Everything You Know is Wrong:

How Erroneous Assumptions and Bad Analysis Can Create Brick Walls

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As genealogists or family history researchers, we all encounter brick walls that stop the progress of our research in its tracks. We all hate them and want to knock them down as quickly as possible. But rarely do we consider the cause of the brick wall in the first place.

Three Types of Brick Walls

There appear to be at least three distinct types of brick wall problems for genealogists. The solution to overcoming or demolishing them depends on the type of brick wall and its cause. Let's consider the three types.

1. **The records don't exist.** This can happen for a variety of reasons. They might have been lost in a fire, flood, or some other type of natural disaster. We will probably never know how many records have been lost this way over the centuries. The other possibility is that the information wasn't recorded in the first place. Consider birth and death certificates, for example. Many states did not begin issuing them until the early 20th century. Prior to that they simply do not exist.

   The solution here is to determine what information is actually being sought . If we need a birth certificate, for example, are we trying to discern the individual's date of birth, place of birth?, his/her parents, or something else? Once we know what we are actually seeking, we can consider what other record might contain that information and search for it. For example, a baptism record in a denomination that practices infant baptism might be a good substitute for a birth record.

2. **Records may be available but we do not know how to find or use them.** This problem covers three separate scenarios.

a. The record might be a type we have never used or even thought of using before, such as a will, deed, tax list, road or bridge record or something similar. It might be an online database with a difficult to use interface or even the sudden digitization of a record type we previously viewed on microfilm.

   The solution here is to learn about additional sources as you grow in your research skills. This can easily be done by attending classes, programs, and other sessions, or by simply asking for help at your library or other genealogical research facility.

b. The record might be in some far off, difficult to access repository. Far off doesn't necessarily mean an archive in Samarkand or some other exotic locale. Hours of operation or mobility issues could make even a local repository inaccessible.

   The solution to this problem depends on the specifics. It might be possible to order a copy of the document from the repository. Alternatively, perhaps a friend will be able to get the copy or you might need to hire a local researcher.

c. The record might be in a language you cannot read and may even be written in an unfamiliar alphabet.

   The only solutions to this problem are to either get help or learn to at least pick out key words and phrases in the language.

3. **Erroneous assumptions and bad analysis.** Brick walls created by this seem like they ought to be the rarest form, but actually are probably the most common. Likewise, they should be the easiest to break down but often are the hardest for us to get around.

What is the cause of this seeming paradox? Like many problems, it seems to be rooted in emotion. We spend a lot of time creating our theories and become quite attached to them. We put on blinders to alternative ideas, and block our own progress. It can be almost impossible to discover what the problem is. We just cannot move back beyond a particular ancestor. The solution to this is found in the genealogical proof standard. When properly applied it can cut through the dilemma if we are willing to move beyond our own assumptions.

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)

To reach a sound conclusion, we need to meet all five components of the GPS:
1. Reasonably exhaustive research.
2. Complete and accurate source citations.
3. Thorough analysis and correlation.
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
5. Soundly written conclusion.[1]

Let's consider the elements one at a time and understand how they apply to the problem.

1. Conducting a reasonably exhaustive search does not contemplate looking at every conceivable archive and repository on the planet. It does, however. mean we should be looking at more than just one or two sources to arrive at our conclusions. In fact, we should be looking at everything we can find. Relying solely on information coming from a secondary source[2] such as birth information on a death certificate will inevitably lead to erroneous conclusions which will block our efforts to move forward.

   To conduct a reasonably exhaustive search, we must set our own biases and assumptions aside. While it is tempting to assume two men who share an unusual surname are siblings, for example, that might be a dangerous guess. The reality might be their relationship is cousins, father/son, uncle/nephew , or possibly not related at all. Thorough and open-minded research will help set assumptions aside.

2. Complete and accurate source citations[3] help because they enable us to reevaluate our work. Was something missed in a source? Should there be other documents providing information on the same event? This could also help if you ask someone else to review your work. They will be able to find your sources and check your work. Sometimes a second set of eyes can be very helpful in spotting problems, particularly if they are not personally vested in the research.

3. Thorough analysis and correlation is important because all of the documents must make sense together even if they are not entirely consistent. Don't confine yourself to looking at just the records. Also look for patterns, such as family naming patters, usual times between children's births, and similar details. Also, we need to look over our work for reasoning or logical flaws. If our analysis is bad, it will likely send our research process on a wild goose chase that will end in a brick wall.

4. You will almost always find some conflicting evidence between sources. Some of these are quite easy to resolve. Others may take careful consideration and analysis. The point here is we cannot just paper over or avoid the conflicting evidence. It is possible the conflict is simply a recording error, but it could also indicate the records are for more than one individual. That is why this step is critical.

5. Writing the conclusion is the final step. It is important because it forces us to really consider everything we have done up to this point. It is a final stage to check our logic. If we made an error and don't recognize it, showing the

written conclusion to a colleague might enable them to discern where we went wrong in our thinking.

Brick walls can be incredibly frustrating for a genealogist. Although they can exist for a variety of reasons, the most pernicious are those we create for ourselves. Bad assumptions and bad analysis will lead to bad results. To get good results, and be in a position to move our research forward, we must avoid these pitfalls. The surest way to avoid the problem is a thorough application of the Genealogical Proof Standard.

Notes

1. "Genealogical Proof Standard." *Board for Certification of Genealogists*. (http:// bcgcertification.org/ethics-super-parent/ethics-standards/: accessed 20 November 2017).

2. See "An approach to evaluating family histories and family trees." PastPorts , Vol. 2, No. 1, (January 2015) : (https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/01_2015.pdf: accessed 21 Nov ember 2017).

3. For instructions on how to properly source your research see: Mills, Elizabeth Shown, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore, Maryland : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017. [Call no. R 907.2 M6587E or 907.2 M6587E]

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