

Proving Your Lineage

By Constance H. Knox

In this lesson, we're going to take a look at a high level view of how to prove your lineage. Keep in mind that you could spend years learning each step in this process.

Research Question

If we want to do genealogy methodically, we want to start with a good research question. We need to keep in mind that we do not want to have a very broad research question like “I want to learn everything on my father's side of the family.” With such a broad research question it is hard to create a methodical plan for which to answer the question.

Instead we want to get more specific using a name, a date, and a place whenever possible. For example, “Robert Jones was born in 1903 in Oklahoma City, OK, but where was he married?” this research question takes us from what we know to the unknown. It includes all three items (name, date, and place) followed by our question.

Your research question could include just one or two of these items (name, place, and date). For example, “Otis Parker was born about 1902 per the 1930 U.S. Census for Woodbury County, IA, but does not state where he was born. Where was Otis Parker Born?”

When we get more specific with our research questions, we can define where we're going to seek the answers.

Genealogical Proof Standards (GPS)

There are specific research rules that are put out by the Board for Certification of Genealogists called “The Genealogical Proof Standards.” This small but mighty book gives us powerful information in detail about what we need to do to help prove our lineage. (See Resources Section)

The GPS Offers Five Steps:

1. Reasonably Exhaustive Research
2. Complete and Accurate Source Citations
3. Critical Tests of Relevant Evidence Through The Process Of Analysis And Correlation
4. Resolution of Conflicting Evidence
5. Sound, Reasoned, and Coherent, Written Conclusions

These guidelines are an excellent process to follow for the hobbyist and professional alike.



Evidence Analysis

Evidence analysis is examining the details within a document. This often starts with a transcription. Reviewing all data within the document, including witnesses, dates, places, and when the document was created can help evaluate each piece of evidence. (See the Evidence Analysis Research Process Map on the last page.)

Information Quality

One of the things you need to consider when looking at the records that you're finding for your ancestors is to consider the quality of the information they contain. Is it an original record? Is it an index? Who was the informant?

Whenever possible we want to find the original records and evaluate the documents for their quality of evidence contained within and for the type of information that was given in the document.

A **Primary Source** – This is someone who witnessed an event or has firsthand knowledge.

A **Secondary (Derivative) Source** – This would be someone who is reporting on an event or data within a document. For example, a census enumerator is a secondary source as he is copying what is being told to him by a family member, a neighbor or other person.

Authored (Narrative) - These are typically family histories either published, self-published, or unpublished.

Direct vs. Indirect Evidence vs. Negative Evidence

Before we can come to a conclusion, we need to identify Direct versus Indirect and Negative Evidence.

Direct Evidence is when you have a piece of evidence that directly answers the Research Question. For example, you have a birth certificate with a birth place that solves the question “where was John Doe born?” that is Direct Evidence.

Indirect Evidence does not directly answer the research question in and of itself, but does when “Two or more information items... answers a research question... when combined...”¹

Negative Evidence is when you *don't* find records in an area where you would expect them to be (after Reasonably Exhaustive Research).

Correlation of Evidence

Correlation of Evidence is where we are taking multiple records and comparing them for information contained within. Are the names, dates, places, and other data the same across various records?

¹ Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, National Genealogical Society Special Topic Series, (2013), 136.

By comparing multiple documents for the same ancestor or family group, you can determine whether there is any conflicts in the data. Does the evidence make sense?

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation Bias is where someone tries to fit the evidence to a hypothesis or research question that a person is trying to resolve.

We often see Confirmation Bias when someone is trying to prove family lore. One should follow the evidence with an open mind and try not to introduce Confirmation Bias.

In order to help avoid have Confirmation Bias, one should work as hard to *not* prove a hypothesis as much as they do to prove it.

Conflict Resolution

While some conflicts are minor and do not need to be resolved, such as minor differences in the spellings of a name, some conflicts may need to be resolved such as where a person was born.

Conflict resolution can only be achieved by following the GPS standards and conducting Reasonably Exhaustive Research, followed by Evidence Analysis, and lastly followed by Correlation of Evidence.

Acceptable Conclusions

The truth of the matter is “absolute proof” is sometimes difficult to document. In some cases, DNA evidence where you have a father and son relationship could be considered absolute proof.

