

IN-GENious!

Documentation: Why Bother?

By **AMY JOHNSON CROW, CG**

People become involved in genealogy for a variety of reasons. Some want to connect with the past and gain a sense of heritage. Others want to join a lineage society, such as Daughters of the American Revolution or Society of Civil War Families of Indiana. A growing number of people want to discover what medical conditions may run in their families. However, I do not know of anyone who started doing genealogy because they love writing source citations.

Genealogy is supposed to be enjoyable. The fact that it is one of the most popular hobbies in the United States would bear that out. Poring over old records, tromping through cemeteries and visiting ancestral homelands are "fun" activities for a family historian. Citing sources is not.

There are several myths about documentation. Unfortunately, these myths have prevented many researchers from using this very important tool. Here are the three biggest myths:



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<http://amyjohnsoncrow.com>.

- I don't need to bother with documentation since I'm not a professional genealogist.
- I'm not going to publish my genealogy, so I don't need to document anything.
- Documentation is too hard and too time consuming.

The majority of people who research family trees do so as a hobby, not as a way to earn a living. However, that does not mean their research is of any less importance. The goal of the hobbyist and the professional is the same: find the facts about a person's ancestry. Whether you are doing the research for yourself or for someone else, you still want to have accurate conclusions. Source citations can help with that.

Why bother with documentation if you never plan on publishing your research? What does it matter if your notes never see the light of day? The answer is this – your ancestry is important, regardless of what you do with your research.

Citing your sources does not need to be hard. In fact, it has never been easier. The major genealogical software programs all have an entry system for source citations. Many even have templates which prompt you for the information. In addition, there have been several guides published recently which discuss citations and how to construct them.

As for documentation being too time consuming, ask yourself this question. Do you have unlimited time, energy and resources to devote to your research? If the answer is "no," then you cannot afford not to cite your sources.

Why Document?

Documentation provides us with a link back to the source of our information. That sounds rather pedestrian, but it is the foundation of why we need to cite our sources. The implications of having that link cannot be ignored.

Knowing where we got our information – or where others got their information – allows us to evaluate the accuracy of our research. How accurate is your statement that Matilda was born in Ohio in 1817? You have no way of gauging that without knowing where you got the information. Did the informa-

tion come from her obituary or did it come from your third-cousin twice-removed who told you at last year's family reunion? (If it is from your cousin, the question begging to be asked is where she got her information.)

If you have been pursuing genealogy for any length of time – in other words, longer than one week – you have likely come across data which contradicts other pieces of data. Your charge as a genealogist is to resolve the contradiction and come to an accurate conclusion. You can flip a coin to decide which fact is more likely correct, or you can evaluate the data.

Dates can be in conflict. You might have two different birth dates for an ancestor. Source citations will help you resolve the conflict. When you see that one date is from his birth record at the probate court and the other date is from his obituary, you can evaluate the sources and decide which is more likely correct. (In this case, the date from the birth record is more likely to be accurate.)

Source citations also help us identify gaps in our research. Everyone likes to have family groups sheets with all of the dates and places filled in. However, just having a "complete" family group sheet does not mean that the research has been extensive. If you look at your sources and see that the dates and places for a person's birth, marriage and death all came from his obituary, you quickly realize that you need to follow up with other records.

It has been said that finding something once is fun; finding it the second or third time is decidedly less so. Source citations will help keep you from looking for a marriage record a second or third – or fourth – time. With so many ancestors to research, there isn't enough time or energy to keep retracing your steps and finding the same records over and over again.

Documentation without Getting a Migraine

Even with the advantages of documenting our research, many people are still averse to actually doing it. Perhaps it causes flashbacks to all-nighters spent finishing high school and college term papers. Documentation does not need to fill you with angst.

The basic tenet of documentation is "Cite what you see." If you obtained a date and place of marriage from a book of marriage record abstracts, you would cite the book rather than the marriage record in the courthouse. This lets you and anyone else reads your notes that you didn't view the actual marriage record; you only saw a published abstract.

