

PAPER CHAINS AND POPCORN

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In the business world we often are required to go to training classes. Many years ago, in a class on effective meetings, I learned a technique that I find useful in genealogy. It was called popcorning, which is the process of encouraging as many ideas as possible to be listed quickly, with no evaluation. Since then, I have heard it called brainstorming and mind mapping. However, those terms are not the best descriptions for what I am discussing, which is a very focused technique. Brainstorming implies wild ideas out of left field, and mind mapping implies that the focus is on our own minds.

What I find helpful is document-focused popcorning. You consider a single document (record) and quickly list as many as potential documents (records) as you can that the document brings to mind. I used to visualize paper chains, with each document leading to another document, but I have come to realize that this was too simplistic. My visual chains became a tangle, with too many loops connected to the loop (document) I was considering.

This is not about record groups or research techniques. It is about identifying records that you might overlook otherwise. As an example, let's look at a single document, say a will for William Wilson. Sit down in a quiet place with just the will (no other documents or files allowed) and a pencil and paper.

What other documents do you think of? Immediately, documents related to probate come to mind. I usually jot down "probate" and then list at least some of them next to it, such as "proving the will," "inventory," "accounting," "bond," and so on. Oh, yes, and if this is the will book copy or an abstract, then I add "original will."

A will is about death. What other documents are directly related to this death? We might add "death certificate," "obituary," "burial," and "funeral home record." That last item would remind me to add "funeral card."

The earlier article "Vital Information without Vital Registration—Marriage & Death Records" has some additional ideas, but do not go read it at this point. The idea of popcorning is for ideas to pop from your brain freely and indiscriminately, preferably faster than you can write them down. Think of popcorn bursting from a hot-air popcorn popper. The heat source is the document. Your ideas should burst forth as randomly and quickly as the popped kernels of corn.

This process isn't about listing documents related to death, however. It is about documents related to *this* document, which just happens to be a will. It's time to get specific. Start scanning the will. The testator asks for his body to be buried in a Christian-like manner. Aha! We can add "church records, membership and death." Do not stop to evaluate whether or not you think his wish was sincere or to review other research that you have done. This is one time when evaluating is counter-productive. We want as many ideas as possible, as quickly as possible.

Continue scanning. He left the 100 acres where he now lives to his eldest son John. At this point we can observe an important difference between this technique and traditional evaluation of the document. Ignore John. Yep, completely. We could go research John, but in this exercise, we're listing documents. We don't want to get sidetracked from the important element of that bequest, the land. Where did it come from? We list "Document acquiring 100 acres—grant, deed, will, etc." I can't think of land without thinking of taxes, so "taxes" goes on my list. In my brain, acquisition naturally leads to disposition. Obviously this will was the document by which William disposed of the land and John acquired it. But John disposed of it. Add "John disposing of 100 acres—deed, will."

His eldest daughter, Mary Morris, receives money; his youngest daughter Ethyl receives a bed and a horse. Marriage pops into mind. "Mary Wilson marriage to __ Morris, before date of will" and "Ethyl Wilson marriage to __, after date of will."

There are several mentions of his loving wife Tabitha. Obviously, we want to look for "marriage of William Wilson and Tabitha __." And, gosh, what happened to her after his death? When did she die? Did she remarry or not? Add "Burial for Tabitha Wilson," "Tabitha Wilson marriage to __, after date of will," and (putting the previous two together) "Burial for Tabitha __ in area cemeteries." Where did she go to live? Add "next census, look for old lady with one of children."

Continue scanning, jotting down documents that pop into (maybe that should be "out of") your mind. Don't organize or analyze. At the end of the will are the names of the witnesses. I've already said you can't say "go research so-and-so," but there are some documents you want to list if a name is unfamiliar: "other wills from same township for names of witnesses." This may help eliminate witnesses who were the scribe or other official person. (This applies even more to deeds.)

The document ends with the signature (proving and recording information are technically another document). This, too, adds another item to the list. Whether the will was signed with a signature or a mark, you should add "compare to form of other original signatures and facsimiles (in deed books, for example) to validate same person."

Notice how often during the popcorning one thought led to another. We never stopped to evaluate how likely it is that a document exists or would be useful. We never thought about research or finding records. We never considered what we had already done. We just listed documents. This is by no means all the documents that will occur on your list through the popcorning technique. Your mind and your document will produce many additional or different ideas. Good luck. (And for some reason, I'm hungry. I guess that was an advantage that the paper chain image has over the popcorning image.)