Proving Parentage Two Centuries Later Using DNA Evidence

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Proving immigrant origins may seem daunting, especially when the family lived hundreds of years ago. The accompanying presentation shows how to navigate multiple border crossings, name changes, and cultural challenges and apply DNA techniques to trace immigrant families from town to town. The right combination of documentary evidence and biological evidence, coupled with sound methodology, reveals the origins of this family.

Common Challenges Faced When Researching Immigrants

- *Frontier Research*
  - **Lack of vital records**. The lack of a national church and a national system of civil registration introduces challenges in U.S. family history research. State governments took decades to enforce registration of births, marriages, and deaths.
  - **Lack of church records**. Protestant and Catholic churches typically appeared years after pioneers of each faith settled an area, with additional years passing before parish registers were consistently kept and preserved. This paucity of early records complicates genealogical research in frontier communities.
  - **Minimal family details in the earliest surviving records**. New local governments struggled to create and maintain the types of records that the governments of New England had been keeping for decades or centuries previously. The first few decades of a new settlement generally kept scantier records than their more well-established counterparts to the east.

- *Tracing a Female Ancestor Who Died Young*
  - **Only a handful of records**. The shorter a person's lifespan, the fewer records exist documenting the individual. A young woman rarely bought or sold property, paid taxes, or did anything that would leave a financial record, as she would be under the care of her father or husband for those matters.
  - **Maiden name**. Tracing a married woman of unknown parentage is particularly difficult in the United States when the maiden name of the woman is unknown. When she dies young and her husband remarries, she may be essentially forgotten in written records.

- *Researching Migrant Families*
  - **Unknown origins**. Unknown origins hide the birth and marriage records of immigrants, restricting research solely to documents created after immigration.

- **Poor families left few records**. Poor tenant farmers had little money for property, taxes, tombstones, or probate. Consequently, they may have left a meager paper trail, without deeds, mortgages, wills, administrations, obituaries, or tax records.
- **Problems spelling names**. Immigrant ancestors had foreign names that were often spelled poorly, anglicized, or otherwise altered, thus obscuring their presence in historical records.

- *Records Difficult to Access*
  - **Local access only**. A reasonable exhaustive search often includes records only available locally. Accessing local records may require onsite visits or the services of local researchers. Either approach may involve significant expense.
  - **Hidden records**. Some of the best evidence lurks in attics, barns, and the memory of locals. Finding the records and people takes correspondence, time, patience, and a degree of serendipity. Even when the records exist in an archive they might be un-cataloged, in offsite storage, or simply unavailable to researchers.
  - **Inadequate indexes**. Newspapers, diaries, estate papers, private ledgers, and many other records lack basic indexes. Even major record types such as deeds, wills, births, marriages, and deaths may have only principle-name indexes.

- *Short-Sighted Research Approaches*
  - **Superficial name searching**. Quick searches of indexes and focusing on the best matches encourages hasty conclusions without adequate analysis and correlation of evidence.
  - **Focusing on one ancestor**. Exclusive focus on the end-of-line ancestor usually fails to extend the line. Also, focusing on ancestral research may fail if inadequate descendant research is ignored. A broader research plan substantially increases the likelihood of success.
  - **Endlessly seeking the perfect record.** No single document holds the undisputed answer. Credible research requires multiple records to produce reliable conclusions.
  - **Expecting direct evidence**. Many challenging research problems cannot be solved with direct evidence alone. Better to plan for an indirect-evidence proof rather than stay entrenched in a direct-evidence mindset.

Sound Research Principles and Practices

- *Begin with a Question and Build a Research Plan*
  - **Parentage**. Most immigration research focuses on identifying the immigrant's parents or place of origin. State the research objective in the form of a question.
  - **Ask more questions**. Tracing an immigrant ancestor often requires answering a series of questions involving a wide variety of sources. The following principles suggest common elements of a thorough research plan.

> "**#10: Effective research questions**. Questions underlying research plans concern aspects of identity, relationship, events, and situations…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 11)

- *Expand the Breadth and Depth of Your Research*
  - **Family research**. The search for an individual is the search for a family. Work the collateral lines, researching siblings and their descendants rather than focusing on one ancestor exclusively.

