Elusive Ancestors?
Never "Too Poor to Trace!"

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SYNOPSIS

Everyone has ancestors who seem to spontaneously appear and then mysteriously disappear—existing nowhere except one census or a family Bible entry. Deeds, marriage bonds, tax rolls, will books, and other common records by which we trace people yield nothing but dead ends for these frustrating forebears.

"Too poor to trace!" is the common conclusion—but one that's often wrong. Many neglected sources include propertyless men, women, and children. Sure-fire techniques can be used to develop clues, even in records that do not specifically name our ancestors. This session discusses some of the cultural and bureaucratic reasons why ancestors seem to be "too poor to trace." It surveys many of the places where even the poor can be found. By the time we close this hour, you should have a tool kit of valuable *strategies,* as well as sources, by which both parents and origins can be found for the most elusive ancestor.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. **Defining and understanding the so-called "poor":**
   - A. Cultural reasons why early settlers chose not to own real property.
   - B. Extent to which landownership was intentionally avoided.
   - C. Socio-economic conditions that changed the lifestyle of this class.

2. **Developing solid research habits**
   - A. Common approaches that *don't* work—and why:
     1) When stuck on an ancestor, gather all records you can find—anywhere—on folk by that name.
     2) When parents can't be identified, start with premise that the problem ancestor was probably named for the father/mother and then search 20–50 years earlier for everybody by that name.
   - B. Approaches that *do* work—and why:
     1) Focus upon the area (county or town) where you know the problem ancestor definitely lived. The best clues to who s/he was and where s/he came from are there.
     2) Pinpoint *precisely* where in the county or town s/he lived—and yes, you can do this even if s/he did not own land and even if no document specifically states a place of residence!
     3) Don't look single-mindedly for the name of that problem ancestor. Think *clusters* of names.
     4) Never forget that a human life is a continuous, cohesive, and compatible chain. The links that form this chain are people, events, and patterns of behavior.

3. **Exploring solutions for common problems**
   - A. Identity
   - B. Maiden names
   - C. Migration
   - D. Origins
   - E. Parentage

A Step-By-Step Program
For "Proving" Family Connections & Origins

1. Focus on the area in which you know your ancestor resided. Your best clues to origins and family connections are right there—even if it *is* a "burned" county.

2. Identify all others in the area by the same surname. You must get to know each and every one of them—thoroughly—in order to sort them correctly into family groups and eliminate those belonging to unrelated families.

3. Identify your ancestor's census neighbors. Ten to twenty in either direction is a basic rule of thumb. The more transient the neighborhood, the more neighbors are needed to establish continuity from year to year. *Critically important are the earliest neighbors that can be identified for the problem ancestor after his arrival in that known place of residence.*

4. Identify all men and women who married people by the ancestor's surname in the area of your interest.

5. Locate and extract all records on each and every person of the same surname—and those married to individuals of the same surname—in the community in which your ancestor lived. Search not only for the husbands of females but also for females under their married names. If your ancestor had multiple spouses, also study the one you *don't* descend from—and her family as well!

6. Search all records created by the identified neighbors. First emphasis should be upon the closest neighbors and those displaying elements in common with your ancestor (see nos. 9-A and 9-B, below).

7. Plat out the landholdings of neighbors of your landless ancestor. By correlating their locations to an unalphabetized census, you can establish the path of the census taker and approximate the site where the landless ancestor resided. In public-land states, a county township-range map usually will identify nearby churches and cemeteries.

8. When new names emerge in your search, reexamine previously used records—searching for the new names.

9. Organize and sort this mass of data continually. Every case is different. Sharpen your skill at spotting clues. Correlate each and every piece of evidence, no matter how "trivial" it seems to be. Don't treat any detail in isolation. Analyze all fragments of information, to see how each fits into everything else that has been found. Look especially for:

   A. All points of similarity and dissimilarity.

   B. Patterns of behavior—not just naming preferences but also cultural, economic, landholding, migration, and religious patterns.

If no local records created by "connections"
identify family or origin for your ancestor, then:

10. Backtrack those "connections" and let them lead you to your elusive ancestor.

A Checksheet
Sample Records Found Even for the "Poor"

Church & Cemetery Records
Cemetery office (or sexton) files
Church minutes—local congregations & higher levels
Denominational newspapers
Membership rolls
Sacramental registers (for baptisms, marriages, burials & confirmations)
Vestry (church business) minutes

Civic Records
Militia rolls (no, the local & state militia was not part of the federal military system)
Poll tax & tithable rolls (yes, poll taxes existed prior to Jim Crow)
Poorhouse records
Road orders
Voter rolls

Court Records
Cohabitation & bastardy charges
Debt suits
Divorce suits
Gaming & assault charges
Warnings out (in early New England)
& more weighty offenses!

Courthouse Records (Miscellaneous Types)
Adoptions (pre-20th century; not to be confused with the next item below)
Apprenticeships, indentures, and binding out of poor or "baseborn" children
Crop liens (with banks or factors)
Free papers (antebellum period; nonwhites filed them; whites often made affidavits for them)
Guardianships of adult nonwhites, pre-Civil War, some states (particularly Georgia)
Manumissions & emancipations—nonwhites from slavery, whites from servitude and the disability of minority
Mortgages on land, household goods, and live-stock
Powers of attorney
Sales of "improvements" made by individuals on unowned public land
Service as chain bearer on land surveys of others
Wolves-head bounty payments itemized in county court records (particular Virginia)

Military Records
Admittance to Old Soldiers' Homes
Bounty-land applications
Burial plot applications
Disability or limb applications
Enlistment/discharge papers
Hospital/medical records
Pension applications (& affidavits filed in applications by fellow soldiers)
Tombstone applications

