Basic Research Practices in the Age of New FamilySearch

Where do we go from here?..Back to the sources.

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New FamilySearch Family Tree

FamilySearch Family Tree or "New FamilySearch" is a new genealogy database being developed by the LDS Church. It has had a staged roll out organized by region and is currently in use by members of the LDS Church throughout North America and other parts of the world. It is currently unavailable to people who are not members of the LDS Church but plans are in the works to open the database to everyone soon. It is based on a wiki collaboration structure and has limited communication and source citation capabilities.

FamilySearch Family Tree and Source Centricity

In the age of New Family Search, good research practices are more important than ever. Even though FamilySearch Family Tree does not allow complete collaboration between users showing the full research process yet, we have to continue to have "source centricity" in our research. Ultimately the reliability of a historical fact lies in the sources that have been used to establish a fact. The more accurate a source is, and the more accurately we have interpreted it, the more we can be sure the information we glean from that source is correct. As we work with FamilySearch Family Tree we have to be careful to make finding sources our first priority, and then carefully document those sources to be able to work with the database in the future. Today, source centricity is crucial to your success and will ultimately strengthen this new database.

Following a GPS—The Genealogical Proof Standard.

We should apply the basic practices of good genealogy research to New FamilySearch Family Tree information even as we are waiting for the capability to thoroughly show that research in the database. "Proof is a fundamental concept in genealogy. In order to merit confidence, each conclusion about an ancestor must have sufficient credibility to be accepted as "proved." (BCG, Genealogical Proof Standard) Following the Genealogical Proof Standard will help us come to the highest level of "truth" possible and make our interactions with FamilySearch Family Tree more fruitful.

1. **Exhaustive Search**

"Reliable conclusions are rarely rooted in half-tilled soil. Any relevant record that goes unexamined is a land mine waiting to explode our premature theories." (Elizabeth Shown Mills pg. 16)

- Keeping a good record of your research, including a research log, will help one track what sources have been checked and help one map out future research.
- One must contact other researchers found working on the same information in the database to see what sources they have uncovered in their research.
- Good genealogy researchers will always drill down to the original source. Databases and Indexes are not records. They are a means to finding the original record. Extracted information can be wrong. One should always look up the source of your source.
- Historical research can never be considered complete but we must minimize the chance that undiscovered sources will change our conclusions.

2. **Well Analyzed**

"Bias, ego, ideology, patronage, prejudice, pride or shame cannot shape our decisions as we appraise our evidence. To do so is to warp reality and deny ourselved the understanding of the past that is, after all, the reason for our labor." (Elisabeth Shown Mills, pg. 15)

A good researcher always tries to be objective in his findings and not reflect the ideologies and values of the present onto the past. In analyzing sources, we need to keep in mind:

- Original and Derivative Sources.
  An original source is the first transmission of the data. Duplicates, record (clerk's) copies and image copies can be considered original source information. Derivative sources are copies that have been processed such as transcripts, edited transcripts, abstracts, extracts, and etc. The more a source has been altered from its original state, the less reliable it is.
- Primary Information and Secondary Information.
  Different levels of information can be included in the same source. Example: Death Certificate. The information that is current to the creation of the source is primary, the information that is not current is secondary. Primary vs. Secondary information is a continuum.
- Direct evidence, Indirect evidence and Negative evidence.
  Evidence is our interpretation of the information in a source. Evidence can establish a conclusion, support a conclusion, or negate a conclusion.
- Analyzing sources is not a black and white exact science nor is it quantifiable. There is a wide spectrum of good vs. bad information. Certainly, Probably, Possibly, Likely, Apparently, Perhaps.

3. **Conflicting Evidence Resolved**

"If conflicting evidence is not resolved, a credible conclusion is not possible." (BCG, The Genealogical Proof Standard)

- While resolving conflicting evidence further analysis might need to be considered, such as:
  - Certification
  - Content

- Creator's Veracity & Skill
- Informant's Purpose & Reliability
- Language Characteristics
- Material Characteristics
- Penmanship
- Custodial History, Trail of ownership.
- Original sources and derivative sources. Degree of Processing (Mills, pg. 32-37)

o In working with FamilySearch Family Tree, as we verify and dispute information it is important to return to the original sources to evaluate and refute any information.

4. **Well Documented**

o Definitive authority on citing sources is: Mills, Elizabeth Shown. Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, 2007.

o Family Search is working with Mills in developing source citations for FamilySearch Family Tree. Future syncing will be easier if Mills' concepts are followed now.

o Well documented sources establish credibility in the research and helps one analyze research that has been done.

o Every bit of information that will allow another researcher to re-trace your steps and come to their own conclusion needs to be documented.

5. **Clearly Concluded**

Elizabeth Shown Mills suggests these standards for a Proof Argument:

- o Explanation of the problem
- o Identification of known resources
- o Presentation of evidence, supported by thorough source citations and analyses
- o Explicit discussion of any conflicting evidence
- o Summation of main points and reiteration of the conclusion. (pg 26)

Because New FamilySearch cannot show all of the analysis and documentation needed for good research yet, a user needs to keep some or all of these aspects of the proof argument in a private copy of your research. These can be stored in the notes and sources of any genealogy software. Future syncing with New FamilySearch will be easiest if a current FamilySearch Affiliate software program is used. These affiliate companies now include: RootsMagic, Legacy Family Tree, Family Insight, and Ancestral Quest. Further information can be found at http://www.familysearch.org/eng/affiliates/index.html
All of these programs allow the user to sync the data in their program with the FamilySearch Family Tree database and will allow source syncing as it becomes available in the database.

Is there "A Truth"?

At this point in time can we know exactly what happened in the past? Our research is only speculation, but thorough research followed by careful interpretation can allow us to come as close as possible to what happened in the past.

Doctrine and Covenants 128:24
We need to put forth our best efforts. May our records be *as accurate as we can make them* when they are presented to the Lord.

Further Reading

- National Genealogy Society, "Genealogical Standards and Guidelines" http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/ngs_standards_and_guidelines
- Board for Certification of Genealogists, "The Genealogical Proof Standard" http://www.bcgcertifcation.org/resources/standard.html
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, 2007.
- Board for Certification of Genealogists. The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual. Ancestry Publishing, Orem, 2000.
- Tucker, Mark. "Genealogy Research Process Map." http://www.thinkgenealogy.com/wp-content/uploads/genealogy-research-map.pdf.

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