- **Descendant research**. To trace ancestors, first trace descendants. Far too many family historians attempt to identify the parents of a poorly researched end-of-line ancestor. The key often lies with descendant research. Study the immediate family and trace a generation or two of descendants. The wealth of information learned from this preliminary research will likely fill in many biographical details previously unknown about the end-of-line ancestor, providing a solid foundation for ancestral research.
- **Neighbor research**. If scoping the research to include the immediate and extended family fails to solve the problem, expand the research scope to include the neighbors. Research the closest friends, associates, and neighbors as if they were your own ancestors. People married neighbors—seek for clues next door.
- **Neighboring localities**. Expand the research scope to include neighboring towns, counties, and states where the subjects may have lived, worked, or traveled.
- **Work the records deeply**. Work the original records and available finding aids thoroughly. Transcribe and translate records fully, reading and rereading the records for clarity. Study the laws or canons governing the creation of records, enhancing your understanding of why the records were kept and how they should be interpreted. Use indexes where available, but go beyond the indexes and search the records directly.
- **Creativity with names**. Learn how the subjects' given names and family names were recorded in original records and transcribed in original and modern indexes. Learn local naming practices and anticipate spelling variations so that you can readily find the names online and in original records.

> "**#14. Topical breadth**. Genealogists plan to consult sources naming or affecting their research subjects and their relatives, neighbors, and associates…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 13)

> "**#12: Broad context**. When planning research, genealogists consider historical boundaries and their changes, migration patterns and routes, and sources available for potentially relevant times and places…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 12)

> "**#24: Understanding meanings**. Genealogists correctly understand the meaning of all legible words, phrases, and statements in the sources they consult…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 17)

- *Develop a Firm Foundation*
  - **Document the historical setting**. Study the local history, local family histories, local customs, naming practices, laws governing record creation, and historical paleography. Work with genealogical and historical societies to understand the nuances and background necessary to properly approach your research problem.
  - **Document family relationships**. Document the immediate and extended family, including birth, marriage, death, and relationship details. A clear understanding of family relationships forms a solid foundation for most proof cases.
  - **Employ various research methodologies**. Focus on descendant research, expanding the geographic scope as needed. Consider the various name mutations likely to occur in each locality and record. Rely upon the strength of a family handprint as indirect evidence. Correlate evidence from multiple sources.

> "**#40: Evidence mining**. Genealogists…seek evidence items that answer research questions directly, indirectly, or negatively. Evidence mining requires attention to detail…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 24)

- *Dive into the Records*
  - **View the census with X-ray vision**. Look beyond the immediate family to the dozen families preceding and following the immediate subject. Close neighbors and associates formed the family's social circles. The children typically married within these small circles of acquaintances. Best to anticipate this early on.
  - **Get to know the neighbors**. As the need arises to expand the research scope beyond the immigrant's family, document vital events and relevant details of the closest neighbors and associates, searching for relationships between families.
  - **Visit the local cemetery**. Review tombstone inscriptions on site and online to build additional family groups for comparison with censuses.
  - **Scrutinize and correlate local sources**. Correlate details gleaned from censuses, cemeteries, church records, vital records, tax lists, and other local records.

> "**#47: Evidence correlation**. Genealogists test their evidence by comparing and contrasting evidence items…to discover parallels, patterns, and inconsistencies…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 27)

- *Apply DNA Techniques*
  - **Consider various types of DNA**. Autosomal DNA may help identify biological cousins within recent generations along several lines of ancestry. Y-DNA passes from father to son and thus may help identify common patrilineal ascent. Mitochondrial DNA passes from mother to children and this may help identify common matrilineal ascent.
  - **Compare genetic genealogy products**. Each testing company has its own product line and customer base. Currently, the most popular consumer DNA tests include AncestryDNA, 23andMe, MyHeritage DNA, and FamilyTreeDNA. Each offers their own brand of autosomal DNA test, with different features and potential cousin matches. Testing with multiple companies allows for the possibility of more cousin matches. Note that FamilyTreeDNA also offers Y-DNA and mitochondrial DNA tests.
  - **Seek out test takers**. As with documentary sources, the genealogist seeks out DNA evidence that may support or overturn a research hypothesis. Evidence from people already tested may be inadequate, necessitating DNA tests from additional descendants on collateral lines.
  - **Combining genetic and documentary evidence**. Genealogists establish genetic relationships through a combination of DNA test results and documentary evidence. Reasonably exhaustive research and correlation of evidence gleaned from genetic and documentary sources are required in establishing biological relationships.

> "**#51: Planning DNA tests**. An effective plan for DNA testing is selective and targeted. Genealogists select DNA tests…. They select previous test takers and target new test takers…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (pp. 29-30)

> "**#55: Integrating DNA and documentary evidence**. Genealogists integrate DNA test results with documentary research findings. They assess the merits and shortcomings of the combined evidence…."
>
> *Genealogy Standards* (p. 32)

Recommended Reading

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. Washington, D.C.: Ancestry.com, 2021.
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