

What's Been Done: Using Someone Else's Genealogy Research

Thomas MacEntee, of High-Definition Genealogy
<http://hidefgen.com> hidefgen@gmail.com

The “Outside Research” Problem

Here is a typical scenario encountered by genealogists of every skill level: you are given a box of “stuff” from a relative and told “this is our family history.” While you may be delighted at this sudden treasure trove, you should also be concerned about incorporating potentially misleading data into your current research.

How do you effectively review and incorporate information you've inherited including notes, family stories and more? How do you do so in such a way that honors and respects the contributions of other family members? And what about extracting “clues” from data that could prove unreliable?

Inherited Research Action Plan

- Perform a basic inventory.
- Track content.
- Evaluate research content.
- Incorporate proven information.
- Look at unproven information for possible clues.
- Share information with others responsibly.

Evaluating Research Content: A Step-by-Step Approach

Break down the information you have received into “data points.” Example: a typewritten family history from the 1970s contains a birth location for your great-grandfather and this is “new” information in terms of what you currently have in your research. Evaluate the source of the information and determine whether it supports the fact or not.

Evidence Evaluation Fields

The following fields can be used when working with The Board for Certification of Genealogists' *Skillbuilding: Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Resources* (<http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skblld085.html>) by Linda Geiger. They offer an excellent way to help analyze research data.

- **Source Type:** A source is **Original** if it is the first written statement, photograph, or recording of an event. Subsequent copies are **Derivative** and may be reproduced by hand, machine, camera or scanner; they may be reproduced on paper, in microform, as photographs or digital images, or in any other medium that records the image whether transcribed by hand or technology.

- **Clarity:** Use **Clear** if the information can easily be read. Use **Marginal** if information is not clear, is partially obscured and researcher must "guess" at words or letters.
- **Information Type:** Use **Primary** if a piece of information is recorded by a knowledgeable eyewitness or participant in that event, or by an official whose duties require him or her to make an accurate record of the event when it occurs. Use **Secondary** if information is supplied by someone who was not at the event and may include errors caused by memory loss or influenced by other parties who may have a bias or be under emotional stress.
- **Evidence Type:** **Direct** evidence is any fact that is explicitly stated. **Indirect** evidence is inferred from one or more pieces of evidence within the record.

Working with Other Researchers

When working with other family historians, you may encounter situations where there is disagreement as to facts about a common ancestor or relative. Also keep in mind that while we all have a similar goal of documenting our family history, our journeys can be very different and you may have more or fewer skills than another researcher.

Correcting Information in a Collaborative Environment

We all started somewhere right? And if like me, you believe the genealogy journey is a learning process, you then understand that people make mistakes. Even you. But with genealogy we also need to understand that very often what seems like facts and academic research are also filled with lore, legend, family stories and emotion. There is a personal sense of ownership for many genealogists and correcting information can sometimes be a difficult process.

- **Understand the capabilities of the platform.** When dealing with websites that display family trees and or indexed and transcribed records, do your homework and determine what can and what can't be done. This may include having to read the Terms of Service agreement to understand who owns user data once it is uploaded.
- **Ask and ask nicely.** When dealing with other researchers online, a "virtual" smile goes a long way. Let the other person know that you've found other information related to a specific person, place or event and ask them if they'd like the data for their own research. Also ask them to update any online postings not to prove that your research is "correct" or "better," but to help all genealogists who come upon the research in the future.
- **Avoid "right" and "wrong" statements.** The easiest way to alienate a fellow genealogist is to tell them that their research is wrong. Even if the research is incorrect, your goal should be to improve the current research and to help future researchers.
- **If necessary, publish your own research.** Sometimes either you can't contact the other genealogist or they refuse to update their information. Remember that

you have at your disposal a variety of tools to make sure your research is just as visible as any other genealogist.

Giving and Receiving Proper Credit

Thanks to social media and education initiatives, there is more awareness of the need to credit researchers especially when narrative content is involved. While this section is not intended as a lesson on copyright law, it is an area of growing importance in the genealogy community which needs to be addressed.

First, realize that facts cannot be copyrighted (meaning birth dates, death dates, names, etc.) But narrative text, say in a genealogy report that you put together, is protected by copyright. Even so, if you get a great lead on your own research from what someone else has posted, here's some advice:

- **Contact the researcher, if possible.** State how you want to use the research (especially if you intend to publish the information in print or online in a blog or website), show how you will credit the researcher and then thank them for their hard work.
- **Build a relationship.** Briefly mention how you are related to the research, or if representing a client, how your client is related.

So what do you do if a researcher is overly possessive of the information and doesn't want to share?

- **Stick to the facts and cite your sources.** Again, if it is facts, then technically you can use the information. However, if it is sourced, I would do the research myself and then use the facts as I wanted. Make sure your source citations states when you found the record!
- **Write your own narrative.** If the person refuses to give permission to use their narrative, realize that they have that right. You'll need to do your own narrative; sorry, there is no shortcut here!
- **Reference, but don't plagiarize.** For research, you can reference that person's research with a footnote as long as you don't reproduce the entire text.

And what about getting credit for your own work? Well, if you do find that someone has used your research and published it without giving you credit (and, again, we're talking narrative content), then you have several options:

- **Advocate and educate.** Often, these situations occur with new genealogists who don't understand copyright or the need to give credit. Be courteous and let them know that you need attribution and why.
- **Be steadfast.** Occasionally you will find a person who knew what they were doing and didn't care. Hold your ground. Research your options and also remember to pick your battles. Is a confrontation – either online or in person – really worth it?

Tips and Tricks for Incorporating Research

- **Take inventory.** Remember, you can't put together an action plan if you don't know what you've received in terms of outside research. Carefully review the content – both paper and digital – and sort into folders or groups. Create a tracking list or spreadsheet and mark off items that have been reviewed, the source of the information, and whether it or not it has been added to your research.
- **Evaluate. Evaluate. Evaluate.** The most important step in the incorporation process is to thoroughly evaluate each data point – such as a birth date or death location – and ensure that it is valid. Remember to use the Genealogy Proof Standard as a guide and if any data seems “iffy,” err on the side of NOT adding it to your research.
- **Never import outside data directly into your genealogy database.** Whether the data is in a GEDCOM file or some other format, always know what you are bringing into your genealogy database. Remember that is not always easy to remove data once it has been incorporated into your research.
- **Focus on data preservation.** If you've received printed genealogy research, make sure you have scanned the pages and converted to digital format. For GEDCOM and other files, ensure there is one or more backups of the data. For data imported from websites and online family trees, create a “holding folder” on your computer and make sure there is a backup copy.
- **Share and share responsibly.** Once you've added new data from others, determine the benefits of sharing your finds with others. For living persons, always ask permission first, and for stories and narratives, remember that copyright issues might be involved. When sharing, including a source citation to assist other researchers.

Resource List

- **How to Organize Inherited Family Genealogy Research**
<http://practicalarchivist.com/inherited-genealogy-research-guest-post/>
- **I just inherited a huge pile of genealogy. Now what?**
<http://genealogysstar.blogspot.com/2015/03/i-just-inherited-huge-pile-of-genealogy.html>
- **Skillbuilding: Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Resources**
(<http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skblld085.html>)
- **The 3 Cs: Organizing Research Inherited from a Relative**
<https://blog.myheritage.com/2016/06/the-3-cs-organizing-research-inherited-from-a-relative/>
- **Where to Start When You Inherit Genealogy**
<http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=byufamilyhistorian>