

“No Records Found” Negative Evidence

[Video Link](#)

What do you do when you don't find the record you expect to find? You have looked high and low and can't find the records. Do you note the fact that you could not find the record in your research notes? Is this negative evidence or negative findings?

Viewer Question

What do you do with negative evidence?

I searched the entire 1840 census for a county in New York but didn't find my ancestor.

Do I note that in my research notes or put that somewhere else? - Danell

This was a great question which prompted several lessons here.

Evidence Defined (Dictionary.com)

Noun

1. that which tends to **prove or disprove** something; ground for belief; proof.
2. something that makes plain or clear; an indication or sign:

In most of our research we should try to *disprove* as much as we try to *prove* a hypothesis.

Negative Evidence

“A type of evidence arising from an absence of a situation or information in extant records where that information might be expected; one of the three categories of genealogical evidence, compare with negative search.”

Board for Certification of Genealogist, a.k.a BCG

Another definition says:

“Negative evidence: an inference we can draw from the absence of a situation that should exist under particular circumstances; i.e., Sherlock



Holmes’s famed case of “the sound of the dog not barking” when a burglary occurred.”

This is not to be confused with negative findings—i.e., the absence of information we hoped to uncover.” Elizabeth Shown Mills, Evidence Explained.

In other words,

“Negative evidence is the absence of original evidence where we expect it to be, after Reasonably Exhaustive Research.” Connie Knox

“Negative evidence does not mean records are missing.” Thomas W. Jones, *Professional Genealogy, Preparation, Practice & Standards*, Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor.

Negative Findings

Negative findings are where there are no records found after searching a specific record collection or group.

Reasonably Exhaustive Research

What is it?

“Reasonably exhaustive research—emphasizing original records providing participants” information—for all evidence that might answer a genealogist’s question about an identity, relationship, event, or situation.” - BCG

How Exhaustive is it?

As The Legal Genealogist, Judy Russell, once said in a seminar I was taking (I’m paraphrasing here), Reasonably Exhaustive Research does not mean *exhaustive*, it means *reasonable* research.

Direct, Indirect, and Negative Evidence

Direct – Directly answers the research question.

Indirect – Typically needs two or more records to piece together a conclusion that answers the research question.

Negative Evidence - Negative evidence is the absence of evidence where we expect it to be after Reasonably Exhaustive Research.

Direct Evidence

As stated, direct evidence directly answers the research question. For example...

Research Question *“When was Jane Smyth born?”*

Birth Certificate says 24 June 1928.

The birth certificate directly answers the research question.

Indirect Evidence

Indirect Evidence typically needs two or more records to piece together a conclusion that answers the research question.

If you're a computer programmer think of stacking “If this, then that” statements. If *this* is true, and *another thing* is true, then the result is XYZ. Computer people will know what I mean.

Research Question “When was Robert Koch born?”

Item #1 - *1900 Census for Johnson County, KS says he was born in Kansas in April 1892, and he is the son of Fred and Wilma Koch.*

Item #2 – *Bible record noted Robert Koch, son of Fred and Wilma Koch, notes he was born 20 April (but the year was smudged/unreadable).*

Conclusion - These two items together conclude that Robert Koch was born 20th of April 1892.

This strategy also works with a combination of DNA and traditional genealogical evidence, but it can be much more complicated needing multiple sound reasonings to conclude.

Negative Evidence

This brings us back to Negative Evidence.

“Negative evidence is the absence of original evidence where we expect it to be after Reasonably Exhaustive Research.” *Connie Knox*

Revisiting the Viewers Question

What do you do with negative evidence?

I searched the entire 1840 census for a county in New York but didn't find my ancestor.

These are **negative findings** unless there is more to the research that I'm not aware of.

There are more resources to look at to *prove* or *disprove* that the ancestor was or was not in New York in 1840.

Strategies Using Reasonably Exhaustive Research

Where else could our researcher look for records around 1840?

Create a Plan

Here is a short example of where this researcher could look for more evidence around that time and place.

- Tax Records
- City or Business Directories (if they exist at that time)
- Land & Property
- Wills & Probate
- Vital Records (if they exist)
- County Court
- All Platforms (Ancestry, FamilySearch, WikiTree, MyHeritage, and so on.)
- Cemeteries (Find-a-Grave, Billion Graves, etc.)
- Newspapers
- Family & FAN Club (Friends, Associates, and Neighbors).

“Plan Your Research And Research Your Plan”

Connie Knox

Once Done with Reasonably Exhaustive Research... And you are *not* finding your ancestor in 1840 in New York...

Is it Reasonably Exhaustive Research? Yes!

Adding to Research Notes

Evidence is evidence, even if it is negative evidence. Write a brief conclusion as to why you thought he/she should be there and then note it as negative evidence.

Example:

1830 U.S. Census – John Doe found in Albany County, NY. (Plus, Abstracted details, add source citation in the footnotes).

1840 U.S. Census – John Doe is missing from the census. I searched the entire county and was unable to find him.

1850 U.S. Census – John Doe is in Albany County, NY. (Plus, Abstracted details & source citation.)

Why?

What was happening in history?

Could he have moved temporarily?

Was there a family reason to leave?

Did someone die?

Did work take him away?

Military?

Prison?



Conclusion

- Conduct **Reasonably Exhaustive Research**
- **Note All Evidence in Your Research Notes** - Even Negative Evidence if it has passed the *Reasonably Exhaustive Research* test.
- ***"Plan Your Research and Research Your Plan"***

Keep asking questions!

It's those questions that make you a great researcher!