

Vital records are always correct...or are they

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As genealogists and family historians we should be seeking out our family's stories. Even more important, we should want to prove them. Proving grandma right was a main push for me in my early research days. Wanting to know the truth gives me a goal, and then prove the family lore to disbelieving family members made it that much better. But what if that vital record is wrong, or leads you to the wrong people?



To weed through conflicting evidence, and downright misleading information, you need to have a good grasp of research methodology and an understanding of how to create search strategies. Plus, you need to become an expert at teasing out the truth from the information you are presented with.

Gather your facts

Knowing what you are looking for is crucial. Pinpoint your research focus, knowing that you may have several different research questions you will need to answer. To begin take stock in what you already know. From that you should determine where the holes are and can then go about filling them.

One of the best ways to do this is through creating a timeline. It should contain all dates, places, people, or any other data you know from previous research. Do not forget to put in collateral lines if it would help solve your research question. Also, look at the historical ramifications to the timeline. Were there wars, epidemics, political upheaval, or anything else that would affect your ancestor's lives. History, and in particular social history, should be examined when looking at your ancestor's life.

Collateral and associated lines should also be considered. Could investigating a sibling, neighbor, friends, or other assorted persons be the key to unlocking the truth? Remember to consider everything because sometimes the straight line will only keep running you into a brick wall. You may have to climb over it or dig under it to really get the answers.

Also, don't be afraid to interview your relatives if you are able. Everyone has a different side to the same story, it all depends on several factors such as what they remember or how it affected them. If it is a family story handed down for many generations try gathering versions as well. Once again, each of us will remember the facts told to us a bit differently. Or, like in the game of telephone, the facts can alter and change based on the audience and what was being conveyed.

Investigate where you should look

Sounds simple right? You need to go research your ancestors so you will pop on over to the local (insert name of repository or website) to learn what you need. However, if you don't do your homework first your trip will be a waste of your time. Successful research takes time and planning.

A few of the items you should think about are:

- What records would my ancestor have created (make a list of everything they did and how it may have been documented)
- What records were created during their time frame (such as when did mandatory vital statistic registration start?)
- Have any occurrences happened where those records may no longer exist (as an example the court house was burned or there was a flood)
- Are the items you need published somewhere or will you need to travel (or hire someone) to the repository to look at the originals

Depending on what you are researching you may also need to educate yourself on the topic. If you are trying to find out if the family story about your homesteading ancestor you will of course need to read up on the Homestead Act and anything associated with homesteading. It is not a failure on you as a genealogist if you have to spend days, if not months, researching a record type (or historical event) so that you can do research. It merely means like the rest of us you do not know everything!



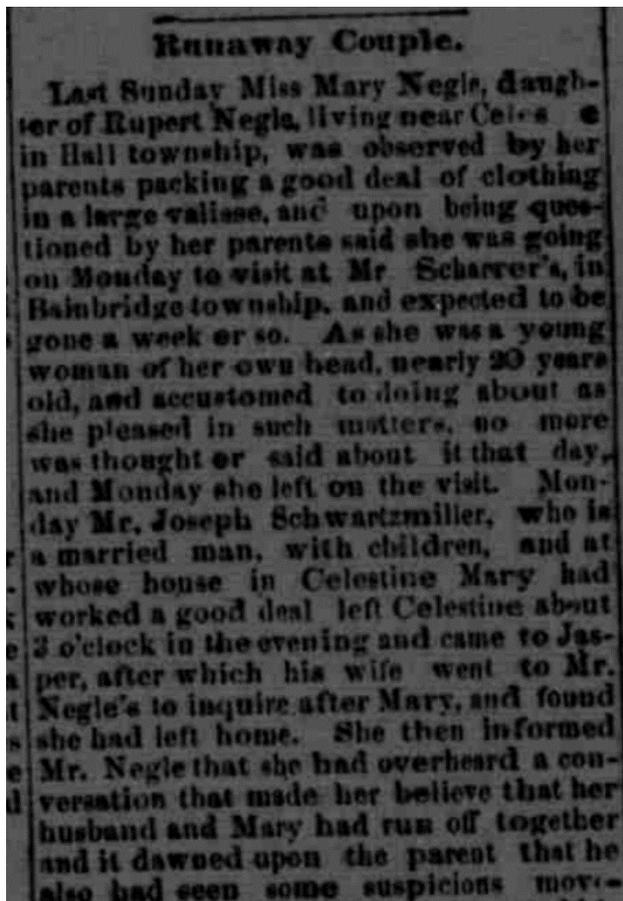
Analyze your data and your problem

Remember, family stories are just that until you prove them. This is particularly true if you have official documents which are in direct conflict with each other. It means even though we loved Aunt Suzie to death we shouldn't take her family story as 100% accurate. Sometimes this is the hardest part for any researcher; tearing apart the family myth to get at the kernel of truth.

Let's look at this example:

“Great grandma and grandpa Miller had to get married. You see, they fell in love and that led to her getting pregnant out of wedlock. He ran away instead of facing the responsibility and her family brought him back after a search to marry her. Grandma's parents were wealthy and sent them to the US from Germany to land they had purchased so they could start over. However, grandpa never really cared for, or treated his oldest well. So, when he was old enough the boy ran away from home. No one ever talked about him.”

This was the synopsis of a story I grew up with about my grandmother's maternal grandparents (my 2nd great grandparents). There were other details thrown in there about how he fought in the Prussian military, how they were star crossed lovers, and how the family basically paid him off to marry her. It was one of those stories I was curious about.



Jasper Indiana "Courier," 11 April 1884.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84023963/1884-04-11/ed-1/seq-5.pdf>

I knew there was an issue with the narrative when I discovered on the US Census that they were both born in the United States. Well if that was wrong, what else could be about this story too. Following the guidelines above I started to pull apart the story.

First, I made a timeline of the information I found as I gathered it. Working backwards through the census and vital records I created a family narrative. It was at this point I discovered my next discrepancy. They were married 4 years after the birth of the oldest child. Well... I guess it could have taken that long to find him, but that seems odd.

From this I made several hypotheses of what could be the true story. Was there a prior marriage? Did he leave before she knew and returned years later? Is there a cover up? Of course these questions made me research the area, time, and records which may have been created. In this case, the true story came out thanks to a newspaper article.

While this process may seem easy, it was a two-year search. I gathered vital records, church records, deeds, and letters. It was only

when I turned away from the traditional record sets that I found my answer. And that several family stories were merged into one large one.

What I did, and you should too, is that I suspended all judgment and treated my family like facts. I was on the case to solve a mystery and no matter how much I loved my grandmother she may have been misled as a child. Which in turn led her to telling a squashed together alternative narrative to her kids and grandkids.

Most importantly, I had a good mystery to investigate and I not only loved the journey but learned so much from it.