

# Reasonably Exhaustive Research

## The First Criteria for Genealogical Proof

*A presentation in* THE JOY REISINGER MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES  
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### Overview

In 2014, a new edition of the manual *Genealogy Standards* made a very small change on page 1, in the first criteria of the Genealogical Proof Standard. The phrase “**a reasonably exhaustive search**” was changed to “**reasonably exhaustive research.**”

Why does that matter? This session will explore the differences in two ways: theory and practice.

In Part 1, we will address three issues:

- How "a search" differs from "research"
- Why "reasonably exhaustive research" (RER) is a flexible concept
- How we can determine whether our own work meets the criteria

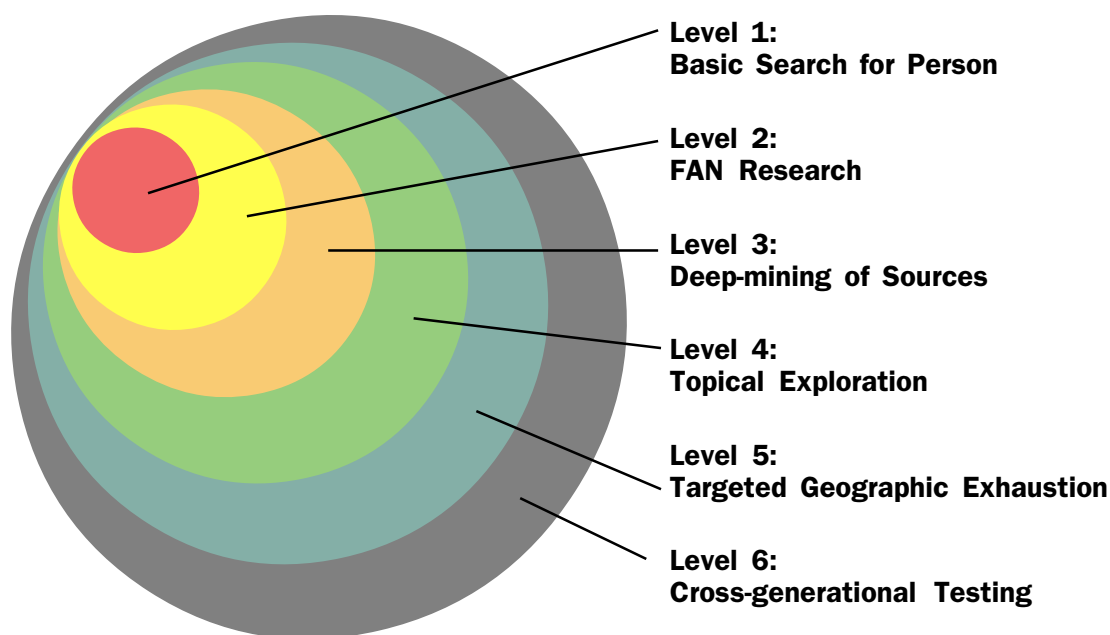
In Part 2, we will track a project from planning to completion, to demonstrate

- how RER affects data collection and analysis
- how the application of RER criteria will correctly identify a man whose origin, parentage, ancestry, and alleged Revolutionary War service have all been mangled by prior failures to apply the standard.

The project is a complex one, specifically chosen to allow exploration of all the layers graphed in our Research Strategies Bulls-eye on the next page.

# Our Research-Strategies Bull's Eye

(A progressively more-intense approach  
to resolving difficult problems of identity & kinship)



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## Explanation:

Most genealogical projects begin with an individual whose identity and birth family needs to be proved. If we are lucky, Level 1 research will yield multiple pieces of direct evidence by which we can correctly answer our identity and kinship questions.

Too often, credible *direct evidence* cannot be found via Level 1 work—not in any database or index, and not in any records created by that individuals. In such cases, RER requires us to apply strategies other than the basic search for a name. Levels 2–6 of our bull's eye guide us through progressively more intense work, using sources that carry no specific reference to the ancestral name and reconstructing communities of kith and kin by which we can draw *indirect evidence* to resolve identity issues.

The value of the bull's eye to correct identification and correct kinship decisions is demonstrated throughout this presentation as we use a wide variety of techniques to identify a man, his parents, and his grandparents in a notoriously barren time and place.

# Our Self-Evaluation Questions

“Reasonably Exhaustive Research” (RER) is a flexible concept. It can expand as needed, to resolve all types of research problems. in all locales. This session presents 6 levels of research that—if all are applied—will likely solve the most extreme issues of identity and kinship.

To measure whether our work meets the criteria for RER, we can test our work in two basic areas: Sources and Strategies. *At a minimum, the Sources tests should be met, as well as Strategy Level 1.*

## Sources

(Project Planning Stage)

Have I

- begun by studying research guides to the locale in which my problem-person resided, as an overview of the basic records?
- studied footnotes and bibliographies in local histories and case studies relating to the time and place, to identify sources those authors used?
- combed major online catalogs for more obscure sources—including
  - National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (<https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc>)?
  - National Archives ([www.archives.gov/research](http://www.archives.gov/research))?
  - WorldCat.org?
  - FamilySearch.org?
- Googled/Binged for the locale, its landmarks, and its institutions—not just the ancestor's name?

