

No, no, Nanette!

What negative evidence is ... and isn't

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Introduction: “Too often, history researchers focus on the search for *sources*, hoping to find explicit answers to their questions. They may indeed find explicit answers, but those answers may be wrong. They may also find a plethora of sources that make no direct assertions and yet prove invaluable for a reconstruction of historical events or past lives. Achieving reliable “proof” of any point requires us to understand *evidence*, its varied classes, the distinctions between them, and how each can be used to build an argument in support of a reliable conclusion.” [Elizabeth Shown Mills, “[QuickLesson 13: Classes of Evidence? Direct, Indirect & Negative](#),” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/> : accessed 1 December 2016).]

“Indirect and negative evidence items ... are buried. They must be detected, and this detection requires higher-order thinking skills, like deductive and inductive reasoning. Genealogists who are not attuned to indirect and negative evidence will miss it, even where it is ubiquitous. The direct/indirect/negative-evidence distinction reminds us to attend to details and possibilities we might otherwise miss.” [Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, Va. : NGS, 2013), 15.]

Some Basic Concepts

A System for Thinking about Genealogical Research

In *Evidence Explained*, Elizabeth Shown Mills sheds light on the process by which genealogists use data to reach conclusions: “*Sources* give us *information* from which we select *evidence* for analysis. A sound conclusion may be considered *proof*.” [Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 3d ed.

(Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015), 24.] To apply this process, we have to understand exactly what's meant by the terminology used.

Defining Terms

In *Genealogy Standards*, the Board for Certification of Genealogists includes a glossary of terms—modified from Thomas W. Jones' *Mastering Genealogical Proof*—with which all genealogists should be familiar. [Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 50th ann. ed. (Nashville, Tenn. : Ancestry, 2014), Appendix D, 63-79.]

- A **source** is a “container of information” and the concept “includes all kinds of publications and unpublished artifacts, records, recordings, and written materials...” [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, 78.]
- **Information** consists of “[s]tatements arising from experience, fabrication, hearsay, intuition, observation, reading, research, or some other means; or a source’s surface content, including its physical characteristics; what we see or hear when we examine a source, not what we interpret...” [Ibid., 70.]
- **Evidence** is “a research question’s tentative answer, which may be right or wrong, complete or incomplete, or vague or specific...” [Ibid., 67.]
- **Proof** is a “documented statement, summary, or argument that explains or shows why a conclusion is proved...” [Ibid., 72.]

A Closer Look at Genealogical Evidence

In *Genealogy Standards*, BCG defines evidence as “[a] research question’s tentative answer, which may be right or wrong, complete or incomplete, or vague or specific...” [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Glossary, 67.] Evidence is divided into three different types:

Direct evidence: what the information says

“An information item that seems to address a research question and answer it by itself; the opposite of *indirect evidence* and one of three categories of genealogical *evidence*.” [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Glossary, 66.]

Indirect evidence: what can be inferred from the information

“Information items that seem to address and answer a research question only when combined; the opposite of direct evidence and one of three categories of genealogical *evidence*.” [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Glossary, 70.]

Negative evidence: what the information doesn't say

“A type of evidence arising from an absence of a situation or information in extant records where that information might be expected; one of three categories of genealogical *evidence*...” [BCG, *Genealogy Standards*, Glossary, 71.]

