Genealogy Research Process

Visualization of Concepts from The Board for Certification of Genealogists & Elizabeth Shown Mills

**Research Goals**
- Statement
- Question
- Hypothesis

**Research Plan**
- Duplicate Original
- Record (Clerk’s) Copy
- Image Copy

**Research Log**
- Transcript
- Extract
- Abstract

**Source**
- Primary
- Secondary
- Indirect
- Negative

**Information**
- Direct
- Resolve Conflicts

**Evidence**
- Proof Argument

**Citation**
- Define
- Search
- Cite
- Analyze
- Resolve
- Conclude

**The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)**

**Define Research Goals**
We identify our objectives:
- statement to prove
- question to answer
- hypothesis to test

**Search Reliable Sources**
We conduct a reasonably exhaustive search in reliable sources for all information that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question.

As part of data collection we use:
- Images: Photocopy, digital image, etc.
- Handwritten or typed copies: Transcript - full, exact copy
- Abstract - condensed version with all important details

Source provenance is the tracking of each representation of a source back to the original.

**Cite Each Source**
We collect and include in our compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source or sources of each item of information we use.

The definitive guide is:
Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace by Elizabeth Shown Mills.

Citing sources gives credibility to our research, helps us have confidence in the research of others, and aids during analysis.

**Analyze Sources, Information & Evidence**
We analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence.

Source - an artifact, document, book, person, etc.
- Original - first oral or recorded form
- Derived - from that already written or spoken
- Derivatives that might be treated as Originals:
  - Duplicate Original - made at same time as original
  - Image Copy - film, photo, digital copy of original
  - Record (Clerk’s) Copy - usually entered in a register

Information - data that makes up a source
- Primary - firsthand (participant, eyewitness)
- Secondary - secondhand (non-participant)

Evidence - our interpretation of relevant information
  - Direct - answers the research question by itself
  - Indirect - relevant, but can’t stand alone
  - Negative - inference drawn from absence of information that should exist in a record but is missing

**Resolve Conflicts**
We resolve any conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question.

All conflicts must be resolved. Although not always the case, usually:
- Original sources carry more weight than derivatives.
- Primary information carries more weight than secondary.
- Indirect evidence can carry just as much or more weight than direct.

Even primary information from an original source can be wrong.

**Conclude Written Proof**
We arrive at a soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.

In a proof argument you:
- Explain the problem
- Identify the known resources
- Present the evidence with source citations and analysis
- Discuss any conflicting evidence
- Summarize the main points and write your conclusion

There is no such thing as a final conclusion. New information can support, question, or disprove your current conclusion.

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Sources: