

How to Begin Genealogical Research by Mary Lou Bevers

1. It is important for you to realize and understand the difference between developing / building your family information through actual **RESEARCH** in appropriate records (thereby proving your claims with supporting evidence)--vs. that of merely collecting names, many without dates and places cited--much less any supporting evidence that the lineage is correct. The old saying "Anything that is worth doing is worth doing well" is certainly true with genealogy. Don't assume something is correct just because someone says so. Verify it with research.
2. **ORGANIZE** your known information onto pedigree charts and family group sheets. It is good to obtain birth, death, and marriage records even for your parents and grandparents, even though you probably know most of the information revealed therein. If you later decide to join a lineage society (DAR, SAR, etc.) you will need them anyway for that.
3. These charts are your **WORKSHEETS/ROAD MAP**. They provide a quick reference to what you know, and allow you to determine what you need to know next and in what records that desired information should or might be found. (See my article about good sources.)
4. Learn what records should produce what information.
5. Be very careful in choosing your method of record keeping. It must have the capability to note multiple sources of information for every name, date, and place on your pedigree chart and family group sheet for quick reference. Handwritten information on colored paper forms can be simple and easy to use, although most researchers now use computer programs which have varying capabilities and advantages, but also limitations and disadvantages.
6. Obtain **COPIES** of your proof documents as you find them. Finding information from multiple sources strengthens your case if it agrees, or indicates the need for deeper research if it disagrees. Studying the documents periodically often reveals clues previously missed.
7. The reason for learning who the **SIBLINGS** of your ancestor were is that often information about the siblings can lead to the desired information you need for your own. Example: Perhaps a death record is not available for your grandmother, but if you have documents that prove who her siblings were, then maybe their death records might give parent information, etc. There might also be a biography about some of them that would give family background information. *If you don't "know" the siblings, then you can't recognize them in the records!* Knowing who the siblings and in-laws were can help sort out individuals with the same name.
8. Pay close attention to who were your ancestor's **NEIGHBORS**, **WITNESSES** to their business transactions (marriages, deeds, etc.), **GUARDIANS** or **GODPARENTS** of their children, and other close associates. All persons in these categories may be potential relatives of

- your ancestor -- and investigating them can provide clues for you to work with in developing your pedigree.
9. Learn about the **HISTORY** of the area where your people lived so that you can determine where the appropriate records should be found. (See my article about boundary changes).
 10. Dates should always be written as 15 June 1867. This method alleviates any misinterpretation. Never use numerals for the month, and always indicate the complete year.
 11. A very helpful tool to assist you with your research is to make a **LIFE CHRONOLOGY SHEET/TIMELINE** for each ancestor for whom you are trying to find information. Begin with the ancestor's year of birth, skip a few lines (in case you do find some event as a child), then beginning about age 15 make a line for every year of his life. As you discover his activities, write the location on the proper year line, and what the act or event was. Example: 1916 Posey Co. IN married Mary Jones 23 May. Developing this form provides a quick reference as to where he was at a given time and will help direct you to appropriate records.

A census record, for example, might indicate from his children's ages and birthplaces that: about 1895, son John was born in NC; about 1897 daughter Mary was born in TN; about 1899 daughter Nancy was born in Tn. In 1900 you found them in Perry Co., IN. About 1903 son Joseph was born in IL; about 1906 son Robert was born in IL; about 1909 daughter Rebecca was born in IN, and in 1910 you find them in the Spencer Co., IN censuses; thus, you track the family from North Carolina to Tennessee, to Indiana, to Illinois, and then back to Indiana. Searching court records in these areas in which they lived might reveal records pertaining to where in North Carolina they came from. Having this track record together in one place can be a tremendous help.

This is what **RESEARCH** is--finding clues to lead you to records that prove relationships. You build your case one or two facts at a time, and base continuing research on those proven facts. If the information you are working with is incorrect, then you are wasting your time.

Here is an example of research methodology:

Let's say you have your grandfather's death record and it says his parents were Stephen McDonald and Mary Burton, both born in Kentucky. You already know from the census that Stephen McDonald was born "about" 1857 in Kentucky and you also know from probate records that he died young in 1884 in Spencer County, Indiana.

Not all names are this difficult to research, but, in this case, you must realize that in looking for McDonald, you may need to consider McDonal, McDannel, and even McDaniel; then you may need to look for MacDonald,

MacDonel, MacDannel, MacDaniel. If you are searching on a computer, using a space or not after the Mc will affect your results. Likewise for Burton -- it might be indexed as Barton, Berton, Birton, Borton, and/or may end in tan, ten, tin, tun, or dan, den, din, don, dun. (Remember your vowels). In other words, spelling means very little in record searching! Consider anything remotely close to the name you are looking for. Also be alert for the use of initials, and for nicknames. (Mary/Polly, Sarah/Sally, plus many others.)

Realizing that you will encounter spelling variations, you are ready now to try to find the parents of your Stephen McDonald. Here are important things to do:

See if there is an 1884 death record for him in Spencer County, Indiana. Birth and death records began in 1882 in most Indiana counties, but many were never registered in those early years. If there is one, it should give his parents' names --- but it might not.

You need to be aware that during the 1850's in Kentucky many counties recorded births and deaths. These are known as the "Kentucky Vital Records Series," and are on microfilm, by county, and are available in some libraries. So how do you know in which county to look? Look at the census neighbors of your Stephen McDonald. Are there any McDowels or Burtons nearby? Any of another surname, born in Kentucky, who might be a married sister? Who were involved with his probate records? Who were witnesses to his deeds? Who were sponsors at his children's baptisms? Investigate these neighbors and associates and other McDonalds and Burtons within that county. You may see something that refers to a Kentucky county.

You need to find your Stephen McDonald in the 1860 census, about three years old, and in the 1870 census, about 13 years old. Kentucky is the logical place to look.

By now you may know some of his associated surnames. Check the statewide census indexes for counties that have McDonalds and some of these associated names, and maybe Burtons. Zero in on that county -- test some of its records to see if they are the people you "know". If you should happen to find the marriage record of your Stephen and Mary---then you will know that you have found the county from which they came. Perhaps Stephen and Mary's birth records are in the Kentucky Vital Records Series for that county, and even probate, deeds, and court case files that prove their parents and grandparents!!! What a thrill!

Probate records include wills, estate settlements (distributions), guardianships, etc.

Court case papers/files contain complaints, answers, and depositions that can reveal wonderful information about relationships, background history, etc. --- especially cases involving inheritances; likewise even in civil cases. Order books will refer to the case in court, and the "Complete Record" books will summarize a case, but you don't get the detail that you would from the "loose papers"/case files.

Deeds will state in what counties all parties live, and sometimes refer to lands in other counties or states. They often prove relationships not found elsewhere. The "grantee" is the buyer, and the "grantor" is the seller.

Sometimes information is extremely easy to find, while at other times it requires much study and digging. Just analyze your documents for any possible clues to lead you to new information.

Bottom line: Do your research thoroughly as you go so that you can recognize your family among errors, misspellings, and various other imperfections.

Mary Lou Bevers has done on-site court house research in all types of records since 1966 and has researched for clients since 1980.