Citing what you see is especially important when it comes time to resolve conflicting data. If you have 2 November 1866 as the marriage date and someone else lists 15 November 1866, take a look at your sources. If yours is from the published records and the other person's source is the actual marriage record, you can judge which of you is more likely correct.

Email and the Internet can be tricky, but always remember to cite what you see. If Cousin Cleo tells you in an email that she found George and Elizabeth's marriage record at the probate court, what do you cite? The email, since that is what you've actually seen. (However, you can note in your citation that Cousin Cleo referenced Jay County Marriage Book 3, page 17. This will help you evaluate Cleo's statement and gives you a quick reference later on where to look for the actual record.)

The reason we document our sources is so anyone (ourselves included) can retrace where we found the information. This means we need to be specific in what we cite. For example, "Marriage record" is not a sufficient source citation. Is it the marriage record from the probate court or the church? Is it from a certificate held in the family? Is it from a published abstract? "Marriage record" alone does not tell you.

There are six components of a good citation:

- Author, person or entity responsible for creating the record
- Complete title
- Details of the publication (edition, volume, reprint, etc.)
- Place of publication, publisher and year of publication
- Location of data within the source
- Explanatory notes (if necessary)

Recording the author's name helps differentiate between books of the same title and it gives credit where credit is due.

If there is no author, look for the name of an editor or compiler.

The complete title, along with the author's name, forms the most basic source citation. It is important to record the complete title from the title page and not from the book's cover or spine. Catalog entries are created from the title on the title page; if you ever want to find the book again, that's the title you will need to know. Include the subtitle. Not only will it help you differentiate between all the books named *The Johnson Family Tree*, it will help you evaluate the source later. A reference to *Clinton County, Iowa Deaths* might lead you to believe the material was taken from death records at the courthouse. When you record the full title – *Clinton County, Iowa Deaths: Pape Funeral Home Index, 1923-1999* – you immediately know the information is from the funeral home and not the courthouse.

It might not seem to add anything important to include the edition or indicate if it is a reprint. In fact, it is very important. Information changes in subsequent editions; what was in the first edition of a family history might have been retracted in the second edition. Reprints are not always identical to the original; material could have been added or deleted. Including this will save a lot of frustration later when trying to find the material again.

The publication information – place, publisher, and year – completes "giving credit where credit is due." In addition, it aids in sorting out ambiguous places and offers clues for analysis. What if the complete title of a book is *Death Notices from the Gazette*? That alone doesn't tell you where the *Gazette* was located. However, if you include that the book was published in Middle-of-Nowhere, Texas, by the Stamper County, Texas, Genealogical Society, that gives a very good clue where the *Gazette* was located.

If you are dealing with an original record, the "publishing" information is the repository. For example: Jay County Probate Court, Portland, Indiana. If you are working from microfilm, include the microfilm number. For example, Family History Library microfilm 2168890.

The location of the information within the source lets you find the material again more quickly. This could be a page number, a certificate number, or a file number. (You definitely want to include the page number if the book is not indexed. You don't want to have to read the whole thing again!)

Sometimes you need to include information not part of the first five components which will help you evaluate the source. An example is that email from Cousin Cleo. If she mentioned the specific volume and page where the marriage record is located, your citation might read:

Email from Cleo Clemmens
<lookingforancestors@gmail.com>, subject "Found their marriage," 3 June 2005. [She references Jay County Marriage Book 3, page 17.]

You might want to make a note about the source itself, such as "The microfilm was very faint" or "The binding of the book was tight; difficult to read the left-hand side of the page."

Conclusion

Citing sources is an important step in genealogical research. It is an important tool in revealing gaps in our research and to help us evaluate our findings. It saves us time when we need to review a source again, because we know exactly where the information came from. It also helps prevent us from looking for a source repeatedly because we didn't know where the data came from the first time.

Our family history is important. You do not need to be a professional genealogist or the author of a published family history. Documentation is for everyone.

Item

Indiana Daily Sentinel 15 January 1869 p1c1

Seventy-two persons have recently joined the Methodist Church at Wabash. At the close of one of the meetings, the congregation adjourned to a neighboring saloon and held a prayer meeting there. The proprietor extended all the facilities in his power for the accommodation and comfort of those present.
