Finding immigrants who "disappeared"

A research approach based on recognizing and challenging assumptions

Martha J Garrett, PhD, CG®

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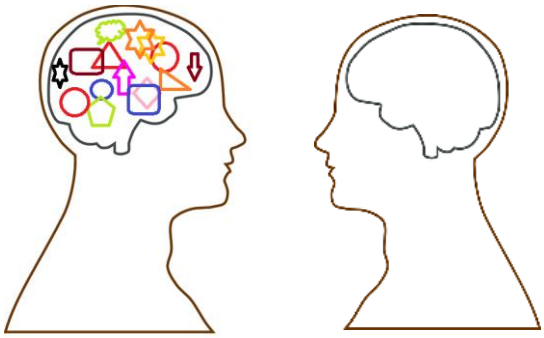
Examples in this presentation are drawn primarily from my series of articles about "disappearing" Swedes being published in the *Swedish American Genealogist* (Geoffrey Morris, Editor, sageditor@gmail.com). The first three appeared in *SAG* 2018:3, 2018:4, and 2019:1; others will be published later in 2019.

Introduction

We all bring to genealogy our own perspectives, which have been influenced in part by our other professional experiences. In my case, that experience included teaching researchers all over the world and in many different disciplines about how to find different kinds of online materials. I soon realized that their attempts were hindered by their own *assumptions.*

My first commissioned genealogical work was a classic brick wall, a case involving a missing Swedish-American immigrant. Many researchers had tried to find him but failed. I recognized the underlying cause from my previous professional experience. The researchers were making assumptions. When I looked for the missing immigrant, I found him easily. Although good tools and techniques helped, an empty head—free of assumptions—was of primary importance.



Of course, we genealogists do consider and challenge assumptions, but perhaps not always in a conscious or regular way. So when we get stuck, thinking more about this issue may be the solution.

Application of this approach to research about missing immigrants

In this presentation, my focus is on Swedes who left for America during the great migration wave.
1.4 million left between 1840 and 1920; naturally, some of them cannot be traced.
Some really disappeared, and records are lacking for others.
But some are invisible because of our assumptions.

Assumptions made about migrants are numerous and diverse.
They are easier to grasp if grouped. One possible way is in these three categories:

The migrants' lives
The information recorded about them
Location and retrieval systems for the information

Migrants' lives, examples of common assumptions

They did in fact leave.
They followed the "usual" route—Göteborg (Gothenburg), Hull, Liverpool, New York.
They settled in the "usual" way—near relatives, in "usual" places, and permanently.
Their lives followed the "usual" pattern—they did expected work, married at the "usual" age, married another Swede, attended Swedish-American church, died at the "usual" age, and were buried where they died.

Information recorded about migrants, examples of common assumptions

Every appropriate record was made and preserved.
Each piece of information was recorded in one resource.
Provided information was true.
Information was entered in records correctly.

Location and retrieval of the information, examples of common assumptions

All the informaton is accessible in online searchable databases via the major services.
The search systems do the thinking for us, so. . .
If there's no hit, there's no record.
If we find an exact match, it's the person we've been seeking.

All these assumptions are sometimes true, sometimes false.
We need to be ***aware*** of them and ***challenge*** them by considering possible exceptions.

Examples of exceptions to common assumptions (names refer primarily to persons in the *SAG* series.)

Migrants' lives, exceptions to common assumptions

Not all supposed emigrants actually left.
(Johan Ferdinand Waeström died of cholera in Stockholm.)
Not all immigrants followed the usual route.
(Ernst Fridolf Sigfridsson arrived via Canada.)
Not all immigrants settled in "usual" ways.
(Alma Sigfridsson settled in Oregon, far from any relative.)
(Nellie Sigfridsson re-emigrated to Canada.)
Not all immigrants had "usual" lives
(Selma Sigfridsson's husband, a farm boy, built up a construction company.)
(Dorothea Sigfridsson married an American when she was in her sixties.)
(Dorothea also lived until she was ninety years old.)
(Carl Anders Carlsson died in NYC, but his remains were shipped back to Sweden for burial in his home parish.)

Information recorded about the migrants, exceptions to common assumptions

Not every appropriate record was made or preserved.

(For example, moving-out records can be missing due to church fires.)

Information could be recorded in more than one resource.

(Moving-out records of emigrants were copied and sent to the central statistical bureau.)

Provided information was not always true—but that doesn't mean it was false.

For Swedes, new names were not falsehoods, since changing names was acceptable in Sweden.

(The man named Frederick Sigfried had been Ernst Fridolf Sigfridsson and Fred Sigfrid.)

Occupation or civil status was sometimes adjusted for reasons of expediency.

(Fred Sigfrid claimed to be a carpenter when crossing into the U.S. to work in construction.)

False information could be due to misunderstanding.

(Carl Ragnar Persson gave his mother's address without parish, county, or country.)

