

Mesa FamilySearch Library
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Breaking Down Genealogical Brick Walls

When genealogists are unable to find further documentation to extend their ancestral line, they commonly refer to the situation as a “brick wall.” I think this term is unfortunate because it implies that there is some external force preventing the researcher from finding information. In fact, the problem usually lies with the researcher. Years of experience show that there are two main issues that stand in the way of further research progress: looking in the wrong place or being unaware of the types of records that may be available. It is unlikely that there are no more records if the unknown person died within the last 500 years and/or the person lived all or part of his or her life in America and/or the unknown person had descendants. If any of these conditions are the case, then there are always more records to search.

For example, many researchers in the Southern States of the United States, have been told that no records exist because the court house burned. Despite the burning of the courthouse, there are still records that can be researched. For example, this situation is referred to as “Burned Counties Research.” This is a whole subject of a specialized type of investigation. For more information see FamilySearch.org Research Wiki, Burned Counties Research.

One important point is to recognize the difference between a brick wall, where records are missing or unavailable and an end-of-line where no more information can be expected. An example of the end-of-line is a out-of-wedlock child where the husband’s identity is not ascertainable or a foundling left on the doorstep of a church or hospital. Sometimes, because of the time frame involved, there simply are no more records.

Every person lives in a cloud of records that follow them all the days of their life and even after death. Our job as genealogists is to find the records in the individual’s cloud. The most important fact to determine, before proceeding with any research, is to identify at least one very specific location associated with an event in the person’s life. Genealogically reliable records are created at or near the site of an event or in a jurisdiction where the event occurred, close to the time the event or created by people who participated in the event.

Records can exist at every jurisdictional level; town, city, county, township, state, nation, no matter how these jurisdictions are designated. Use historic maps and other map references to establish the jurisdictions at the time of the event where records may have been located.