

Four Generations Genealogy



GeoGenealogy as a Problem-Solving Tool: The Case of a 19th Century Female Teenage Immigrant

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For many North American family historians, the holy grail is a spot on a map – the place where the immigrant lived before crossing the ocean to a new land. Knowing an ancestor's home place is not just an end in itself; it is the key to tracking the family in home country records.

Generally, an orderly search for immigrant origins includes three steps:

- 1) Search for place-of-origin clues in North American records:
- 2) With a clue in hand, locate the place on a map and determine a clerical or civil jurisdiction that might have produced records about an ancestral family.
- 3) Match the North American immigrant or family with a person or family in home country records (civil records, censuses, church records, emigration records) and work back in time.

In the case of more recent immigrants arriving, say, in 1880 or later, clues to home country origins can be found in numerous kinds of records – censuses, death registrations, passenger records, citizenship records, passport applications, social security number applications, and more. Few North American records record the birthplace of earlier immigrants. This handout accompanies a presentation that illustrates how a geographically broad search for evidence produced enough location clues for a geographically focused search for the German origins of an 18-year-old woman who married in Ft. Madison, Iowa, in 1846. The keys to finding her birth family included:

- Paying close attention to neighbors and associates to find German place name clues.
- Using online gazetteers and maps to geographically target a search in German records.
- Identifying and accessing surviving German church records.

Defining Dena

A gravestone states that Dena, the wife of Christian Gerloff, died 18 March 1900; she was 72 years, 10 months, 11 days old, indicating a birth date about 7 May 1827. Ringgold County records do not record the death. The only evidence for her surname and birthplace is from censuses and her sons' death registrations. Evidence for birthplace is not more specific than Brunswick and evidence for her surname is conflicting.

<i>Census</i>	<i>County (Iowa)</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Est. Birthdate</i>
1895	Ringgold	Deanne Gerloff	66	Germany	June 1828 – June 1829
1885	Ringgold	Diane Girloff	57	Germany	June 1827 – June 1828
1880	Lee	Deana Gerloff	51	Brunswick	June 1828 – June 1829
1870	Lee	Dina Gerloff	42	Brunswick	June 1827 – June 1828
1860	Lee	Diana Garloff	32	Brunswick	June 1827 – June 1828
1856	Lee	Dena Gerloff	29	Germany	June 1826 – June 1827
1850	Lee	Dinah Gatliff	25	Germany	June 1825 – June 1826

Dena's Maiden Name			
<i>Death Certificate</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Mother's Name</i>	<i>Informant</i>
Henry Gerloff	1915	Dora Sanford	Charles Gerloff (brother)
Charles Gerloff	1918	Dena Sanfus	Edith Hanson (niece)

Christian Gerloff, 23, married Miss Diana Sandvoss, 20, on 11 December 1846 in Lee County. Sanford and Sanfus are actual surnames, but the marriage license is a more reliable source than the death registrations for Dena's maiden name. Sandvoss (or Sandvoß) is an uncommon name in Germany today. Note: Dena might have exaggerated her age a bit as a young woman.

In Search of Dena's Parents. Only one other Sandvoss lived in Fort Madison in 1850. Jacob Sandvoss (indexed "Lanferd"), 43, was a German-born carpenter. Age, proximity, and associations make him a plausible candidate for Dena's father.

- Jacob Sandvoss attended the same German Lutheran church as the Gerloff family.
- Jacob Sandvoss lived less than five blocks from the Gerloffs.

Case closed? No. *Association alone does not prove a family relationship*, even in the case of an uncommon surname. No Lee County record gives direct evidence of a relationship between Dena and Jacob; his 1868 will did not name Dena. In fact, Jacob did not land at New Orleans until January 1847 – a month after Dena's Iowa marriage. More research is necessary. Next steps include:

- finding any U.S. record of Dena prior to her December 1846 marriage, and
- finding other Sandvosses in local records, censuses, or passenger records.

Immigration. It takes a little luck to find immigration records before 1850. It helps to know something about common immigration routes for an ethnic group. In the 1840s, many Germans landed at New Orleans. Many went to Texas, but steamboat travel made St. Louis and other Mississippi River towns popular destinations. Indeed, a 17-year-old Conradine Sandvoss (indexed "Sandross") disembarked the *Alexander von Humboldt* at New Orleans in December 1845. She was the only Sandvoss on the ship. The timing (a year before her Iowa marriage) and her age make her a candidate for Dena. Several other passengers on the *Humboldt* also went to Fort Madison, making it likely Conradine was, in fact, Dena.

Other Sandvosses. Although the name was spelled (and indexed) various ways, other Sandvosses landed at New Orleans between 1845 and 1855. Some settled along 525 miles of the Mississippi River.

