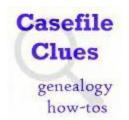
Casefile Clues

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http://www.casefileclues.com Weekly case studies, sources, and methods

Brick Walls from A to Z

This week we take an alphabetical look at some approaches that can help break down those proverbial genealogical brick walls. Each suggestion is necessarily summarized. Some approaches are straightforward and easy to implement. Others require time and experience. We will be seeing these approaches in action in future issues of Casefile Clues, but sometimes a simple list is a great way to jog the mind.

A is for Alphabetize

Have you created an alphabetical list of all the names in your database and all the locations where your families lived? Typographical errors and spelling variants can easily be seen using this approach. Alphabetical order can create limitations too, particularly when a tax list or a census record has been recorded in alphabetical order destroying significant geographical clues.

A is for Assumptions

While it is necessary to make assumptions in order to begin work on some problems, there often comes a time when the assumption must be put aside. The search for a marriage record may begin in the location where the first child was born, but if records are available and no marriage can be located, then it may be time to let go of

that assumption. Always clearly label assumptions as assumptions. Once an assumption becomes confused with fact, it is difficult for it to return to the land of assumptions.

B is for Biography

Creating an ancestor's biography might help you determine where there are gaps in your research. Determining possible motivations for his actions (based upon reasonable expectations) may provide you with new areas to research. And well-documented ancestral biographies can be submitted to local genealogical society periodicals for inclusion in their publications thus sharing and preserving your information.

B is for Boundaries

An incorrect knowledge of the county boundary, the state boundary, or the national boundary can cause a researcher to search in the wrong location. Political boundaries may be precise, but they may also be in constant flux. Linguistic boundaries are much more fluid and rarely clearly defined.

C is for Chronology

Putting in chronological order all the events in your ancestor's life and all the documents on which his name appears is an excellent way to organize the information you have. Creating some order where none exists may make new patterns noticeable.

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C is for Culture

What do you know of your ancestor's culture? Is your ancestor's ethnic heritage impacting his actions and the kinds of records she leaves? Don't assume you act like your ancestor or vice versa.

D is for Descendants

Your great-great-grandparents may have many descendants outside of your immediate family. Any of these descendants may have family information or memorabilia that could be crucial to your research. Seek them out.

D is for Deeds

A land transaction will not provide extended generations of your ancestry, but it could help you connect a person to a location or show that two people with the same last name engaged in a transaction.

E is for Extended Family

If you are only researching your direct line there is a good chance you are overlooking records and information. Siblings, cousins, and in-laws of your ancestor may give enough clues to extend your direct family line into earlier generations.

E is for Estrangements

Is the reason you cannot find your ancestor's parents because the family had a falling out at some point in time and there was no reconciliation? It could easily have happened.

F is for Friends

Are your ancestor's friends what caused him to emigrate from point A to point B? And because these friends have no blood ties to your ancestor, you have overlooked them or perhaps even had difficulty

determining who they are? Non-relatives who interact with your ancestor by witnessing his documents, signing his bonds, etc. might have been life-long friends.

F is for Finances

Did your ancestor's financial situation impact the records he left behind? Typically the less money your ancestor had the fewer records he created. Or did a financial crisis cause him to move quickly and leave little evidence of where he settled?

G is for Guardianships

A guardianship record might have been created whenever a minor owned property, usually through an inheritance. Even with a living parent, a guardian could be appointed, particularly if the surviving parent was a female during that time when women's legal rights were extremely limited (read nonexistent).

G is for Geography

Is your lack of geographical knowledge impacting your research? Was it easier for your ancestor to travel to the next county to get married? If your ancestor left home looking for work, what was the route to take? Where was the largest nearby city?

H is for History

If your knowledge of history is weak, you may be making incorrect interpretations or about your ancestor's actions and records. The genealogist needs to have an understanding of national, regional, and local history applicable to the time period being researched. One level of history is no more important than any of the others.

H is for Hearing

Think of how your ancestor heard the questions he was being asked by the records clerk. Think of how the census taker heard what your ancestor said. How we hear affects how we answer or how we record an answer.

