

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)

Finding Your Way through

Tough Research Problems

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Life is good when records with direct evidence exist, like a marriage license that gives the birth dates and places of both bride and groom and lists the full names of each set of parents. Typically that doesn't last long. At some point, one finds only bits and pieces of indirect or conflicting evidence and progress often comes to a screeching halt.

This class examines a case study prepared for application to the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) where direct evidence was non-existent in identifying the family of Jesse Roberts of Greenville County, South Carolina. Key strategies are presented to piece together strands and threads of evidence from disparate sources using the Genealogical Proof Standard.¹

Genealogical Proof Standard²

1. Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search for all pertinent information
2. Include complete and accurate citation of sources for each item of information we use
3. Analyze and correlate collected information for quality
4. Resolve conflicting evidence
5. Write a soundly reasoned, coherent conclusion.

Benefits of the Genealogical Proof Standard

1. Helps you determine what you know
2. Helps you decide what you need to learn
3. Helps you explain your work to others
4. Gives you confidence regarding the direction to take

¹ Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013).

² BCG website, <https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/>

5. Is the basis for approaching difficult research problems using indirect evidence

6. Helps you feel safe and secure about your conclusion

Case Study

Obituary of Jesse Roberts

“Died—In this District on the 24th ult. Mr. Jesse Roberts, in the 38th year of his age, leaving a wife and 7 children to mourn their irreparable loss. The deceased was a member of the Baptist Church for a long time, and a zealous follower of his Lord and Master—he was an industrious and good citizen—an affectionate husband and parent. His loss is severely felt by those in his immediate neighborhood, as well as by all who know him.”³

Roberts Head of Households in the 1800-1820 Greenville County, S.C. Census

Census	male age group	Isaac	James	Samuel	Sherod	William	Jesse
1800	Under 10	1	2	3	1	1	
	10 to 16			1			
	16 to 26	1			1	1	
	26 to 45		1	1			
	45+						
1810	Under 10	3	3	2	2		
	10 to 16		1		1		
	16 to 26		1	2			
	26 to 45	1	2		1		
	45+			1			
1820	Under 10		1	1	3		
	10 to 16	2	2	1			
	16 to 26	2		2	3		2
	26 to 45		1				
	45+	1	1	1	1		

Strategies and Tips for Difficult Problems

1. *Be unreasonable* when conducting a “reasonably exhaustive search.”
 - a. Become an expert on applicable records from your area of interest

³ Jesse Roberts obituary, *Greenville Mountaineer*, 1 October 1836, Volume 8, number 20, page 3, column 2, South Caroliniana Library microfilm G2, Columbia, South Carolina.

- b. Make a search plan of all applicable records
 - a. Use the volume indexes not just grantor-grantee indexes.
 - b. Read every Roberts deed not just the ones that look promising.
 - c. Read every Roberts probate not just the ones that look promising
 - d. Read every Roberts Civil War service record not just the ones that look promising.
 - c. Start with compiled records but always use the most original records possible
 - a. A book with abstracts of *Minutes of Ten Baptist Churches of Greenville County, S.C.* left out many important details from the actual records.
 - d. Evaluate the sources cited by others for possible research avenues
 - e. Make a list of family members, friends, and associates
 - f. Search for descendants as they may have a unique piece of evidence
 - a. One family Bible listed that John Nealy was married to his aunt, Mary Grogan Roberts.
2. Combine thorough citation with your research log
 - a. Cite your sources using a consistent, structured format
 - b. Evaluate whether you have balance in the types of sources
 - a. Make a bibliography by source type to evaluate balance
 - c. Evaluate the quality of your sources. Challenge your sources. Evaluate where else you might find supporting or conflicting information. If possible, never rely on only one source for an important relationship or key fact.
 3. Correlate and analyze as you do your research.
 - a. Put your conclusions in lists to better “see” them
 - b. Use tables to better analyze and correlate data
 - c. Use maps, especially land ownership maps to “see” where they lived
 - d. Plat the deeds to better understand the neighborhood
 - e. Learn historical background of major events
 - i. Nullification in S.C. was a highly charged divisive topic splitting church and families.
 - f. Conduct “cluster research” involving neighbors and contacts
 - g. Look for spelling variations: Roberds in addition to Roberts. Look for name variations: Sherod and Sherwood can be the same person.
Beware of similar names: Jesse Roberts in Georgia is not Jesse Roberts

in South Carolina. Beware of close proximity: John Roberts living within 5 miles was a wealthy city person and unrelated to Jesse Roberts.

4. Resolve conflicts
 - a. View it from the opposite perspective
 - b. Search for the existence of alternate possibilities
5. Writing is a process
 - a. New ideas and questions occur as you write
 - b. Writing requires you to think deeply
 - c. Expect to write several or many iterations
 - d. Share your written conclusions with others for “vetting”

Case studies from the National Genealogical Society Quarterly

- Victor S. Dunn, “The Bourn Identity: Meredith Bowen Alias Bourn of Frederick County, Virginia,” NGSQ 95 (Dec 2007), 265-270.
- Carmen J. Finley, “A Son Proved . . . an Ancestor Disproved: Thomas Caldwell of Lunenburg County, Virginia,” NGSQ 94 (June 2006), 101-112.
- Margaret J. Field, “From the Black Hills to the Berkshires: Lessons in Using Indirect Evidence to Find the Ancestors of Albert Field,” NGSQ 91 (June 2003), 85-94.
- Richard A. Hayden, “Resolving the Inexplicable: The Marriage Bond of Archibald Young and Lettice Morgan,” NGSQ 95 (Mar 2007), 5-16.
- Ronald A. Hill, “William Colwill of Bridgerule: A Man with No Roots,” NGSQ 92 (Sept 2004), 187-208.
- Birdie Monk Holsclaw, “From Hypothesis to Proof: Indirect Evidence for the Maiden Identity of Elizabeth, Wife of George Hagenberger,” NGSQ 92 (June 2004), 96-104.
- John T. Humphrey, “Minimum Resources, Maximum Yield: Reconstructing the Schuck Family in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania,” NGSQ 91 (Sept 2003), 165-182.
- T. Mark James, “Abraham Ott of Orangeburg, S.C.: Direct vs. Indirect Evidence” NGSQ 93 (June 2005), 85-93.
- Thomas W. Jones, “Uncovering Ancestors by Deduction: The Husbands and Parents of Eleanor (nee Medley) (Tureman) (Crow) Overton,” NGSQ 94 (Dec 2006), 287-304.
- Rachal Mills Lennon, “The Wives of Jonathan Turner: Identification of Women in Pre-Twentieth-Century South Carolina,” NGSQ 92 (Dec 2004), 245-255.
- William M. Litchman, “Using Cluster Methodology to Backtrack an Ancestor: The Case of John Bradberry,” NGSQ 95 (June 2007), 103-116.
- Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Roundabout Research: Pursuing Collateral Lines to Prove Parentage of a Direct Ancestor—Samuel Hanson of Frontier Georgia,” NGSQ 91 (Mar 2003), 19-30.
- Kathryn C. Torpey, “Assembling and Correlating Indirect Evidence to Identify the Father of Susan Kennedy of Philadelphia,” NGSQ 92 (Dec 2004), 256-268.