

## Doing the History Eliminates the Mystery

**Curt B. Witcher**, MLS, FUGA, IGSF  
Genealogy Center Manager  
Allen County Public Library  
900 Library Plaza, P. O. Box 2270  
Fort Wayne, IN 46801-2270 | 260-421-1225  
[www.GenealogyCenter.org](http://www.GenealogyCenter.org)  
[Genealogy@ACPL.Info](mailto:Genealogy@ACPL.Info)  
[www.facebook.com/GenealogyCenter](https://www.facebook.com/GenealogyCenter)  
[www.pinterest.com/allencountylib/genealogy](https://www.pinterest.com/allencountylib/genealogy)



Thorough genealogical research depends on one's ability to find and appropriately evaluate all the evidence available to substantiate a particular individual and the family to which that individual belongs. This can only be done when one steps outside the normal routine of collecting documents and begins to harvest information by exploring the history surrounding an individual and a particular family.

### Strategies for “Doing the History”

**Part One:** Focus on all the details of a single ancestor.

Establish a specific context for the individual ancestor being investigated; establish a specific context for the particular ancestral family being explored. Ask the full range of the “reports’ questions:” who, what, where, when, and why.

**Part Two:** Focus analytical attention on finding and analyzing all the documents that evidence the details of the particular ancestor.

Seek to find and evaluate all the documents that support the details you both claim and want to know about a particular ancestor. All does not mean all that are easily available, all that are online, or all that you've had time to “get around to”—all means “every, total, complete.” It is helpful to have a documents checklist.

**Part Three:** Evaluate the specific contexts in which you find your particular ancestor and ancestral family.

If the person/family is living in a rural setting, determine who the neighbors are within several square miles. Consider ethnic clusters and the history of the land. If the person/family is living in a town or urban setting, determine who the neighbors are and if the person is living in an actual defined neighborhood. Evaluating the specific contexts for the particular ancestor should involve looking at every known aspect of the individual's life—the answers to all of the who, what, where, when, and why questions in Part One. Evaluating the specific context will assist in creating a “target area” on which to focus more intense research.

**Part Four:** Study all the geographic histories of the target area.

It is not possible to put too much emphasis on knowing the history of the geographic areas where your ancestors lived. Knowing the history will help you understand why

your ancestors settled where they did, both generally and specifically, and will help highlight more of the lesser known sources and record types that might be extant in the area. The exploration of geographic histories will lead to other more specific histories. Some of these more specific histories may include religious, business, and trade or occupational histories. In addition to other more specific histories, the in-depth exploration of general histories also typically reveals new sources of data. Some of these sources may include:

- newspapers
- directories
- gazetteers
- laws and codes
- letters & diaries
- manuscripts collections
- company records
- military compilations
- religious works
- government docs.

Sources of geographic histories include:

- The local public library(ies) in the target area of your research.
- The state library in the state of your target area. <publiclibraries.com/state>
- Major genealogical research libraries and virtual offerings:
  - Family History Library/FamilySearch—Catalog, Books & Wiki
  - Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center—Catalogs & Databases
  - Library of Congress—Library Catalog and Digital Collections
  - New England Historic Genealogical Society—Catalog, Manuscripts & Databases
  - Google Books, Internet Archive/Open Library, & Digital Public Library of America

### Part Five: Study all the ethnic histories that relate to your ancestor.

So much information can be gleaned by taking a careful look at the ethnicity of one's ancestor. In a very real way, it is an important "fingerprint" of an ancestor. Knowing the particular ethnic group may help explain why one church was attended over a geographically nearer one; may lead one to special publications including ethnic newspapers and ethnic directories; and may lead one to the records of ethnic organizations, aid societies, and schools. Studying ethnic histories will almost assuredly reveal more record and data sources. Ethnic encyclopedias that are geographically based are particularly valuable, e.g. ***Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups***.

### Part Six: Don't forget "near-bys," FANs, and the HISTORY!

Know the neighbors; know the FANs: friends, associates, & neighbors. If data cannot be found on a particular individual but the family is living in an ethnic neighborhood, focus on a neighbor or a small group of neighbors to investigate. Know the topography as well as the geography, and the migration route that brought the first members of your family to the area. Use timelines to place the particular ancestor and ancestral family in multiple historical contexts. *Doing the history* answers many questions and provides valuable data.