There were Swedish immigrants who lied, in some cases spectacularly.

(Albert!)

Information was not always recorded correctly

(Alma Sigfridsson's death certificate was full of errors.)

Location and retrieval of the information, exceptions to common assumptions

Not all information is accessible via online searchable databases at the major services.

(Carl Anders Carlsson's burial information was at a small Swedish website about graves.)

(Carl Ragnar Persson's obituary was obtained via a local genealogical society in Alberta.)

The search systems do not always do the thinking for us.

If there's no hit, there still may be a record.

(Selma Sigfridsson could not be found on a U.S. passenger list, because her name had been transcribed as Sigpidsson.)

Even if a search yields a match, we haven't necessarily found the person we're seeking.

(Nellie Sophie Giese was not Nellie Sophie Sigfridsson, even though their descriptions matched.)

How can recognizing and challenging assumptions be incorporated into genealogical research?

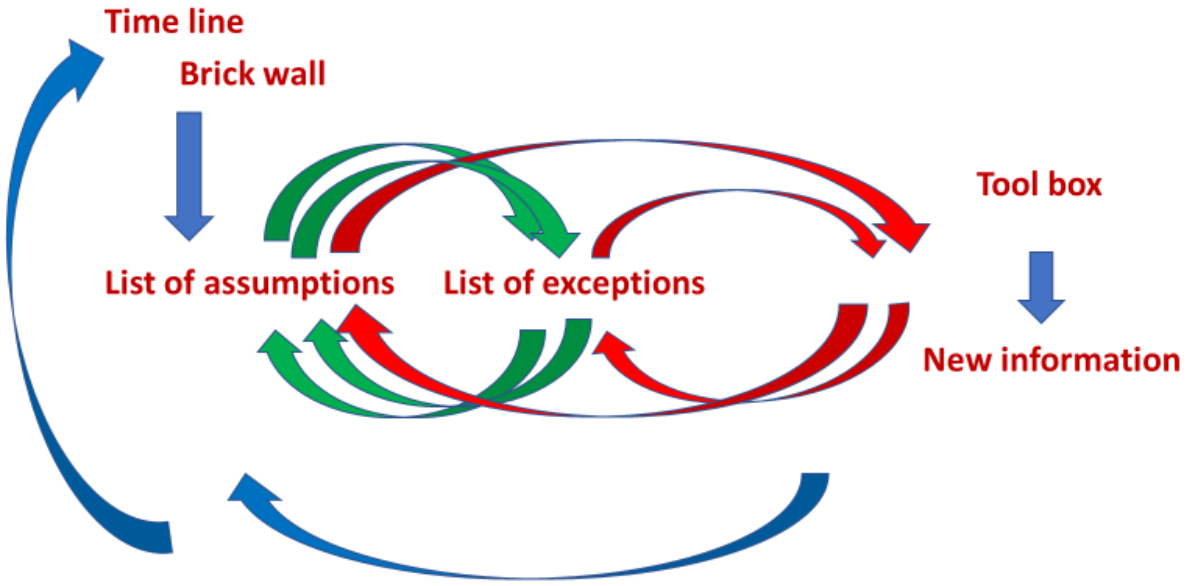
Being aware of assumptions isn't a tool. It's an approach, an attitude, a frame of mind. Here are two possible ways of incorporating it into research—about missing immigrants, for example.

#1. Formalize it

If you prefer structure, you can formalize the approach. If you haven't already done so, create a time line for the person you are trying to trace. List each life event, available information about that event, the sources from which the information has been taken, and the references for the sources. Identify the first brick wall, the first point at which the person seems to have disappeared.

Consciously recognize your assumptions—about what events followed, what information was recorded, and where and how that information can be accessed—and make a list of those assumptions. Then challenge each assumption and create a list of possible exceptions. Also do an inventory of your tool kit for the case, listing the methods that you think will be relevant to the research.

Now work your way through the assumptions and exceptions, investigating each alternative using appropriate items from the tool box. Go back and forth between the lists and the tool box. In the process, you will almost certainly find information that results in your adding new assumptions, new exceptions, and new tools. When you find information that breaks down the wall, return to the time line and add the new information. Identify the next brick wall, if there is one, and begin again.



#2. Make it a habit

If you don't want or need much structure, try checking for assumptions at each step of the research process. Just make it a habit. Imagine each step in the process as an arrow, with a "thought cloud" hovering above it. That thought cloud represents you, asking yourself, "Am I making an assumption? Is that assumption true in this case? Could it be that this particular case involves an exception?"

I urge you to give it a try, either one of these two ways or some other way that you invent yourself.

In my experience, when researchers in any field become more aware of their assumptions and challenge them, they are much more likely to find what they seek.

Martha J Garrett, PhD, CG®
Swedish Homecoming
Uppsala, Sweden
www.SwedishHomecoming.com