- Julius and Andrew Sandvoss landed at New Orleans in November 1846. Julius was in Dubuque, Iowa, by 1850. Andrew Sandvoss of St. Louis bought a town lot in Fort Madison in 1862.
- The Hy Sander family immigrated in 1851 and settled in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, 125 miles south of St. Louis. A family history states that his wife was Joh. Christine Sandvoss. (Other Sandvoss families settled around Cape Girardeau about the same time).

Records identify six German place names associated with these Sandvosses.

- Jacob Sandvoss married Conradina Achilles in Ft. Madison in 1849. Her 1892 obituary stated she was born in "**Lebenstedt, Braunschweig.**"
- A register of emigrants from Braunschweig from 1846 (a year after Dena's departure) to 1871 stated that Jacob Sandvoss emigrated from **Lichtenberg** in 1846. He was married in **Berel**.
- Julius and Andrew Sandvoss of Dubuque and St. Louis emigrated from **Liedingen**.
- A family history stated that Hy Sander of Cape Girardeau had married Joh. Christine Sandvoss in **Schlewecke**; she was born at **Hackenstedt**.

The origins of Jacob, Julius, Andrew and Hy Sandvoss are recorded in Brunswick emigration records that began in April 1847 (Fritz Gruhne, *Aswandererlisten des Ehemaligen Herzogtums Braunschweig*, available in Family History Library) – Dena left before emigrants were required to register. (Note: Bremen emigration lists from 1832 to 1907 were burned and others were lost in World War II).

Working the Geography

These location clues, garnered from an expansive geographic search along the Mississippi, made possible a geographically focused search for Dena's birth family in Germany.

Google Maps and other online tools make it easier than ever to find obscure places, but they are based on a free, public online gazetteer: the **Geonet Name Server** (<https://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/>).

The GNS returns precise latitude and longitude for towns and other geographic features. For best results, select "text-based search" under "GNS Search" on the left side of the page. For a simple search, just select a country (optional) and enter a placename. The GNS will find multiple places in a country with the same name. Names can be searched as "starts with," "exact match," "contains," or "ends with," and non-English names can be searched with or without diacritical marks. A search for "Berel" finds:

Berel (Approved - N)	Germany (GM)	Lower Saxony [conventional] / Niedersachsen [German] (GM06)	52° 09' 55" N, 010° 13' 02" E (52.165141, 10.217265)
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The GNS also accommodates searches for multiple places at the same time, making it easy to see how close together they are. The GNS returns these results for the six Sandvoss placenames.

Liedingen	52° 14' 39" N	10° 20' 13" E
Berel	52° 09' 55" N	10° 13' 02" E
Lebenstedt	52° 09' 34" N	10° 19' 44" E
Lichtenberg	52° 07' 27" N	10° 17' 27" E
Hackenstedt	52° 04' 31" N	10° 06' 19" E
Schlewecke	52° 02' 27" N	10° 08' 13" E

One minute of latitude is 1.15 miles. At 52° north latitude, a minute of longitude is six-tenths of a mile. Liedingen is only 16 miles northeast of Schlewecke. Hackenstedt and Schlewecke are displaced a few miles to the southwest, but the other four towns are only a few miles apart. GeoGenealogy has identified a manageable target area for a search of German parish records.

The Geonet Names Server gives direct links to Google Maps and MapQuest. Because these mapping programs show different levels of detail as you zoom in and out, it may be hard to find all the locations you are looking for on a single screen view. You may want to use a large-scale topographic map – possibly a historical map.

- 1:25,000-scale German topographic maps (<https://lib.byu.edu/collections/german-maps/>)
- Ancestry, *Germany, Topographic Maps, 1860-1965* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1294/>)
- Paper maps can be ordered from *Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie* (Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy) (<https://www.bkg.bund.de/>). Alternatively, visit a university map library.

Finding the Records

With a location in-hand, it is possible to identify the jurisdictions (parishes or political subdivisions) that may have kept records about the family you are researching. In this case, options include:

- 1) **FamilySearch** (www.familysearch.org). For these German locations, FamilySearch has only civil registration records from 1808 to 1813. They might include Jacob's birth, but not Dena's.
- 2) **Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirch in Braunschweig** (<https://www.landeskirche-braunschweig.de/index.php?id=926>). Records for some parishes may be in church archives.
- 3) **Archion** (<https://www.archion.de/en/>). This fee-based database offers digital images of records for many, but not all parishes. You can search for availability free.
- 4) **State Archives**. Some parish records are in state archives. To find a qualified local researcher who can access the records, search the APG member directory or make inquiry to a local or regional genealogical society. In this case, the *Niedersächsischen Landesverein für Familienkunde* (Lower Saxony State Association for Family Studies) recommended a researcher who lived near the state archives.

