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# FINDING SOPHIA'S FAMILY: A CASE OF FRATRICIDE AND FORGOTTEN IDENTITY

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A family quarrel turns into tragedy. In the aftermath, a young widow and her children leave their rural home for the city. Painful memories and former family connections are forgotten in time. Subsequent generations seek the widow's identity.

## The Victim's Wife

Descendants of the murdered man wanted to know more than the newspaper accounts. They knew the name of his widow, Sophia, but nothing of her family background and origins.

- Who were Sophia's parents and birth family?
- What happened to her and the children?
- How did they survive the tragedy?

## Planned Research

Before beginning an investigation, we write a research question about our subject and a plan for gathering information. The question helps to direct our research so we stay focused. Genealogy standards give guidance. Research questions are

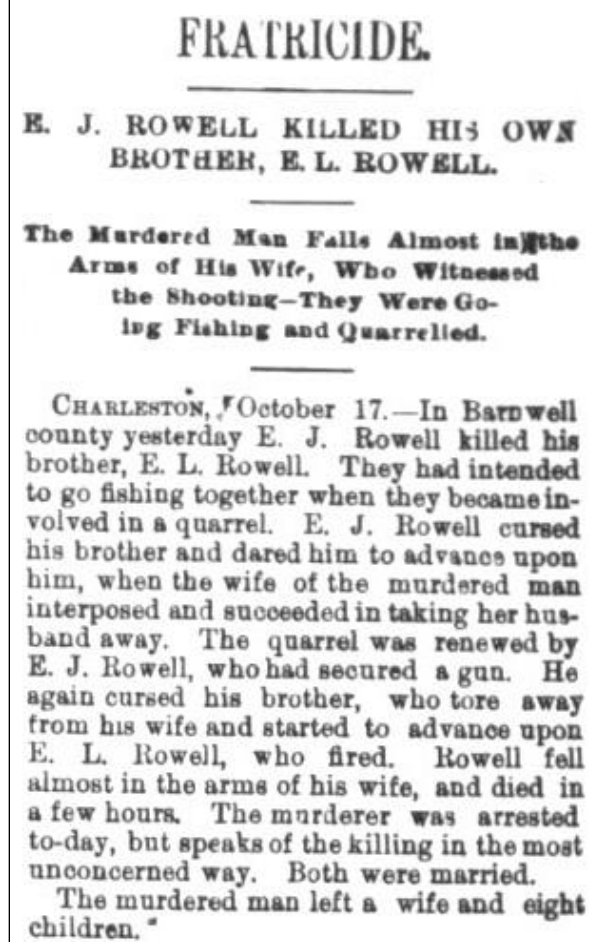
- specific to the research subject and the unknown or forgotten information,
- sufficiently broad to be answerable, and
- sufficiently focused to be testable.<sup>1</sup>

The most useful research plans allow for flexibility—adapted as the work progresses—but are based on an extensive scope of records with broad context.<sup>2</sup>

## Family Stories

If we are lucky, we have family stories to draw upon—one of the first sources that genealogists mine for relevant information. Similar to other source types, stories can be evaluated and reliability assessed. See References #9 (Miller) and Case Studies #14 (Garrett-Nelson) and #18 (Hill).

Figure 1: "Fratricide," *Macon (Georgia) Telegraph*, 18 October 1886, p. 1, col. 6.



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1. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed., rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2021), 11–12, Standard 9, "Planned research"; and Standard 10, "Effective research questions."  
2. *Ibid.*, 12 for Standard 12, "Broad context; and 14 for Standard 17, "Extent."

Locating relevant records generally requires knowledge of a residence location, political boundaries, and time period to determine record availability.

## Identity

Identity is more than a name or an alias an individual might adopt. Many characteristics determine a unique person in history—placement in a birth family, extended kin, military service, religious affiliation, occupation and skills, participation in events, schooling and literacy, a social network of associates, and times and locations of vital events. We can use these features to identify the correct individual when faced with

- name spelling variations;
- name changes;
- multiple forenames;
- nicknames, diminutives, and pet names; and
- multiple, same-named persons living at the same time and place.

**“Genius is not so much a matter of making great discoveries. It’s seeing the connections between small things.**

**—Anonymous<sup>4</sup>**

**“A name is an uncertain thing;  
you can’t count on it!”**

**—Bertold Brecht<sup>3</sup>**

Our ancestors did not live in isolation. Their lives were impacted by cultural, economic, historical, legal, religious, political, and social factors in their communities.

Understanding this context helps us analyze records and develop and test hypotheses about an ancestor’s origins and birth family. For more on context, see References #7 (Henningfield) and Case Studies #15 (Garrett-Nelson), #20 (Peters).

## Whole-Family Research

Sometimes called cluster research, neighborhood research, or the “FAN” [Friends, Associates, and Neighbors] principle, the method involves researching extended family, neighbors, and associates of a person. We are more likely to be successful when we widen the net of persons.

Records created by and about a group provide more opportunity for finding relevant information than those left by one individual. Researching members of a person’s extended family and social network increases the pool of available records for study and analysis. This approach increases the probability of finding a solution to a problem of identity and family reconstruction. On the other hand, the method multiplies a genealogist’s workload by each additional person researched, so we want to use it strategically.

### **Key Concepts for Finding an Ancestor’s Birth Family**

- Work from the known to unknown.
- Write a specific research question about the individual and make a plan.
- Analyze starting point information, including family stories.
- Recognize people move in groups.
- Conduct whole-family research.
- Be aware identity is more than a name.
- Family reconstruction requires understanding social and historical context.

3. David Crystal and Hilary Crystal, *Words on Words: Quotations About Language and Languages* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 218; citing Bertold Brecht, *A Man’s a Man* (1927), scene 10.

4. Elizabeth Shown Mills and Ruth Brossette Lennon, *Tips & Quips for the Family Historian* (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2017), 79 for “Problem Solving.”

## Reconstructing a Forgotten Family

The case study illustrates finding the birth family of a mid-19th-century South Carolina widow. No known record provides an exact birthplace or fully identifies her parents. State vital records do not exist for the time. Her father's probate file was not found. The case was solved by understanding the social context, creating and testing hypotheses, and conducting whole-family research.

The case led to researching extended family who dispersed beyond the widow's home state—Colorado, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Many record types were mined for evidence—census, church, city directories, court, land, maps, military, newspapers, probate, and vital records. See Case Studies #21 (Peters) for the article published in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*.

### Lessons from the Case Study

- Newspapers sometimes get it wrong. Seek out multiple editions.
- Maps provide context and interest. Look beyond the usual street and road maps.
- Be open to first, middle, and last name variations. Study the community's naming traditions.
- City directories pinpoint residence and show neighbors. Check the business and street directory sections.
- Identify and research members of the ancestor's social network.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Websites were viewed 1 December 2023.

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### **Case Studies Featuring Identity and Family Reconstruction**

*Archived issues of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly are available to NGS members for download at [https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq\\_archives/](https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq_archives/) (requires member login).*

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