

Climbing too Fast, Gasping for Breath: Take Time with Documents

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A few preliminary thoughts

Have you ever been in such a rush to reach a destination that, once there, you realize that the things passed along the way were not enjoyed, or even noticed? It's so tempting to reach the summit (goal) without absorbing the climb (process). And the result: A person could easily get "winded" and maybe not even achieve the pinnacle (so intent on the destination that the journey was ignored). That can apply to a physical climb, a journey through life, or, of course, GENEALOGY research. What did you pass by that might even have given a bit of help as you climbed (perhaps a water fountain or a short-cut)? What is necessary then? Time-consuming "backtracking" to re-evaluate the process (hoping you have not gotten lost). Doesn't it make more sense to go a bit slower and be thorough (of course, re-visiting "old haunts" in the document research is still quite likely, so you need to leave a "bread crumb" trail or a map to get back to where you began). So, let's climb (not literally, of course).

Once you have celebrated locating your ancestor(s) on that elusive document, now what? Genealogists are never satisfied for long. We are always hungry for more. Maybe that's why genealogy is such a perfect pastime, whether hobby, profession, or perceived duty (the official or unofficial family historian). Before continuing forward, STOP! Have you really examined the latest find? Where can that latest discovery take you? Did you transcribe or extract ALL the information from the current document or piece of evidence? Even things that seem superfluous at first might contain a pebble of truth (hopefully, not in your shoe).

Keep in mind that our ancestors did not live in vacuums (not Kirby, Shark, Hoover . . .). Who knew the most about your forebears? The people they were around (co-workers, neighbors, friends, employees at care centers, ??) and maybe the people they were buried with (during their lifetimes, that is). Consider the "FAN Club" theory, identified by Elizabeth Shown Mills (see resource list at the end). And consider the social history along with the personal elements of your ancestor: wars, weather issues, inventions, etc. These can provide hints to suggest that there just might be another document or element about your family that will help make the ascent even more exhilarating. Make your climb goal-focused.

The suggestions below are not all inclusive; individual states and/or counties, particular time periods, and other elements mean that uniformity is not to be expected (even 2 documents about the same event in the same location can differ). The list here provides some possible, additional findings and everything is worth checking (sometimes twice). Resources accurate as of 5 February 2025. (Note: "principal" refers to the person to whom the record is primarily linked.)

Where can that discovery lead?

Goal: to reach the summit while
still able to breathe!

- Obituary can include
 - Cause, date, & place of death (place may not be the same as)
 - Occupation (former or current) & affiliations (religious, civic, etc.)
 - Family members (older obituaries may list relationships, full names of children, names of spouses, & residence location at the time the principal died)
 - Funeral, memorial, &/or burial information.
- Death certificate or registration can give
 - Death info
 - Age at time of death
 - Location of death
 - Attending physician
 - Cause of death
 - Informant of the particulars for the deceased (may or may not be a relative)
 - Birthdate & place
 - Occupation (former or at time of death)
 - Parents & spouse names and if they are still living
 - Burial (when & where) or cremation information
 - Immigration & naturalization information, if applicable.
- Marriage record, certificate, or registration can provide
 - Names of parents
 - Location of marriage (not always where the license was obtained)
 - Person officiating
 - Occupation(s)
 - Residence(s)
 - Ages of both spouses
 - Whether or not it is a first marriage (should be noted for each)
 - Signatures of couple & witnesses
- Birth and/or baptism record might include
 - Birth date & place
 - Any unusual birthing circumstances (still born, health condition, etc.)
 - Parents' names, occupations, residence, & ages; maybe their birth places
 - Godparents' names (may be relatives)
- Naturalization records (intent & granted) can list
 - Legal name of principal, age, & signature
 - Birth location & citizenship of principal (& renouncement of loyalty)
 - Date, arrival port, ship name of immigration
 - Occupation & residence
- Immigration record might include
 - Legal name & occupation of principal (with signature)
 - Names of other family, as applicable
 - Address or destination in the new country
 - Arrival date & port (possibly departure date & port as well)
 - Name of ship