Miscellaneous Federal Records
Auxiliary census schedules—especially 1880 Defective, Delinquent, & Dependent Classes
Bureau of Indian Affairs records—for whites also
Congressional petitions & claims—for veteran benefits denied through military channels, debts owed for labor, frontier problems etc.
Freedmen's Bureau records—whites also. (This was a bureau for "freedmen, *refugees,* and abandoned lands."
Those *refugees* included whites who had been displaced by the Civil War.)
Land Office files
Wartime damage claims—for former slaves also
WPA ex-slave narratives
WPA interviews with elderly whites

Miscellaneous Local Records
City directories
Newspapers
Memoirs, account books, letters, etc., left by others in community
Probate files of nearby doctors, merchants, etc.
School censuses

State-Level Records
Appeals court reports
Indian depredation claims (particularly Georgia)
Land grant applications (uncompleted)
Legislative acts (divorces, manumissions, other special problems)
Passports (usually through Indian nations)
Petitions to governor/legislature
State censuses
Tax rolls (copies of destroyed local rolls)
Wartime damage claims

Further Study

A Sampling of Ideas & Guidelines in Print

Abstracts, Indexes & Transcripts

Carter, Clarence Edwin and John Porter Bloom. *Territorial Papers of the United States.* 28 vols. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934–1975. Petitions, letters, lists of unclaimed mail in post office &c. At ***Archive.org.***

Dyer, Gustavus W. and John Trotwood Moore: *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires.* Easley, S.C.: Southern Historical Press, 1985.

Library of Congress. *American Memory.* **http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/am/law/lawhome.html.** Samples:

- *American Law: A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation, U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1873.* Includes petitions from poor veterans, widows, orphans.
- *Chronicling America.* Newspapers.
- *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.*
- WPA. *Life Histories,* 1936–1940. Mostly elderly whites.
- WPA. *Slave Narratives,* 1936–40.

Mills, Donna Rachal. *Florida's Unfortunates—The 1880 Federal Census: Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes.* Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Mills Historical Press, 1993. This special schedule was created for all states that year.

Mills, Gary B. *Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission; A Composite Directory.* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1994. Digitized at ***Ancestry.*** There is no comparable master index for all the Northern claims; for help with locating those, use Pendell and Bethel in col. 2.

Background Reading

Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Discusses the lifestyles of the poor (and other classes) in different cultures within colonial America.

McWhiney, Grady, and Forrest Mc Donald. "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage: An Interpretation." *American Historical Review* 85 (December 1980): 1095–1108. Provides better understanding of the so-called poor of the pre-20th century South. Archived at **JSTOR.org.**

———. *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988. Examines values cherished by many Southern (and some Midwestern) settlers who are now difficult to trace.

Guides to Records

Bethel, Elizabeth. *Preliminary Inventory of War Department Collection of Confederate Records.* PI 101, RG 109. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service [NARS], 1957. Identifies many collections of Confederate records rarely used by genealogists—including hospital records for soldiers, POW records for Union soldiers, post office records, etc. Digitized at **Archive.org.**

Hill, Edwin E. *Guide to Records in the National Archives ... Relating to American Indians.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981. Indian records include whites and blacks. Digitized at **Books.Google.com.**

Lainhart, Ann S. "Records of the Poor in Pre-Twentieth-Century New England." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* [NGSQ] 81 (Dec. 1993): 257–70.

Pendell, Lucille H. and Elizabeth Bethel. *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Adjutant General's Office.* PI 17, RG 94. Washington, DC: NARS, 1949. Itemizes many unknown records for hiring civilian laborers, claims &c. Digitized at **Books.Google.com.**

Case Studies & How-To:

Garrett-Nelson, LaBrenda. "Parents for Isaac Garrett of Laurens County, South Carolina: DNA Corroborates Oral Tradition." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* [*NGSQ*] 108 (June 2020): 85–112. A superb example of cracking the wall between slavery and freedom for a man who first appears on record in 1866.

Hait, Michael G. "Free and Enslaved: John and Melinda Human/Newman of Talbot County and Baltimore, Maryland. *NGSQ* 103 (June 2015): 115–27. Uses tax laws for clues to track ancestry of a black family, *ca.* 1752–1880.

Henningfield, Melinda Daffin. "A Family for Mary (Jones) Hobbs Clark of Carroll County, Arkansas." *NGSQ* 107 (March 2019): 5–30. "Poor, landless, illiterate, abandoned by her husband and left behind by her family ..."

Lennon, Rachal Mills. "Context and Comrades Illuminate a Silent Southerner: John Temple (1758–1838), Revolutionary War Pensioner." *NGSQ* 103 (March 2015): 49–67. Shows how to track a man for whom "no records exist" between his enlistment and application for pension 40 years later.

———. "Identifying a Son for John Temple of Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. *NGSQ* 103 (June 2015): 139–50.

———. "Jonathan Turner—More than a Name: A Carolina Case Study in Dissecting Records." *NGSQ* 97 (March 2009): 17–28.

Note: All three articles are archived online by Lennon at **https://www.FindingSouthernAncestors.com**.

Lickliter, Darryn. "Researching Poor Ancestors: Almshouse Records," *NGS Magazine* (Apr.–June 2021): 19–25.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Applying the Preponderance-of-the-Evidence Principle to a Southern Frontier Problem: William Medders of Alabama." *NGSQ* 82 (March 1994): 32–49. A case study in proving parents and siblings of a non-landowner by

- using land records of neighbors to "donut" the problem ancestor along a county line;
- reconstructing life and kin of all others in those two counties who had same surname or married into families of same surname;
- using land records for those other same-name families to group them into family clusters.

Archived online at **HistoricPathways.com/articles**

Note:

NGSQ, from 1983, has published many case studies for reconstructing enslaved families. Archives are at NGSgenealogy.org.