

# Finding Acceptable Sources

By Allin Kingsbury

Imagine a genealogist finding hundreds of names on the Internet and adding them to his database. The source that the genealogist cites is the URL of the Web site where the data was found. He is pleased with the productivity of his "research." You may ask, "Did the genealogist do a good job?"

There are a number of problems in this scenario that need to be resolved. First, assume the Web site does not indicate the original sources of the data. Much of the genealogical data on the Internet lacks sources. Our genealogist made no effort to determine that the data was accurate and did not attempt to learn the sources of the data before accepting the data as valid. It is likely that our genealogist is repackaging junk genealogy and circulating it to others. Because the Internet data was neatly formatted in professional-looking type, it looked correct. Secondly, citing an Internet address as a source may turn out to be a wild goose chase. The data may be moved or the site may shut down before a good genealogist can get around to checking on the validity of the data.

I had an experience similar to this scenario a few weeks ago when I found an ancestor on a Web site that included many generations of family members. I had worked on the family for many years and had been unable to determine who the parents were. Before I added the names to my database, I looked at the data to see if it made sense. The individuals who were stated to be parents of my ancestor were from wealthy and prominent Swiss families. This was consistent with what I had learned. They had joined the Mennonites and come to America to escape the viscous religious persecution they experienced in Switzerland. My ancestor was Catholic. For the son of a Mennonite who had escaped the religious persecution of Europe to have a son become a Catholic in America would be considered akin to treason, yet the son (most likely not my ancestor) was named in the father's will as though he had caused no problem for the family. This did not make sense to me. Also, according to the birth dates, which were accurately documented for the family, the father was age 14 when his son (my ancestor) was born. This may have happened among uneducated poor families, but it would have been considered a disgrace in a prominent family of Switzerland. I chose not to add the names to my database.

## The Need for Good Sources

Most researchers assume that if they have a source for a date and place, they have completed the research on this item. However, the source may not have sufficient information to prove that the date and place belong to the individual in your database. Individuals with the same name, especially if it is Smith, are common. You need a source of information to prove the relationship to a family. A document such as a birth certificate or christening record which lists the names of the parents will prove the relationship. A death certificate verifies that the individual is the person in your family if the birth date matches other sources that you have or if it lists the next of kin that you can identify as a family member. Another person's research, printed as a genealogy will not necessarily prove a relationship. That person may have made a

mistake and linked the wrong individual to a family.

A friend told me of a problem in his research. He had found an ancestor in a New England town along with another family nearby where both parents had the exact same names as his ancestor and spouse. He was able to separate the families with some difficulty, only because the two families attended different churches and had named most of their children with different names than used for children in the other family.

I had similar problem where my ancestor and another family with the same husband's name and same given name for the wives had their children christened in the same three adjacent parishes during the same twenty-year period. The church records listed the full name of the father and the given name of the mother. I had to look at all the records available to separate the two families. I only realized that there were only two families when I saw the christenings were too close together and that there were too many children and too many with the same given names.

It is when you are gathering information about an individual and find someone with the same name living close by that you need to look at primary sources which are free from interpretations, speculations and guesses in order to differentiate the two individuals.

## Primary sources

Most genealogical sources are either primary sources or secondary sources. A primary source is defined as a source recorded at the time of an event. It is assumed that the person doing the recording has knowledge of the facts being recorded or is getting the facts from someone who has knowledge of the facts. Examples of primary sources include:

- birth marriage and death certificates (vital records)
- christening, marriage, and burial records made by church officials
- burial records kept by a cemetery
- census records (assuming the census taker had a reliable informant)
- family Bibles (assuming births, marriages and deaths were recorded at time of event)
- pension records
- divorce proceedings
- mortuary records (assuming the informant was accurate)

These sources provide dates and places for births, marriages, divorces and deaths. They are considered official records by the organization that recorded the information. This is even true for family Bibles. The person who made the effort to record the information for the family considered it an important duty that should be done accurately.

