

Genealogy Research Process

Introduction

Genealogical research is a process. If followed with thought and patience, the process can produce results. That is, the question raised or the hypothesis posed will be answered, one hopes positively but perhaps negatively.

Can a person pursue an investigation of their ancestors without using a research process? Not really, as soon as you cannot answer the question Who are the parents of xxx? a research process is needed. Whether a process is followed is quite another issue: Some will simply go to an online family tree, locate the person represented by xxx and copy the information, assuming that the person who created the family tree knew what they were doing. This works sometimes but it's often a failure; otherwise all the online family trees would be accurate and complete - they are not.

Many, perhaps most, people who are looking at their ancestry will never follow a research process. However, for those who would like to be sure they are finding their actual ancestors, and not someone else's ancestors, following a research process is a necessary investment. For those who conduct genealogy as a business and accept clients, a research process is a necessity. For those seeking certification in the field, a research process is also a necessity.

The process itself is straight-forward and intuitive; it is the same process followed in any scientific study and the particular wording used to describe the genealogical research process is adjusted for the specific case of genealogy.

In the following I avoid the use of the word 'proof' because it carries a lot of baggage that's been well-explored in various forums in the past couple of years. This could be an unproductive exercise on my part since the word 'proof' is unfortunately well-established in professional genealogy circles. It's worth examining Mills's work on this topic as well as comments by James Tanner and Tony Proctor to get a good feel for the topic.

Mills: <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>

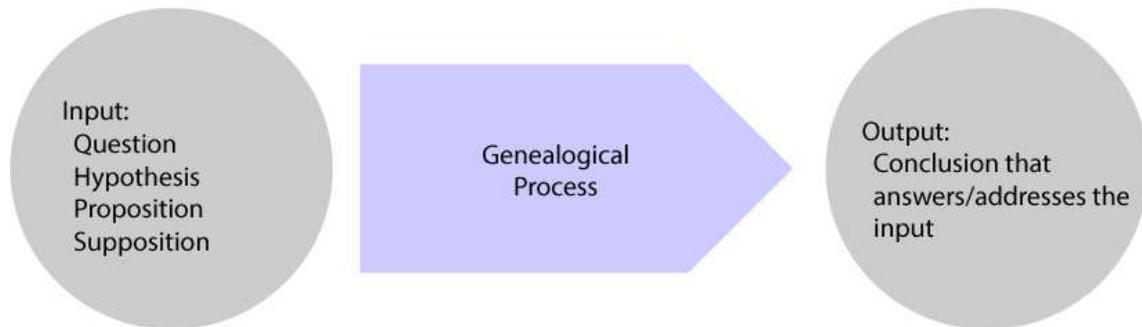
Tanner: <http://genealogysstar.blogspot.com/2013/07/beyond-evidence-to-proof.html>

Proctor: <http://parallax-viewpoint.blogspot.com/2013/12/proof-of-pudding.html>

On the other hand, if a person is on the path to obtain certification by the Board for Certification of Genealogists then it's necessary to use the word 'proof' quite a bit and learn the genealogical proof standard.

Process

Every process has at least one input and one output. For genealogy research the input can be a question or hypothesis or proposition or supposition. The output is an answer in the form of a genealogical conclusion statement. That output must/should satisfy the customer's needs whether the customer is the researcher or a client or an editor or an attendee at a conference. This idea of a customer for the research is well-recognized in technical fields but is often ignored in genealogical studies - more will be said about this later.



A conclusion is reached based on the activities of the research process. This conclusion may in the future be changed in whole or in part based on further information becoming available; or, the conclusion may stand as accurate with no further changes. To a great extent this chance of modifying the conclusion of the research depends on the complexity of the posed question/hypothesis and whether or not the information gathered strongly or weakly supports the conclusion.

The creation of a genealogical conclusion statement follows a process similar to that of many scientific research processes. At its simplest, the process has six steps:

1. State the supposition/proposition/hypothesis/question.
2. Determine/locate/access the source(s) that are, or may be, relevant to the hypothesis/question. Try to find sources prepared near the time of the event(s) in question. Investigate any prior research by others.
3. Derive/determine the information provided in a source.
4. Validate/clarify/explain each piece of applicable information in a source as well as the overall quality/reliability/trustworthiness of the source based on all information provided by the source.

Repeat the previous two steps for all sources.

5. Assess the validity/soundness/strength of the full body of information from all the sources. Analysis and synthesis are required, and evaluation (application of the skill of critical thinking) is needed – this assessment may be simple or complex.

6. Draw a conclusion from the evaluation of the full body of information. Does the conclusion support or refute the hypothesis/question, or is there insufficient information of acceptable quality/reliability to draw a conclusion? Does the conclusion satisfy the customer's needs?

In her work Elizabeth Shown Mills provides definitions of key process components:

- **Sources** are: documents, registers, publications, artifacts, people, websites, etc.
- They may be characterized as: original – derivative – authored.
- **Information** is: knowledge or inference or statement of fact from a specific event/record.
- It may be characterized as: primary – secondary – undetermined.

Thoughts

The above discussion is the 'what' - the steps of the process. Now need to talk about the 'how' - the actual conduct of the process - but first there are some skills needed to carry out research.

Critical thinking and the evaluation of information are essential tools/skills when studying the body of research information. When evaluating the body of information, what criteria and values are used? The discussion of critical thinking follows.