In many cases, we have to rely on records as they are presented to us, the analysis of that evidence, understanding primary, secondary, and negative evidence along with the correlation of all evidence. Only then can we present a logical conclusion based on the information we have at the time of our analysis and how it directly answers the Research Question. Sometimes new evidence comes to light that may change our conclusions.

Written Conclusions

Written conclusions can be in the form of a Proof Statement or Proof Argument (a.k.a. Proof Summary).

A **Proof Statement** is a simple sentence or two explaining your conclusions.

A **Proof Argument** is a detailed explanation of how the evidence is laid out and is correlated to come to the conclusion resolving your Research Question.

Unresolved Conflicts & Language of Probabilities

When we cannot resolve conflicts or give proof to our Research Question, we need to honestly state that in our documentation.

It is acceptable to use Language of Probabilities in our research notes and documentation. These are words or phrases that include “maybe, possibly, probably, likely” or “without further evidence.” This helps the reader understand that there was *no* solid conclusion achieved. Later on, there may be additional information that helps resolve the conflict.

Sometimes conflicts can't be resolved. It's okay. Life will not come to an end if you can't resolve a conflict. Sometime the evidence is just not available. Write up your conclusions in your Research Notes with the Language of Probabilities and move on.

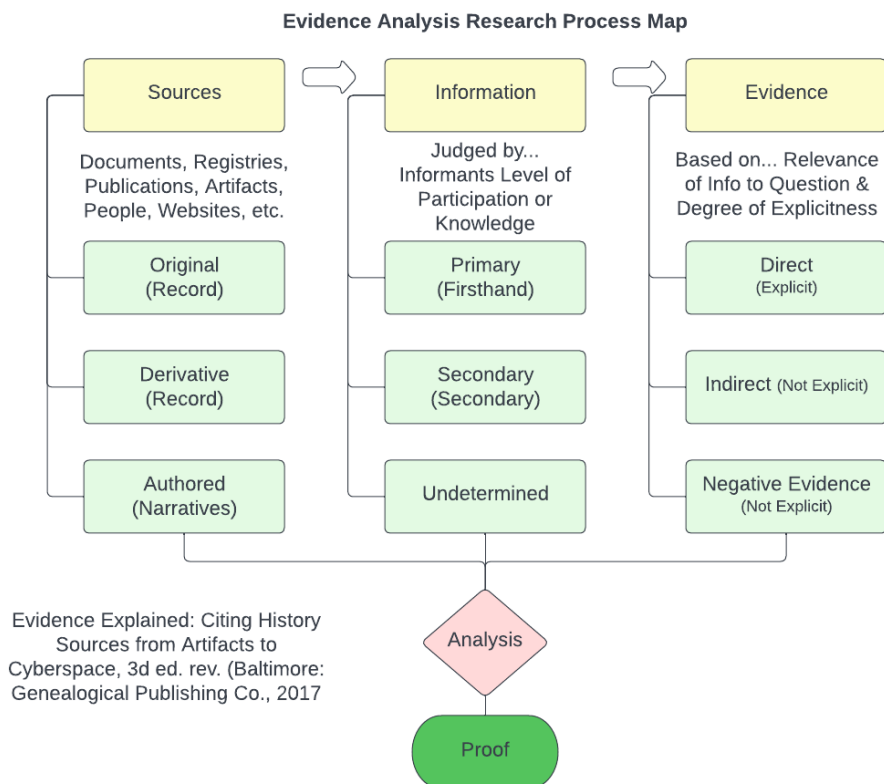
Resources

[Mastering Genealogical Proof, by Thomas W. Jones, National Genealogical Society Special Topic Series \(affiliate\)](#)

[Genealogy Standards Second Edition, by the Board for Certification of Genealogists \(affiliate\)](#)

[Evidence Explained: History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace 3rd Edition Revised \(affiliate\)](#)

[Genealogy TV Amazon Store \(Books, Archival Materials, and More\)](#)



² Recreated with permission from Elizabeth Shown Mills, author of Evidence Explained: Citing History from Artifacts to Cyberspace (2017), 3rd ed., inside front cover, Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, MD.