



Their Mark Here: Signatures and Marks as Identifying Tools

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Learn how to identify and use original marks and signatures as tools to untangle the shadowy identities of our forebears.

Source Analysis:

Sources can be any container of information.¹ *Evidence Explained* defines sources as “artifacts, books, digital files, documents, film, people, photographs, recordings, websites, etc.” (p.23).²

Sources should be classified as original, derivative, or authored narrative. The classification of sources as original or derivative can sometimes be unclear due to the existence of records such as duplicate originals, record copies, and image copies. Close scrutiny of the source, as described in Standard 35, can help clarify the classification.

Standard 35:

“genealogists appraise each source’s likely accuracy, integrity, and completeness. This appraisal considers the source’s characteristics.”³

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second ed., rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 89.

² Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017), 23.

³ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 21.

Source:
 “artifacts, books, digital files, documents, film, people,
 photographs, recordings, websites, etc.”⁴

Is it a(n)...		
Original? The first version of the written record, photo, audio/video recording, etc.	Derivative? Sources created from and/or after the originals.	Authored Narrative? A mix as often seen in historical narratives.

Unclear on whether it's an original or derivative?		
Duplicate Original Versions created at the same time as an original, likely by the same person	Record Copy Clerk's copies of original records copied into official books for use in court	Image Copy Photos or copies of original records that do not alter the original image

⁴ Mills, *Evidence Explained*, 23; also see Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 89.

Incorporating evidence gleaned from sources:

When seeking to utilize marks and signatures as identifying tools, one document alone does not constitute proof of identity.

Standard 17.Extent

“Whether a genealogical question is simple or complex, the research plan aims for ‘reasonably exhaustive’ research, required for genealogical proof. Thorough research gathers sufficient data to test-and to support or reject-hypotheses concerning identities, relationships, events, and situations.”⁵

Standard 47. Evidence Correlation

“Genealogists test their evidence by comparing and contrasting evidence items. They use such correlation to discover parallels, patterns, and inconsistencies including points at which evidence items agree, conflict, or both.”⁶

Case studies incorporating evidence from signatures and/or marks:

Green, Shannon. “Two Probates and Three Richards: Who was Richard Bedell of Hempstead, Queens County, New York?” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 107 (December 2019): 259 – 270.

Hill, Ronald A. “Identification Through Signatures: Using Complex Direct Evidence to Sort Colwills of Cornwall.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 87 (September 1999): 185 – 98.

Hill, Ronald A. “William Colwill of Bridgerule: A Man With No Roots?” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (September 2004): 187 – 08.

LaRue, Nicole Gilkison. “Parents for Greene Garrison of Ringgold, Iowa.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 105 (June 2017): 109 – 19.

Martin, David Kendall. “Untangling the Ancestry of Samuel Allen of Summit, Schoharie County, New York: A Lesson in Principles.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 92 (March 2004): 31 – 50.

⁵ Abridged here for space, see full standard for complete details; Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 14.

⁶ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 27.

Peters, Nancy. "Using Indirect Evidence to Find In-Laws for Conrad Peters of Monroe County, New York." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 99 (December 2011): 281 – 93.

Rockett, Kay. "Signatures, Penmanship, and Name Variations: Identifying Reverend Mr. Jacob Ware." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 86 (September 1998): 218 – 22.

Further references:

Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, second ed., rev., Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2021.

Harrison, Wilson R. *Suspect Documents: Their Scientific Examination*. London: Sweet & Maxwell Limited, 1958.

Hatcher, Patricia Law. "How Did Your Ancestors Sign Their Names?" *Ancestry Magazine*, v. 22, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 28 – 33.

Kluskens, Claire. "Confederate Slave Payrolls." *The Twelve Key* (<https://twelvekey.com> : accessed 19 January 2021), published 9 July 2020.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017. *See especially 1.25-1.27.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map." *Evidence Explained* (<http://www.evidenceexplained.com> : accessed 19 January 2021).