Pension records are a primary source for the commencement of the pension and the termination (death). If the pension was paid

to the spouse after the decease of the pensioner, we have a primary source for her death date. Pension applications usually required proof of marriage as well as information about children, military service and places of residence. Because this information had penalties for perjury and usually required certification of accuracy by reputable witnesses, the information is reliable. Often, marriage certificates and pages from the family Bible (primary sources) would be submitted with the application as proof.

Other primary sources which do not normally contain birth marriage and death dates, but are useful in estimating these dates and surmising where they occurred, include:

- land records
- probate records
- tax records
- court records, especially those dealing with inheritance and guardianship
- military records
- civil court records

These records are useful in establishing when a person was known to be living or known to be deceased. The date of a probate record can be used to estimate that the deceased died within the preceding year. Tax records and land records are useful in establishing residence of the parents which would be the birthplace of a child born during the residency. Today, a mother will usually travel to a hospital to give birth, but to give birth anywhere outside the home was extremely uncommon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier.

Early civil court records often name individuals as witnesses or as participants in litigation. The occurrences of these names officially prove that the individual was living on the date that he appeared in court, but may or may not provide evidence of place of residency.

## Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a document that is based on research, remembered personal knowledge, or knowledge related by other individuals relating to events that have occurred earlier. In many secondary sources, the original source of the information is not recorded and remains a mystery. If discrepancies in dates or places are found, the decision regarding which information is correct can be difficult. Genealogists have established rules which work well in resolving conflicting data. The most-used rule says that a primary source is better than a secondary source. Resolution of data from two secondary sources is best resolved by finding a primary source. If there is conflicting data from two primary sources, the source closest to the actual event should prevail, but the discrepancy should be mentioned in the notes of your database. You may find other sources that tip the balance in favor of the other date. Fortunately, some conflicting data is not off more than a few days or a few miles. (I find this is often not true – people can be reported in a record to have been born in states far distant from their actual birth place and birth dates can be off by many years. Also I would include some examples of common secondary information found on primary source documents such as the birth information on a death certificate, entries in family Bibles since some may be primary and some secondary. There are two other categories of evidence that could be mentioned: direct evidence that di-

rectly answers the question about an individual such as birth date, birth place, etc and indirect evidence such as age in a census, at marriage or at death from which a birth date can be calculated or estimated.)

Some primary sources contain information that should be categorized as a secondary source. For example, a death certificate based on information supplied by a neighbor would be a secondary source for birth date and place of birth. A family bible with information from an elderly grandmother's memory about earlier generations of the family would be a secondary source for those dates. Information that is recent when recorded and which was witnessed or known by the author of the source is a primary source. Otherwise the data should be treated as from a secondary source, even though the document is on the list of primary sources.

Commonly used secondary sources for genealogy include:

- Manuscripts detailing family relationships
- Published family histories
- Biographies
- Local histories which include family history
- Obituaries
- Headstone inscriptions
- Marriage, birth and death announcements in newspapers
- Letters with family history information
- Internet family history sites
- Transcriptions of primary source information

These secondary sources are only as good as the information used in their creation. They vary from accuracy equivalent to a primary source to pure fiction. The fiction is occasionally created through fraud, but more often it comes from sloppy research, guesses or forgetfulness. Many secondary sources offer no clues as to where the information originated

Sources which prove relationship are the key to accurate family history. There are many examples where a genealogist has substituted another individual with the same name and proceeded with the research. Some have even found many generations of ancestors of the wrong parents and published their research, probably ignorant of their error .

Sources which prove relationship include:

- Birth and christening documents which have the names of parents
- Documents which match birthdates in a family Bible
- Documents which match the places of residence of an individual
- Documents which match the name of the spouse
- Probate records which name the spouse, children, grandchildren and other relatives
- Family Bibles which state relationships
- Land records which document the inheritance of property to by other members of a family

In order to establish relationship, you need to find documents that

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indicate that all your sources are about the same individual. Each individual has unique identifiers such as birth date, exact residency, occupation, and names of relatives. If you rely on the place of residency to be sure documents apply to the same individual, accuracy depends upon the uniqueness of the place. A small town is much

better than a large city, unless you have a street address which is most unique. If you have a person linked to a single piece of property, you have done well. If you have the person linked to a place like Boston, then you must be sure that you have not merged two individuals with the same name.