Case Solved

Church records in the holdings of the Lower Saxony State Archives in Wolfenbüttel provided direct evidence for Dena's birth family. Lessons: 1) Do the geography. 2) Locate and access the records.

- Conradina Dorothee Henriette Sandvoss was born 4 May 1828 (the gravestone implied 7 May 1827) and baptized 9 May in Liedingen to Johan August Julius Sandvoss and Catharine Sophie Schulze. Julius of Dubuque and Andrew of St. Louis were her brothers.
- Jacob Sandvoss was not Dena's father. His marriage to Johanne Lucie Sophie Feustal in Berel in 1834 was his first. He likely was related to Dena, but it is not known how.

Other Resources

James M. Beidler, *The Family Tree Historical Atlas of Germany* (Cincinnati: Family Tree Books).

Judy Kellar Fox, "Ten-Minute Methodology: What is 'Reasonably Exhaustive' Research?" Board for Certification of Genealogists, 3 September 2015; <https://bcgcertification.org/ten-minute-methodology-what-is-reasonably-exhaustive-research/>.

Kevan M. Hansen, *Map Guide to German Parish Registers* (Bountiful, Utah: Family Roots Publishing Co., 2009); a series of regional guides (www.familyrootspublishing.com).

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Reasonably Exhaustive Research: The First Criteria for Genealogical Proof," The Joy Reisinger Memorial Lecture Series, Board for Certification of Genealogists, 6 September 2019; accessible at <https://familytreewebinars.com>.

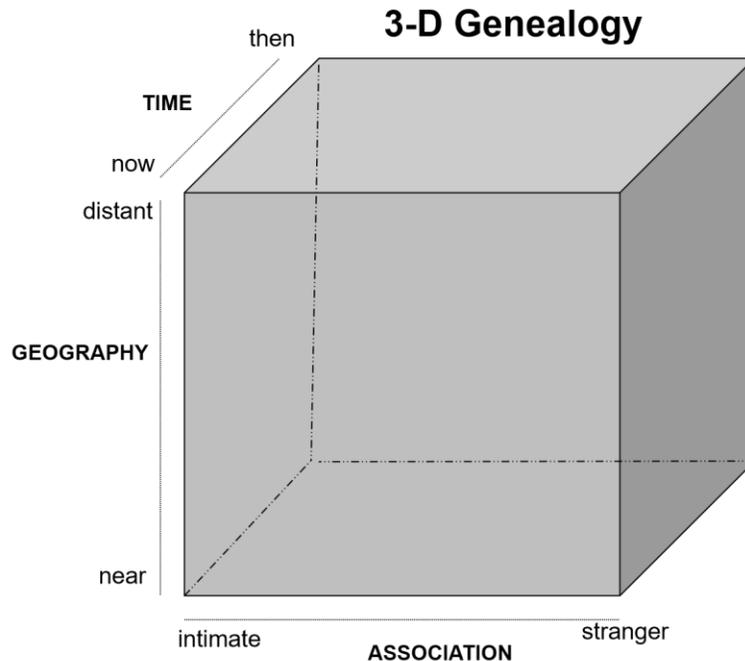
Elizabeth Shown Mills, "QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle, *Evidence Explained*, <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle>; from Mills, *Quick Sheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research* (the FAN Principle) (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2010)

ADDENDUM
Musings about 3-D Research Space

Two methodological concepts encourage researchers to place a research subject in a broader social context.

- **The FAN principle**, popularized by Elizabeth Shown Mills, reminds researchers to look to the people around a research subject – family, associates, and neighbors – for important genealogical evidence.
- **Cluster research** investigates a group of people or families that are associated in some way beyond family relationships. The group could be passengers on a ship, members of a church, or a class of students – any “cluster” that associations tie together.

3-D research is another way to think about the research space around a research subject’s life space. It is a reminder to search in all corners of an ancestor’s life – across associations, time, and geography.



FAN Club research, cluster research, and 3-D research all increase the likelihood that research will be reasonably exhaustive as called for by the Genealogical Proof Standard. Reasonably exhaustive research is more than an exhaustive search for a source; it is an expansive body of research, including multiple strategies for evidence discovery, correlation of direct and indirect evidence, and well-reasoned conclusions. Mills describes research as spiraling process that starts with a question and spirals inward through analysis of known data, research, evaluation and correlation of evidence, through repeated cycles of research and analysis until a satisfactory proof can be assembled.¹

¹ Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Quick Sheet: The Historical Biographer’s Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012. Also see Mills, “Reasonably Exhaustive Research,” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*, 4 March 2016, <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/quicktips/reasonably-exhaustive-research-0>.