## Strategies

### Level 1: Basic Search for Ancestor

Have I

- searched for the problem ancestor in all sources I have identified?
- examined the *original* (or a reliable image copy) of every record used for the critical issues of identity and kinship?
- found multiple pieces of quality evidence that all agree on an answer to my research question? If so, has each piece of evidence been *independently* created—or do all trace back to a common source or one informant?
- extracted into my research notes *all* the information I found at this level, in order to build a mass of data that can be combed for patterns and clues?
- studied the laws of this person's place and time to properly interpret the documents I find—and understand why I will or will not find certain things?
- studied local histories for *context* to identify events, circumstances and societal attitudes that would have affected my ancestor's life and created relevant records?

### Level 2: Thorough Research on FAN

Have I

- thoroughly researched all identifiable members of my person's FAN (friends and family, associates, and neighbors)?
- extracted into my project files *all* the information I find? Or have I passed over the data that doesn't offer an obvious answer, on the premise that it does not seem relevant.
- thoroughly researched all same-name people and the FAN of each, to correctly sort identities?
- tracked descendants of the FAN for DNA comparisons?

### Level 3: Deep-mining of Sources

Have I

- *read* (or at least skimmed) *every page* of every identified record book—to ferret out all unindexed references buried within the sources?
- extracted *all* the information I find at this level, in order to build a mass of data that can be combed for patterns and clues?

### Level 4: Topical Exploration

Have I

- searched all relevant databases and indexes for *topics*—e.g., agencies, institutions, landmarks, political jurisdictions, etc.

### Level 5: Targeted Geographic Exhaustion

Have I

- completed Levels 1 through 4 in *all* geographic areas in which the problem ancestor lived?

### Level 6: Cross-Generational Testing

Have I

- assembled a *complete* family for at least one generation before and after the problem ancestor? Do the patterns and associations I have defined for the problem ancestor also fit the generations before and after?

## Further Study

### Background for Today's Case Study

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Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Testing the FAN Principle Against DNA: Zilphy (Watts) Price Cooksey Cooksey of Georgia and Mississippi." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 102 (June 2014): 129–52. This article introduces the man (John Watts) who is the subject of today's project.

———. "Frontier Research Strategies—Weaving a Web to Snare a Birth Family: John Watts (ca. 1749–ca. 1822)." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 104 (September 2016): 154–90. This article presents the case for John Watts's identity and birth family, using supplemental evidence not covered by today's session.

———. *Historic Pathways* ([www.HistoricPathways.com](http://www.HistoricPathways.com)). Under "Research" tab, see "Cooksey" and "Watts" for 15 reports detailing all the research that underpins today's case study and its 2014 predecessor.

### Self-Instruction

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Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. 2d ed. Nashville & New York: Ancestry Imprint, Turner Publishing, 2019.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "QuickLessons" and "QuickTips: The Blog." *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*. <https://www.EvidenceExplained.com>. Of particular relevance to this session are these 7 posts:

- QuickLesson 3: "Flawed Records"
- QuickLesson 6: "Mindmapping Records"
- QuickLesson 8: "What Constitutes Proof?"
- QuickLesson 11: "Identity Problems & the FAN Principle"
- QuickLesson 14: "Petitions: What Can We Do with a List of Names?"
- QuickLesson 16: "Speculation, Hypothesis, Interpretation & Proof"
- QuickLesson 20: "Research Reports for Research Success"

### Examples of Reasonably Exhaustive Research

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Downs, Pamela Strother. "Ancestors of Henry Tatum of Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana: Migration and Mistaken Identity." *NGS Quarterly* 101 (December 2013): 273–90. Strategies include platting all landholdings in a key neighborhood to identify associates whose records pointed to Tatum's origin in an earlier locale.

Hait, Michael. "The Parents of Thomas Burgan of Baltimore County, Maryland." *NGS Quarterly* 101 (March 2013): 35–48. Strategies include sorting the identities of same-name men in the same county, using land records to place each in distinct communities amid specific networks of people.

Garrett-Nelson, LaBrenda. "Resolving a Modern Genealogical Problem: What Was Rainey Nelson's Birth Name?" *NGS Quarterly* 104 (September 2016): 102–14. Strategies included the testing of family lore as well as studying laws, the white plantation owners who employed Nelson, customs of land transmission in his society, and socio-political histories.

Hatton, Stephen B. "Using Networks to Backtrack the Migration and Identify the Parents of Jacob Wynkoop of Morgan County, Ohio." *NGS Quarterly* 102 (June 2014): 111–27. Strategies include identifying and backtracking the FAN of a problem ancestor, letting them lead the way to the ancestor's unknown origin.

Jones, Thomas W. "Too Few Sources to Solve a Family Mystery? Some Greenfields in Central and Western New York." *NGS Quarterly* 103 (June 2015): 85–103. Strategies include using indirect evidence, drawn from associations, to identify probable collateral kin to use for DNA testing, from which hypotheses can be confirmed.

Lennon, Rachal Mills. "Identifying a Son for John Temple of Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama." *NGS Quarterly* 103 (June 2015): 139–50. Strategies include examining over 10,000 documents across the four states, and a sheet-by-sheet scrutiny of all probate packets created in one county across five decades.

———. "The Wives of Jonathan Turner: Identification of Women in Pre-Twentieth-Century South Carolina." *NGS Quarterly* 92 (December 2004): 245–55. Strategies include identifying and studying the birth family of a child's stepmother in order to identify the prior wife who bore the child.