

# Are you a Genealogy Spelunker or Caver? Exploring the Deep Recesses of the Family Tree

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Heading into a cave for some family history exploration? Great! But are you a Caver or a Spelunker? Let's check . . .

Definitions (from *Dictionary.com*):

- Spelunker – a person who explores caves as a hobby (1940-45; from Latin: *spēlunca*; from Greek for cave: *spēlunx*)
- Caver – a person who “studies or explores caves” (1645-55)

Note the difference: one is a hobbyist, the other is studying. Before advancing into the cavern where the light is dim or non-existent and the way may be fraught with uneven pathways and tiny passageways, STOP! Ask some questions: Do you have the right tools? Do you have enough sustenance to keep you going, especially enough water? Is your cell phone charged (though signals in caves are terribly unreliable, using the device's flashlight, sounds, magnifier, etc. can be literal lifesavers)? Do you have your map or diagram of the cave (pedigree chart) and have you really examined the latest step (what are you looking for and where did you “leave off”)? Maybe a rope or other means to find your way back to the beginning will be of good use, just be sure you are careful not to let it get tangled around a stalagmite. Do you have the information that prior explorers have mapped out? Even things that might seem irrelevant could provide clues about which direction to take when faced with a choice of holes to explore. Did previous explorers provide the needed citations so you can find the gems on your excursion? And what will you do when confronted by a rock wall, maybe the result of a cave-in, but possibly a natural formation that is directing you elsewhere? If you have your tools, you might try chipping away at the blockage, but if not, maybe that direction needs further research and should be handled another day. Now, you want to be aware of any agendas (hidden or otherwise) of the earlier explorers: maybe there is a reason for their conclusions; if so, can you trust them? Context matters, whether exploring a cave or climbing a [family] tree. Be goal-focused.

Cavers know research means going back & forth through records and they . . .

- Start with the known and work to the unknown
- Gather data, but don't get discouraged if they need to go back to reconfirm information
- Recognize that, if they are on the wrong path in the cave, they might have to return to the “split” in the passageway where they took the wrong “fork”; they consider taking a different “branch” (but do not delete what has been discovered, they might not be too far off or they might find others who can use the research!)

### Spelunkers are satisfied with just a single . . .

- Index
- Transcription
- Abstract
- Tombstone
- Census record
- Newspaper clipping
- Family story
- Item from the family (letters, Bibles, journals, etc. . . . sometimes people lie)
- Online or otherwise distributed family tree (even if the originator is unknown)



### Cavers know to research the social history and they . . .

- Learn how the regional events and developments affected the family
- Discover what time periods cross over their family history timelines
- Develop understanding of why their ancestor . . .
  - Had the job he/she did
  - Moved in or out of the area
  - Associated with particular people or activities

### Spelunkers do not want to take time to . . .

- Look up history in resources other than those strictly focusing on genealogy
- Create timelines or look at maps
- Research occupations or other activities of family members

### Cavers do on-site research, including investigations at . . .

- Historical societies/libraries with
  - Family files
  - Newspapers
  - Cemetery records
  - Local histories and mug books
  - Business and telephone directories
- Court houses and other public repositories housing
  - Wills and probate records
  - Deeds and property documents
  - Court case records
- Cemeteries to explore
  - Burial records
  - Headstones
- Churches with the records of
  - Baptism
  - Marriage
  - Death/burial
  - Family/church histories

See references for more ideas on using the FAN Club method of making the exploration even more exhaustive

### Spelunkers believe . . .

- One or two pieces of evidence will be sufficient
- There is no value in going to where ancestors lived; the Internet provides all that is needed
- Joining societies requires too much commitment