I is for Incorrect

Is it possible that an "official" record contains incorrect information? While most records are reasonably correct, there is always the chance that a name, place, or date listed on a record is not quite exact. Ask yourself how it would change your research if one "fact" suddenly was not true?

I is for Ignorance

Is it our ancestor's ignorance that is causing the problem? Did your ancestor make bad mistakes that sent their lives into a tailspin? Maybe the reason our ancestor's decisions do not make any sense is that our ancestor was not making good decisions to begin with.

J is for Job

What was your ancestor's likely occupation? Is there evidence of that occupation in census or probate records? Would that occupation have made it relatively easy for your ancestor to move from one place to another? Or did technology make your ancestor's job obsolete before he was ready for retirement?

K is for Knocking

Are you knocking when you should be ringing the doorbell? Perhaps there is a different tool you should be using to solve your research problem. Are there other

records you are not even aware of? Make certain you are using the right tool and that you have all the available tools at your disposal.

K is for Kook

Was your ancestor just a little bit different from his neighbors? Did he live life outside cultural norms for his area? If he did, interpreting and understanding the records of his actions may be difficult. Not all of our ancestors were straight-laced and like their neighbors. That is what makes them interesting (and more difficult to trace).

L is for Language

Do you understand how your ancestor pronounced the name of his place of birth? If your Swedish-born ancestor indicated he was born in "Cheesa" on a marriage record, he actually might have been referring to Kisa. The way it sounded to an American clerk might not have been the way it was spelled on a Swedish map.

L is for Lines

Do you know where all the lines are on the map of your ancestor's neighborhood? If your ancestor was a landowner do you know where his property lines were? Do metes and bounds descriptions provide the names of those neighbors? Getting your ancestor's maps all "lined" up may help solve your problem.

M is for Money

Have you followed the money in an estate settlement to see how it is disbursed? Clues as to relationships may abound. These records of the accountings of how a deceased person's property is allocated to their heirs may help you to pinpoint the exact relationships involved.

M is for Maternal

Are you too focused on the paternal line? Just because that was the last name that got passed down from one generation to another does not mean it necessarily exerted any more influence on your ancestor than his maternal relatives. It might have been maternal uncles that brought your relative to Nebraska instead of his father's family.

N is for Nicknames

Is a nickname causing you to overlook your ancestor in a record? Lizzy, Beth, Betsy are all diminutives for Elizabeth, Sally is one for Sarah. Keep these in mind when researching. Your ancestor who was married to Lucinda in one census and Cindy in the next might have only had one wife.

N is for Neighbors

Have you looked at your ancestor's neighbors? Were they acquaintances from an earlier area of residence?

O is for Outhouse

Most of us don't use them any more, but outhouses are mentioned to remind us of how much life has changed in the past several hundred years. Are you making an assumption about your ancestor's behavior based upon life in the twenty-first century? If so, that may be your brick wall right there.

O is for Out-of-Date

Are you using an out-of-date finding aid or resource? Make certain you are using a corrected or updated versions if necessary. Keep in mind that in some cases, there may be multiple indexes to the same set of records. Use all indexes in case the desired entry is rendered differently in each index.

P is for Patronymics

If patronymics are being used in an area where you are researching, keep in mind that no one will have the same last name as their mother or father and that some families may choose non-patronymic surnames for their children. This is done solely to confuse the researcher.

P is for Patience

Many genealogical problems cannot be solved instantly, even with access to every database known to man. Some families are difficult to research and require exhaustive searches of all available records and a detailed analysis of those materials. That takes time. Some of us have been working on the same problem for years. It can be frustrating but fulfilling when the answer finally arrives.

Q is for Questions

Post queries on message boards and mailing lists. Ask questions of other genealogists at monthly meetings, seminars, conferences and workshops. The answer to your question might not contain the name of that elusive ancestor, but unasked questions can leave us floundering for a very long time.

Q is for Quirky

Maybe the reasons your ancestor and his records do not make sense is simply that your ancestor was just "a little different." Sometimes we have an ancestor who was slightly flaky.