Check:
FindAGrave.com
BillionGraves.com
Interment.net

Many Church & Vital
Records at:
FamilySearch.org
Ancestry.com

Newspapers.com
NewspaperArchive.com
Chronicling America

More on these:
Ancestry.com
FamilySearch.org
Archives.gov

- Passenger list could identify
 - Legal name of principal & names of those in the party
 - Occupation (in the “old country” &/or planned in the new one)
 - Sponsoring person, family, organization, &/or destination
 - Date & port of entry & possibly the same for departure
 - Name of ship & captain
 - Physical description &/or health status
- City directories can list
 - Name of head of household (age & sex not usually included)
 - Names (listed individually) of others in household (but alphabetically)
 - Usually only adult children are listed
 - Sometimes only employed household members are included
 - Address of home (if in another township, that might be noted)
 - Address & name of company or organization of trade
 - Difference from previous directory
 - Moved, married, name change, etc.
- Military records

Military resource:
Fold3.com

 - Pension can include
 - Family data – spouse, children (names, dates, & whether alive)
 - Health data – information on service-related issues as well as other maladies from time of discharge to time of application
 - Affidavits from colleagues, clergy, friends, service compatriots, etc.
 - Letters from invalid &/or lawyer to pension board
 - Photos (rare)
 - Applicant signature
 - Service record shows
 - Muster rolls (bi-monthly attendance)
 - Enlistment & Discharge dates & places
 - Injuries, imprisonments, or death – where & what circumstances
 - Furloughs
 - Advancements & commendations
 - Reprimands & demotions
- Family ephemera can include any number of clues to family history
 - Letters & address books
 - Photos
 - Newspaper articles
 - Certificates of award or other achievement
 - Diplomas, graduation programs, & school records
 - Funeral cards or announcements
 - Maps & schedules
 - Journals/Diaries
 - Address books & gift receipt lists (wedding, shower, birthday, etc.)
 - Anything with a signature (can be used to identify who is who in cases of same names)

Check county websites
 at USGenWeb.com &
Genealogy Trails.com &
LinkPendium.com

- Court documents can provide next of kin info, various dates and locations
 - Misc. Cases
 - Deeds
 - Wills
 - Probate records of various forms
- Census records (day, month, and year in *italics* indicates the date from which information is to be gathered; e.g., 1 April 1940 means that the data collected is to reflect the status in the household on that date and anyone dying even one day later or born one day earlier should be included, while those dying even just one day before or born even one day after that date are to be omitted – no, enumerators are not always careful about that). It is usually safe to expect that the city, township, county, state on the top of the page is the residence location for those listed on that target date, however, be careful to check that enumeration districts were not mixed together or that any of the households listed at the end are not from another location. More information on exactly what is included (for US, UK, Canada, as well as specialized and State Census schedules can be found at <https://cyndislist.com/census-worldwide/census-records-online/>; check those for the different data collection items, they differ from one year to the next).
 - Earliest US Census schedules: 1790, 1800, 1810, 1820 (*2, 4, 6, 7 August*, respectively); 1830, 1840 (*1 June*):
 - Names of heads of households only
 - Others grouped by sex & general age
 - 1850 Census *1 June 1850*
 - 1860 Census *1 June 1860*
 - 1870 Census *1 June 1870*
 - 1880 Census *1 June 1880*
 - 1890 Census: Destroyed, only fragments available
 - 1900 Census *1 June 1900*
 - 1910 Census *15 April 1910*
 - 1920 Census *1 January 1920*
 - 1930 Census *1 April 1930*
 - 1940 Census *1 April 1940*
 - 1950 Census *1 April 1950*

More Census info:

Ancestry.com

FamilySearch.org

Archives.gov

<https://cyndislist.com/us/census/>



Some additional words of wisdom

- 1) Do not accept information placed on FamilySearch BY FamilySearch as reality unless you have personally researched it and found it accurate

In fact: Do not consider ANY family tree (posted online, obtained in a publication, copied over from Aunt Til . . . verify EVERYTHING and CITE YOUR SOURCES)
- 2) Learn all you can about the different, applicable occupations and the companies or factories that were in the region
- 3) Learn about what was happening in local, as well as regional, country-wide, and world-wide history, at the time period in question (these might include epidemics, wars, industrial revolution, major weather-related events, etc.)
- 4) Use a timeline or “life chart” to identify potentially contradictory information (e.g., a person cannot be born after he has immigrated to the United States)
- 5) Use maps for perspective

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE . . .

