



Strategies for Resolving Conflicting Evidence

Joy Reisinger Memorial Lecture Series
sponsored by the Board for Certification of Genealogists

Angela Packer McGhie, CG, FUGA
mcghiefamilyhistory@gmail.com

Genealogists often encounter records that contain conflicting information about their ancestors. The challenge lies in determining which information is correct. This presentation will feature case studies containing conflicting information, including instances of parental misidentification. These scenarios will demonstrate 1) the record that contain conflicting information, 2) the additional records examined, 3) analysis of the reliability of each record, 4) the correlation of information between sources, and 5) the resolution of the conflict.



The Genealogical Proof Standard¹ emphasizes the importance of resolving conflicts in evidence. While some conflicts are minor and easily explained, others are significant and must be resolved before forming any conclusions.

In *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, Thomas W. Jones stated:

“Resolving the conflict requires us to separate the evidence into likely-correct and likely-incorrect answers, discard the incorrect answers, and justify or explain that separation and discarding.”²

The key is to “justify or explain the separation and discarding.” One must gather sufficient evidence to determine which answer is likely correct and supports a conclusion.

This session will outline various strategies for resolving conflicting evidence. They are organized into five categories based on principles from the Genealogical Proof Standard: conduct reasonably exhaustive research, analyze each record, correlate information from various records, and write a conclusion. These strategies are useful in resolving cases with conflicting information and will enhance problem-solving skills.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, “Ethics and Standards: Genealogical Proof Standard,” (<https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/> : accessed 4 October 2024).

² Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013): 74.

Strategies for Resolving Conflicting Evidence

Conduct thorough research



1. Research must be thorough enough to locate the records containing the answer to the research question.
2. Continue searching for records that corroborate the evidence, as it is often challenging to determine the accuracy of a single record.
3. When you find conflicting information, seek additional records to help identify the most likely correct information.

Analyze each record



1. Evaluate each record individually to identify relevant information and assess its reliability.
2. Check to see that the sources selected have been independently created.
3. Original records are generally more reliable than derivative ones, but each record requires careful evaluation.
4. Assess the reliability of the informant.
5. Seek records containing primary information from an eyewitness to the event.
6. Reliable evidence can be direct, indirect, or negative.

Correlate information from various records



1. After evaluating each source, correlate the information from different records.
2. Compare and contrast evidence when dealing with conflicting information.
3. Organize the evidence to identify which pieces are consistent and which are not.

Weigh the evidence for reliability



1. After correlating and sorting the evidence into consistent and inconsistent items, weigh the reliability of each piece to determine the most likely correct answer.
2. Evaluate and explain any information that does not align with the most reliable evidence.
3. This process depends on the **quality** of the evidence, not the **quantity** of records that support a particular conclusion.

Write a summary of the evidence and conclusion



1. After completing the analysis and correlation strategies, summarize the conflict, presenting evidence from both sides, and detail the resolution.
2. Explain why some evidence may be less reliable.
3. Writing a summary helps assess the research's thoroughness and the conclusion's soundness.

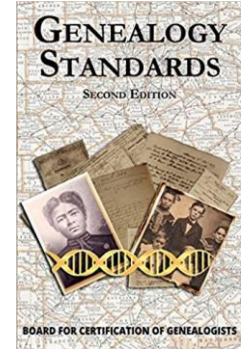
Relevant Genealogy Standards³

Standard #48. Resolving evidence inconsistencies

Genealogists attempt to resolve conflicts or incompatibilities among two or more evidence items. Resolution involves (a) identifying evidence items that support each side of a conflict and (b) articulating a defensible rationale for setting aside evidence items that support all but one side of the conflict.

Standard #48 continues to provide four methods of conflict resolution:

- (a) only one uncorroborated evidence item or only one combination of related evidence items supports one side,
- (b) showing that significantly more error-prone sources and information items support one side,
- (c) explaining why evidence for one side is substantially less credible than evidence for the other side, or
- (d) any combination of rationales a–c.



