methodology for dealing with conflicting evidence comes in a six-step system outlined by Harold Henderson:

- ❖ Step One: Notice It
- ❖ Step Two: Make Sure It Matters
- ❖ Step Three: Keep Looking
- ❖ Step Four: Analyze
- ❖ Step Five: Correlate
- ❖ Step Six: Write and Publish for Proof. [Harold Henderson, "How to Handle Conflicting Evidence: A Six-Step Program," *Archives.com Learn from Experts Series*, 8 October 2013.]



GUARD AGAINST UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS: PLAY DEVIL'S ADVOCATE WITH ALL CONCLUSIONS.

The biggest risk in genealogical research is our occasional unwillingness to set aside, or even to challenge, the theories and hypotheses nearest and dearest to our own hearts. We sometimes cling to family stories or to assumptions because we want them to be true, despite evidence—even compelling evidence—to the contrary. That ancestor-we-want who was on the Mayflower. The Cherokee princess. The one-of-three-brothers who went west taking the family Bible with him. In most of these cases, there will be evidence conflicting with our cherished theories. And in each of these cases, our task as genealogists is clear:

“[W]hen we feel we have a likely interpretation of the ‘facts’—when the evidence seems to point toward a logical conclusion—it is time to play Devil’s Advocate. We reevaluate our evidence, trying to disprove our interpretation as intensely as we have tried to prove it.”

[Elizabeth Shown Mills, “QuickLesson 16: Speculation, Hypothesis, Interpretation & Proof,” *Evidence Explained : Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*.]

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Web addresses verified as of 11 September 2016.

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