*To be continued in the next issue.*

# Finding Acceptable Sources - part 2

By Allin Kingsbury

*Continued from the October issue*

*The first part of this article discussed the problem of finding sources that have significant evidence of relationship. To prove a lineage, a genealogist needs evidence of relationship and of identity.*

## **Problems of Secondary and Sub-secondary Sources**

Much of the information in secondary sources is correct. Many genealogists who assembled large family genealogies did excellent research and found solid sources of information. The older family histories were often compiled from interviews with living individuals who knew the information about their generation of the family. The common problem with these sources is the occasional mistakes that creep into research from misreading difficult handwriting, transcription errors by clerks and others who kept records, misspellings, lapses of memory by family members reciting family history and many other sources of error. Secondary sources often do not list the sources of information, nor do they point out places where the researcher guessed or assumed. There are many genealogies now being published today that have only secondary sources as sources. Most of these are on the Internet. These family histories often use christening dates and represent them as birth dates and burial dates as death dates. They often take guesses by other individuals and list them as fact without the benefit of explanatory notes. They are creating sub-secondary sources that look like secondary sources.

Should you be lucky enough to get one of these genealogies in GEDCOM format, you can convert it to a computer database and run a records check. Should you find many syntax errors in the data such as births before marriage dates, deaths before birth dates, unusual ages of parents when having children, children born less than 9 months apart, and so forth, you have evidence of poor research. In such cases, much of the data is useful until you come to a point where an individual is linked to the wrong parents or spouse. However, to be sure the data you have is accurate, you need to check every fact if all you have is a sub-secondary source or a poor quality genealogy. To be sure, you need to know which primary sources verify the data in your family history

## **Even Primary Sources Can be Wrong**

You may find conflicting information as you do your research. Occasionally, primary sources can be wrong. Census takers occasionally falsified records because they were paid by the number of names found. One census taker for the Illinois 1850 census entered several families in his area twice. To avoid accusations, he altered the details enough to make the added families look like a different family, but the changes were such that, if confronted, he could claim the bogus entry was the actual family. Other problems came when the family was not home and the census taker used a

neighbor as an informant. There are also occasional errors in official documents where a careless clerk wrote an entry wrong, or made a transcription error when copying a document into the official record. There are also errors by the researcher when poor handwriting is misread, or an error is made transcribing data. With the excellent copy machines available today, it is good to copy the original document so that it can be reexamined later if a discrepancy is found.

## **Identities Can Be Confused**

My ancestor, Robert King fought in the Revolutionary War. One history of Erie County, Pennsylvania refers to him as Captain King and says that he distinguished himself in the Sauk wars and concluded a peace treaty with the Indians. The Revolutionary War Pension File for Robert King lists his children with their birth dates and leaves no doubt that he is my ancestor. It also states that his military service was limited to the Revolutionary War and that he held the rank of lieutenant. There was a Captain Robert King who fought the Indians. Several genealogies posted on the Internet refer to my ancestor as Captain Robert King. I can find no primary evidence stating that the Robert King who settled in Erie County, Pennsylvania was a captain. One must never assume that if the name is the same, it must be the same person.

To be sure two sources are referring to the same individual, there must be information which links the individual to a relative (preferably a parent), to a place (such as a residence), or to a common event. If there is nothing to link the two references, you can never be sure they refer to the same person. A good source will identify an individual in such a way as to eliminate any doubt that all the information about him refers to the same person.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to find the best possible sources of information. Accurate sources lead to sound conclusions. More sources give you more details about the person. If your sources are few and have questionable accuracy, you should continue your research.

You should record not only the sources that you have found, but also sources that had no information or could not be found. You may find more sources later. Others will look at your research and want to know where you looked. If you can explain in your notes why some sources could not be found or did not help, you do a great service to those who review your work.

Sources should not just provide dates and places for births, marriages, deaths and other events, but they should prove relationships. They should prove that the birth, marriage, and death are all for the same person. The same name could refer to more than one person. The sources should also prove the connection of each generation to the next.