Standard #50. Assembling conclusions from evidence.

Once a genealogist resolves conflicting evidence, all remaining relevant evidence items are compatible with a single answer to the research question. This answer becomes a conclusion.

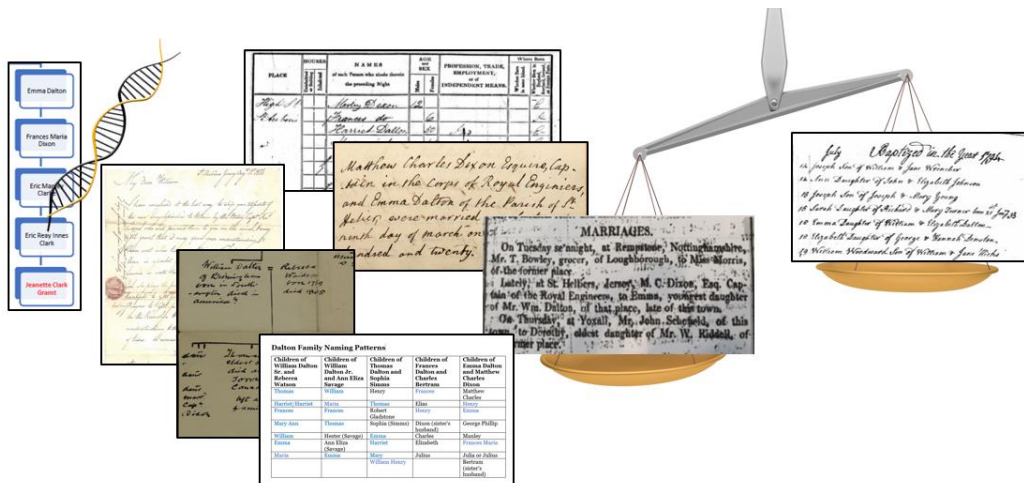


Figure 1:

Example of weighing evidence for reliability in the case study on Emma Dalton

³ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2021): 28-29.

Resources for Further Study

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*. Second edition revised. Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry, 2021.
- Jones, Thomas W. "GPS Element 4: Resolving Conflicts and Assembling Evidence." *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013.
- Jones, Thomas W. "Reasoning from Evidence." *Professional Genealogy: Preparation, Practice and Standards*. Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2018.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis." *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 4th edition. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publ. Co., 2024.

Case Study Examples

- Bittner, F. Warren. "Dora Luhr's Hannover Origin: A Case of Conflicting Evidence." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 98 (September 2010): 165-176.
- Forsythe, Warren L. "Resolving Conflict Between Records: A Spurtons Moseley Bible." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 84 (September 1996): 182-199.
- Garrett-Nelson, LaBrenda. "Resolving a Modern Genealogical Problem: What was Rainey Nelson's Birth Name?" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 104 (September 2016): 203-13.
- Hayden, Richard A. "Resolving the Inexplicable: The Marriage Bond of Archibald Young and Lettice Morgan." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 95 (March 2007): 5-16.
- Henderson, Harold. "Jethro Potter's Secret: Confusion to Conclusion in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 101 (June 2013): 103-112.
- Henningfield, Melinda Daffin. "Determining Linnie Leigh Gray's Birth Date." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 98 (December 2010): 245-250.
- Jones, Thomas W. "The Four Fathers of Amzi Leach: Analysis of Conflicting Evidence." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 82 (September 1994): 207-215.
- Peterson, Allen R. "Who Were the Parents of Charlotte Ann Williams of Flint, Michigan? A Death Certificate with a Half-Truth." *NGS Quarterly* 98 (September 2010): 177-187.
- Russell, Judy G. "George Washington Cottrell of Texas: One Man or Two?" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 105 (September 2017): 165-180.
- Stricklin, Dawn C. "Namesakes, Name Changes, and Conflicting Evidence: The Search for the Mother of John Little Crow." *NGS Quarterly* 94 (December 2006): 245-258.