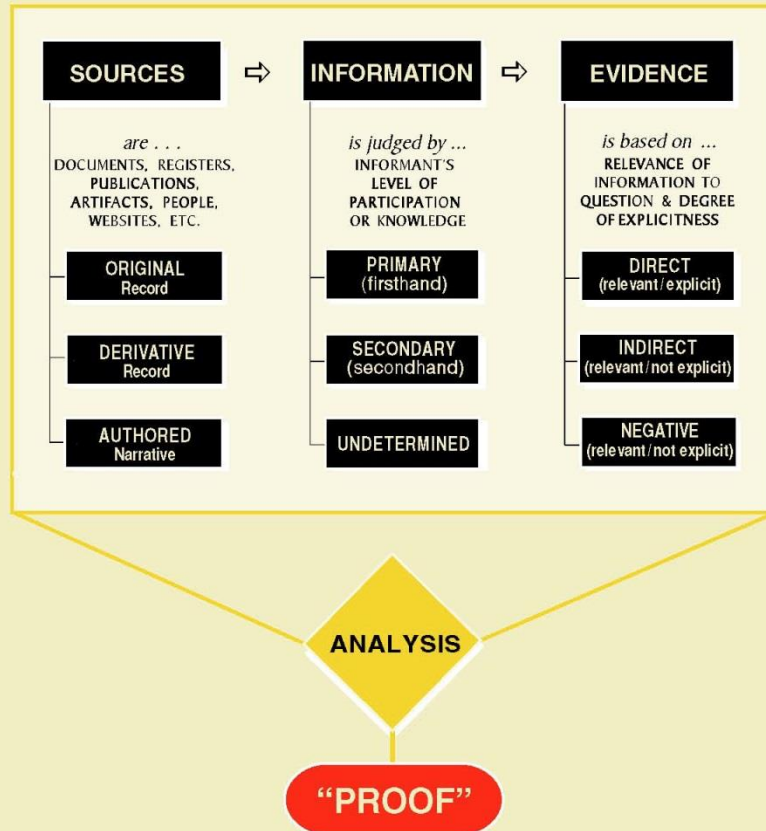
Analyzing Genealogical Evidence

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Evidence Analysis A Research Process Map[®]

Basic Principle:

SOURCES provide INFORMATION
from which we identify EVIDENCE for ANALYSIS.
A sound conclusion may then be considered "PROOF."



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Reproduced from *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2013)

Focusing on Negative Evidence

The Dog That Didn't Bark: “[T]he Inspector’s ... attention had been keenly aroused. ... “Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes. [A. Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze,” *The Strand Magazine* (July-December 1892) IV: 645, 656-657.]

Negative evidence is often defined in terms of Sherlock Holmes’ dog-that-didn’t-bark. “It’s the absence of what *should* happen under a given set of circumstances. A watch dog is expected to bark. If it doesn’t, then its very silence attests the likelihood of certain things.” [Mills, “[QuickLesson 13: Classes of Evidence? Direct, Indirect & Negative](#),” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*.]

Negative evidence, then, is evidence that isn’t there, but that we would expect to find if a particular fact were true. Some examples:

- In a baptismal register where most children were identified as “filium legitimum” (legitimate child), a baptismal entry without that language. It’s language that should be there if the child had been born legitimately, that we’d expect to find. Since it’s not there, that dog didn’t bark – it would be *negative evidence* of the child’s legitimacy.
- In the detailed daily diary entries of a woman for the years 1877-1880, no references to pregnancy or childbirth. That’s something we’d expect the woman to record if she had been pregnant and given birth during the time period covered by the diary. If it’s not there, that’s the dog that didn’t bark for any person born in that time frame – it would be *negative evidence* of that woman as the mother.
- The absence of a child born in 1845 from a family’s enumeration in the 1850 U.S. census is *negative evidence* that that child was a member of that family, especially if other children around the same age are recorded. Because a child that young should have been living at home and been recorded that year, it’s the dog that didn’t bark on the question of the child’s place in that family.

It isn’t negative evidence just because we don’t find a name or a record that we looked for and hoped to find. It’s not *merely* the fact that the result we’re looking for isn’t there; by definition, that’s just a *negative search*. Looking for and not finding a name in an index, in a census enumeration, on a tax list or anywhere else doesn’t become negative evidence until and unless it’s put into context. We have to understand the records of the time and place and, often, spend time studying the background relevant to the topic well enough to be able to articulate the reasons why we would expect the evidence to have been there and justify the conclusions we draw from its absence.

Resource List

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 - “QuickLesson 8: What Constitutes Proof?” <http://goo.gl/ZAO9oR>
 - “QuickLesson 10: Original Records, Image Copies, and Derivatives.” <http://goo.gl/IgnGJP>
 - “QuickLesson 13: Classes of Evidence—Direct, Indirect & Negative.” <http://goo.gl/783EaG>
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