R is for Recorded

Have you considered looking at the miscellaneous items that are recorded in many county recorders' offices? There are more than just deeds and vital records. I

have found out-of-state divorce decrees, military discharges, medical licenses, etc., recorded in the books of miscellaneous records. Give them a try. You never know what your relative thought he should have recorded.

R is for Read

Read about research methods and sources in your problem area. Learning about what materials are available and how other solved similar problems may help you get over your own hump.

S is for Step-Parent

Is the reason you cannot find your ancestor in the 1860 census because the mother remarried and you do not know the new husband's name? If the child is enumerated with the last name of the step-father and that name is unknown to you, locating the family may be difficult and determining the name of the second husband should be high on your priority list.

S is for Sneaky

Was your ancestor sneaking away to avoid the law, a wife, or an extremely mad neighbor? If so, he may have intentionally left behind little tracks. There were times when our ancestor did not want to be found and consequently may have left behind few clues as to his origins.

T is for Transcription

Are you using an incorrect transcription which you have never compared to the original document from which the transcription was made? A slip of the keyboard may have created your brick wall.

U is for Unrelated

Are you assuming two individuals with the

same last name have to be related? It may be that those two with the same surname are completely unrelated and moved near each other just to confuse their descendants.

T is for Think

Think about your conclusions. Do they make sense? Think about that document you located? What caused it to be created? Think about where your ancestor lived? Why was he there? Think outside the box; most of our brick wall ancestors thought outside the box. That's what makes them brick walls in the first place.

U is for Unimportant

That detail you think is unimportant could be crucial. That word whose legal meaning you are not quite certain of could be the key to understanding the entire document. Make certain that what you have assumed is trivial is actually trivial.

V is for Verification

Have you verified all those assumptions you hold? Have you verified what the typed transcription of a record actually says? Verifying by viewing the original may reveal errors in the transcription or additional information.

V is for Vital Records

Have you made your own brick wall by not obtaining vital records on all your ancestor's children—not just the direct line? Answers to your problem may be resting in records of aunts and uncles instead of those on your ancestor.

W is for Why?

The good genealogist should be like a toddler, constantly asking "why?" If you are

not asking yourself why a record was created when it was, why a name was spelled the way it was, why your ancestor lived where he did, why your ancestor waited until he was forty to get married the first time, you may be missing out on important clues.

W is for Watch

Keep on the watch for new databases and finding aids as they are being developed. Perhaps the solution to your brick wall just has not been created yet.

X is for X-Amine

With the letter "x" we pay homage to all those clerks and census takers who made the occasional spelling error (it should be "examine" instead of "x-amine.") and also make an important genealogical point. Examine closely all the material you have already located. Is there an unrecognized clue lurking in your files?

Y is for Yawning

Are you getting tired of one specific family or ancestor? Perhaps it is time to take a break and work on another family. Too much focus on one problem can cause you to lose your perspective. The other tired is when you are researching at four in the morning with little sleep. You are not at your most productive then either and likely are going in circles or making careless mistakes.

Y is for Yo-Yo

Was your ancestor a "yo-yo?" Did he immigrate to the United States more than once? Two of my wife's ancestors did. My own ancestors were not that indecisive, but it does happen. Sometimes people went

back to the homeland and never did reemigrate.

Z is for **Zipping**

Are you zipping through your research, trying to complete it as quickly as possible as if it were a timed test in school? Slow down, take your time and make certain you aren't being too hasty in your research and in your conclusions.

About Casefile Clues

Casefile Clues is a weekly how-to genealogy newsletter written by nationally known genealogy author and speaker Michael John Neill.

Casefile Clues focuses on genealogy sources, methods, and analysis. Written in a clear, easy to understand format, it exhibits sound genealogical methods and emphasizes problemsolving and process, not just the final result.

There is more information on *Casefile Clues* at http://blog.casefileclues.com or http://www.casefileclues.com. Normally \$17 a year for 52 issues, it has been called by some the best genealogy educational value online and "like going to a workshop" every week.