

What does that Document REALLY say?

Evaluating the Evidence

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I. Understand the need to take a professional approach to research

- Use a research log
- Keep accurate notes
- Document all sources

II. Understand the classes of evidence

- Sources are original, derivative, or authored
Created at the time of the event or a copy of the original
- Information is primary, secondary, or indeterminable
This helps to determine the quality of the information
- Evidence is direct, indirect, or negative
This helps to answer the research question

III. Determine the reliability of evidence. Ask these questions

- Who was the informant?
- Could the informant have provided inaccurate information; either intentionally or unintentionally?
- When was a document created? For what purpose was it created?
- Does the record support other known data?
- Does this evidence answer the research question?
- Is there missing information?
- What does the missing information tell?
- What does the record NOT report?
- Could this event have happened at the time and/or place stated?

IV. One piece of evidence does not make for proof, but may provide suggestions for further search.

- If the census indicates a land holder, search land records
- Death certificate may indicate cemetery. Search there for more details
- If looking at a church record, become familiar with the laws of that denomination.
- Estate records give many clues as to literacy, property holdings, occupation, family structure.

V. "Rules" to remember

- Primary evidence can be wrong
- Knowing "who" provided the information is essential to its credibility
- Never accept only one source as proof; even an original
- Scanned images are still derivative sources; can contain errors
- Deeds, wills, and other court records are derivative sources; can contain errors
- Posted family trees provide clues only; NOT reliable information
- Not all problems can be solved ☹

Suggested Resources

"BCG Genealogical Standard Manual, The." Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2000.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Merriman, Brenda Dougall. *Genealogical Standards of Evidence: A Guide for Family Historians*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009.

Rose, Christine *Genealogical Proof Standard Building a Solid Case*, 4th ed. San Jose, California: CR Publications, 2005.