

GOT A PROBLEM? QUIT LOOKING FOR THE ANSWER

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If you are stuck on an ancestral problem, some of the best advice I can offer is to quit looking—or at least quit looking where and how you are presently looking. This article offers some suggestions.

QUIT LOOKING—REALLY!

Sometimes we are simply too close to the problem. We are in a rut (a very deep rut from which we cannot see the countryside). We need a break. Prepare a written, detailed analysis of everything you know about the problem. Print it out. Put it on top of the stack of documents that you've found, put them in a box, and put the box in a closet.

Then go work on a totally different family. You may learn new methods and sources in your new research venture. Wait at least six months. Then dig out that box. Begin by reviewing your written analysis. Next read every word of every document to see if there is a clue there that you had overlooked before because you thought you knew what the document said.

If that doesn't help, put the box away again, this time for a longer time period. Think back on the information sources that you had access to just three years ago as compared to now. More sources—printed, imaged, micro-filmed, and online—will continue to appear. Maybe you just need to wait until you have access to the document you need.

LOOK IN REVERSE

Are you looking for the parents of an ancestor you found in the 1850 or 1860 census? You know what to do, right? You search earlier censuses for the surname. I have a better idea. Search later censuses.

Too many family researchers feel that it is unnecessary to look in later censuses because they "already know who is in the family." Oh, really? This reveals a late-twentieth-century bias. We think of nuclear families, but the reality of the nineteenth century was extended families.

When we look in later years, we may find an elderly parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle in the family, or perhaps a widowed or unmarried older sibling. The opportunities are doubled. When searching earlier censuses, we had only the husband's surname to work with. But the extended family in later censuses is just as likely to include members of the wife's family. Furthermore, the 1880 census asked for the relationship to the head of household.

The additional surnames and birthplaces that we learn about in the extended households may provide valuable clues for narrowing our search in the earlier time periods.

At the time you began your research, searching censuses from 1870 onward may have been a major chore, but now we have censuses indexed and imaged online.

LOOK SIDWAYS

If you aren't having much luck looking backwards or forwards for your ancestor, look sideways. Focus your research on his or her siblings. They may be easier to find. Furthermore, they have the same parents. Don't forget to look for the spouses of the siblings. They may have unusual surnames and be easier to trace. Their place of origin may be known, which may be the origin for your ancestor.

LOOK IN NEW SOURCES

Many family researchers tend to focus their efforts on too few record types. The most neglected record group is surely deeds. This is amazing to me, since deeds can be such a rich source of family information. Two types, in particular, frequently state relationships mentioned in no other surviving records.

Quitclaim deeds are documents in which, for example, siblings (and sometimes the widow) release their claim on land of the deceased father. Spouses of the siblings are often named or signed quitclaim deeds.

Deeds of care are used to transfer title to someone (usually son, daughter, or son-in-law) providing that the person will care for the elderly couple.

Both of these records are found not in probate books, but in deed books.

LOOK FOR FNAs

Your ancestor's life was peopled with individuals to whom he was not related. These Friends, Neighbors, and Associates were important to him. They may offer valuable insight (and possibly even the answers that you are seeking). Families often moved to areas where old neighbors had gone. Conversely, neighbors from back home may have followed your ancestor to the new locality. If you can't find your ancestor's origin, try looking for the origins of his FNAs.

DON'T LOOK FOR PEOPLE

That's right, ignore names. Look for places. Soak up every bit of information you can find on the world of your ancestor. Research the county. Research the town. Research the church. Research the businesses, schools, stores of his area. Often this background leads to breakthroughs; it always provides a better understanding of our ancestors.

If you find yourself stuck on a problem family, quit looking! You just might find the solution.