A need to go back to check (even if you think you got it all). So, look at those amazing letters, documents, photos, ephemera . . . it's like a holiday, open all those presents!

A COUPLE OF ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS ON WHERE TO FIND MORE

Cyndi's List (Cyndislist.com)

Stephen Morse's 1-Step Pages (stevemorse.org)

General Resources (current as of July 2026)

M. Beill Browne & Stuart M. Keeley. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986.

Melvin J. Collier, "Demonstrating the Effectiveness of Cluster Genealogy," *Roots Revealed* blog, 17 May 2016 (<http://rootsrevealed.blogspot.com/2016/05/demonstrating-effectiveness-of-cluster.html>) [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

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Crista Cowan, "FAN Club Research to Build Your Family Tree," *YouTube* video, Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 5 August 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guKiQOK5Rc4>) [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Jennifer Dondero, "What is a Genealogy FAN Club?" *The Occasional Genealogist* blog, March 2018 (<https://www.theoccasionalgenealogist.com/2018/03/genealogy-fan-club-cluster-collateral.html>) [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Paul Drake. *What did they Mean by That? A Dictionary of Historical and Genealogical Terms Old and New*. Bowie MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2003.

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B. J. Evans. *A to Zax: A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists & Historians*, 3rd Ed. Alexandria, VA: Hearthside Press, 1995.

FamilySearch. "Transfer the Information." *FamilySearch Wiki*, 5 Dec 2022. (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Transfer_the_Information#Cite_Your_Sources) [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 5 Feb 2025]).

FamilySearch. "Organizing Your Files," *FamilySearch Wiki*, 17 April 2020 (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Organizing_Your_Files) [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 27 July 2022]). (This resource includes many additional helps, websites, and suggestions.)

Christy Fillerup, "The Cousin Next Door: Using the FAN Club Principle," *Legacy Tree Genealogists* website and blog, 2016 (<https://www.legacytree.com/blog/cousin-next-door-using-fan-club-principle> [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Stephen Glazier. *Random House Webster's Word Menu*. New York: Random House, 1992.

Thomas Jones. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013 (or most current edition).

Douglas Keister. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2004.

Mary Ann Kelley, "FAN Club: Friends, Associates, Neighbors," *Collecting Cousins* blog, 18 November 2015 (<https://www.collectingcousins.com/fan-club-friends-associates-neighbors/> [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Gus J. Marsh, "Cluster Genealogy Research," *Gus's Genealogy Blog*, 10 April 2010 (<http://gusmarsh.blogspot.com/2010/04/cluster-genealogy-research.html> [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Elizabeth Shown Mills. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co., 2009 (or most current edition).

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle> [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Elizabeth Shown Mills, *QuickSheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)*, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012.

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Testing the FAN Principle against DNA: Zilphy (Watts) Price Cooksey Cooksey of Georgia and Mississippi," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 102 (June 2014): 129-152.

Tony Proctor, "FAN Principles Unfolded," *Parallax View: A Different View on Things* blog, 16 November 2016 (http://parallax-viewpoint.blogspot.com/2016/11/fan-principles-unfolded.html#_edn2 [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

Cindy Bergeron Scherwinski, "Cluster Genealogy," *In My Life* blog, 15 July 2008 (<http://anaharcockermom.blogspot.com/2008/07/cluster-genealogy.html> [accessed by Jean Wilcox Hibben, 17 January 2019]).

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