### Cavers know to . . .

- Stay organized, using a consistent method of filing in order to locate information later by
  - Keeping discoveries and conclusions easy for others to follow
  - Creating a method by which the system can “grow” as more data is found
  - Developing a way to file material not yet connected to the family under investigation
- Do an exhaustive search before being confident with their claims by
  - Returning to websites for updated information (and keeping track of dates of prior visits)
  - Creating comparison charts or tables to rectify contradictions in the findings
  - Keeping logs of people contacted and websites visited, along with findings, or lack thereof (recording “negative evidence” as well as discoveries)
  - Maintaining a list of what caverns should be explored next, based on latest discoveries
- Engage in on-going education by
  - Attending online and/or in-person conferences
  - Obtaining books and other resources to stay on the path to credible claims
  - Following up on leads and suggestions from genealogists and historians
  - Maintaining subscriptions to genealogy and related journals, keeping on top of the latest discoveries and collections opened for exploration
  - Joining organizations that will be assets in the cultivation of their areas of study (and where they can help others move from spelunker to caver status)
  - Networking with other genealogists (family or associates) to get ideas for further research
  - Pursuing certificates, accreditations, degrees, etc. within the field of genealogy, history, and/or their chosen fields of study
  - Being open to the advances in technology and learning how to apply the tools appropriately
- Always cite their sources by
  - Including a record of what sources did not [seem to] yield findings
  - Using a recognized format consistently, aiding themselves and others to locate the material at a later date

### Spelunkers have not learned the value of . . .

- Organized filing of information, always leaving that for when they have the time
- Slowing down “researching” in order to fully examine what they have found
- Doing an exhaustive search (not settling for a single document)
- Taking more than a single class in beginning genealogy; that one class won’t provide it all
- Genealogy conferences, webinars, and similar means of learning how to explore the family cave
- Belonging to societies and volunteering to participate (it gives them chances to connect with people who may be helpful and whom they may help)
- Identifying where evidence was found (settling for a simple “birth certificate,” or comparable, as a source)
- Negative evidence

Network: It can be dangerous to explore a cave by yourself

## Suggestions for Becoming a Caver instead of a Spelunker

- Cavers use all records at their disposal to unearth the identity of the unknown potential relative (research the person as if he/she was one of their ancestors . . . that just might be the case!)
- Cavers know to contact archivists, professional genealogists, other researchers, and whomever might give a lead or direction or event on how to gain access to those elusive documents, if records might exist but aren't at their disposal
- Cavers are not married to one particular way to spell a name (given or surname)
- Cavers create timelines and do periodic reviews of the people and findings, as they are found, to verify that they are still going in the right direction
- Cavers use maps to search relationships between locations and further clarify identity of people and places
- Cavers consider browsing census records, checking the neighbors, and comparing data
- Cavers, like anyone going into uncharted territory, can get lost, but they are not adverse to go back to a waypoint to get back on the right path

## Guidelines for cavers to consider before heading into a different part of the cave

- Think about *what* is seen when looked at: conclusions are dependent on how data is interpreted, based on perception, combined with
  - Emotions
  - Prior experience/knowledge
  - Biases (hidden agendas of the record creators or those involved in the documentation)
  - Context (who, what, when, where, why, how)
- Analyze what is being viewed, with the focus determined by
  - Facts as supported by evidence
  - Competency of the source (person or resource)
  - Any "hidden agenda"
  - Thorough investigation (with record-keeping for future reference)
- Keep personal perspectives in perspective by
  - Leaving emotions on the shelf
  - Not being swayed by personal biases
  - Being open to interpretations of others (not blindly accepting, but recognizing that there might be other ways of viewing information)
- Never turn down a piece of evidence, instead
  - Evaluate every piece of data (you might not strike gold, but don't overlook silver in the quest)
  - Even when evaluation makes it questionable, file it for further, later analysis
  - Make a chart or spread sheet to help identify the contradictions (use colors – print and/or highlight – to make issues easy to spot)
  - Allow for "new" findings, even if they differ from initial conclusion(s) – then repeat the analysis (often *ad infinitum*)
  - Think out of the cavern

*Remember: removing options (and rock barricades) is a step forward, not back*

*Cavers ALWAYS cite sources & keep notes of those that have yielded no results. They date findings (or the lack of them) and locations (repository, website, publication, etc.) to help future explorers as well as themselves; one never knows what cavern might be worth a (second) look.*

## General Resources

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**Conclusion:** Cavers know that no one method (e.g., Internet research) should ever be considered the only path in tracking a family's life or trying to identify an elusive ancestor. Always consider auxiliary lines (siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins; even neighbors can provide info that will help you trace YOUR people). Also, consider the history of the geographic area & the demographics, economics, & politics of the towns and states where your family settled.