

FROM THE SOURCES MOUTH

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INTRODUCTION:

- One of the “rules” of genealogy is to start with yourself and work backwards
- In doing so, your basis consists of people
- Once you go back a bit, beyond the realm of memory, the basis of genealogy becomes sources and their information, not people
- Claim: Genealogy is the use of information to reconstruct ancestors’ identities not the act of gathering information about ancestors
- Often the best way to reconstruct an ancestor is to start with a single source and work outward



LOG, CITE, ARCHIVE:

Some basics need covering before we can proceed.

- Log what you’ve looked for and where you’ve looked, so you know where you did not find it.
- Archive a copy of whatever you find.
- Keep a citation to what you find
 - Keep the citation with your archived source so that you know what it is
 - Use the citation whenever you make a statement based on that source

INFORMATION IN A SOURCE:

Two concepts I use for handling information—

ASSERTIONS:

We may wish that documents stated facts. Sadly, that isn’t what they do. They make claims that may or may not be factual.

The first step in tackling a problem is to look at a relevant source and extract assertions from it.

- Just extract the assertions, evaluating comes later
- Extracting assertions is the act of breaking down a document into the claims that it makes and putting those claims in a list.
- Consider context when extracting assertions. A source’s context can affect the assertions you extract from it.

IDENTITIES:

In this presentation, an identity is a set of assertions that clearly relate to the same person.

Our sources don't come with universal labels that unambiguously state who they are discussing. We need to work from the ground up.

- Start from a source that is believed to be trustworthy
- Pick a set of “canonical assertions” from that source that can form the core of a new identity

ANALYSIS:

My Shingles Principle— When a source makes enough assertions that overlap with an identity, you can add its relevant assertions to the identity.

Conversely, if a source “looks good” but does not sufficiently overlap with what you have already accepted into an identity, adding it to that identity may end up being like shingling the wrong roof.

When building up an identity you can make a table or timeline for the identity and enter the new assertions. Remember to track the source for each assertion.

Concept maps (often called mind maps, though technically not the same thing) can help with complex cases involving multiple identities and many assertions.

SYNTHESIS:

After working on two identities that look suspiciously like they ought to belong to the same person, you may find a single piece of evidence that both identities represent the same person, or you may hit upon a solid rationale for considering them to stem from the same person. The connection between those identities may still be much weaker than any connection within them. For that reason it is still useful to think of identities as units even when you connect them. It is always wise to be prepared to admit that something is wrong and separate the identities again.

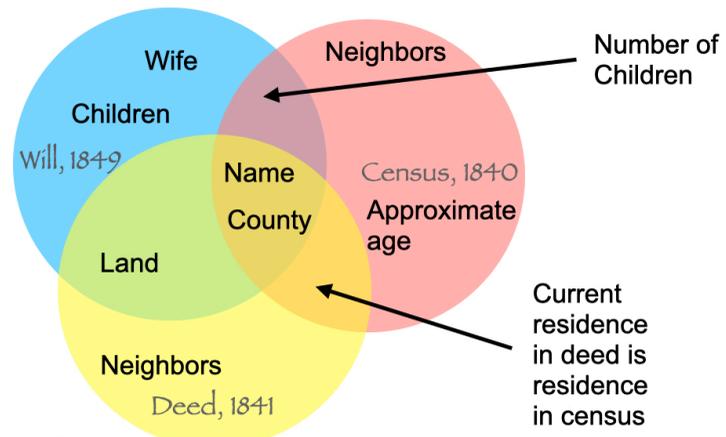
In the end, if research is successful, either a single identity expands until it seems to represent a person's entire life or a small number of identities fit together and the set represents the successful reconstruction of a person.

The term I use for an identity that fills out a person's entire life or that kind of set of connected identities that does the same is “individual.” Just like an identity is a set of assertions that go together, an individual is a set of identities that seem to go together. With that you have, hopefully, reconstructed a person who, once upon a time, really existed. That is always the goal.

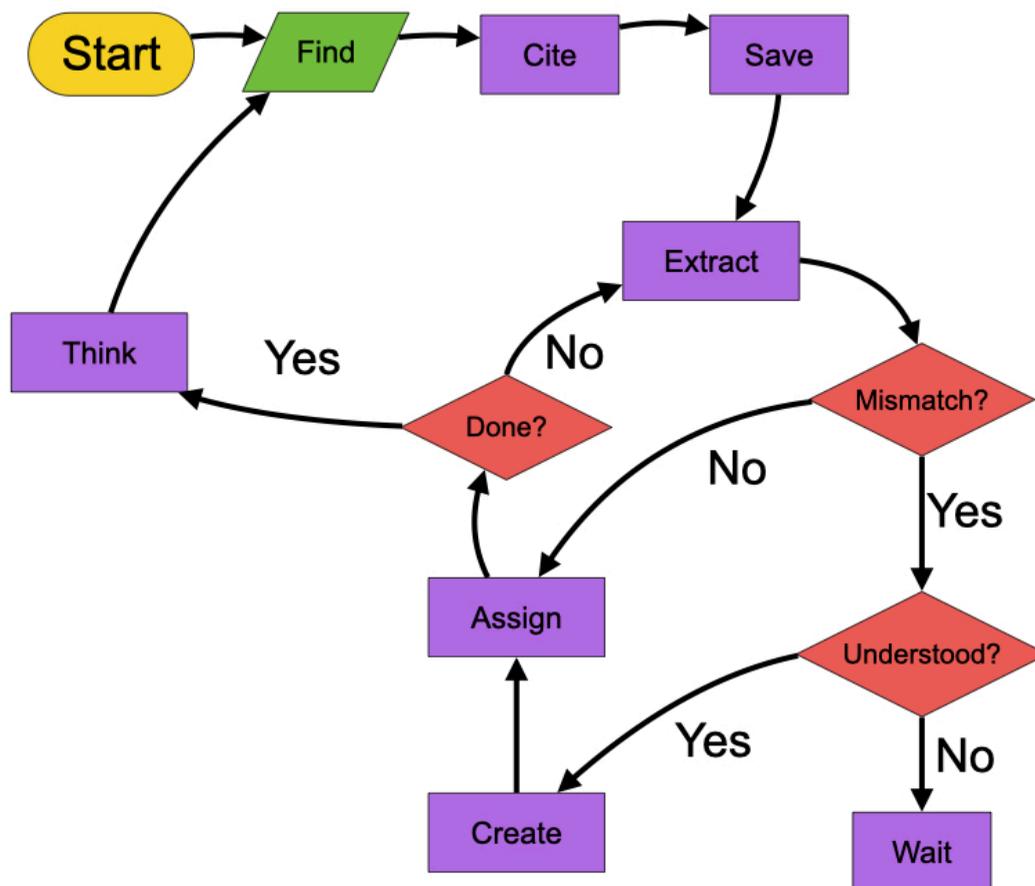
PROCESS:

1. Find a source
2. Make a copy
3. Create a citation

Building an Identity



4. Store the citation with the copy
5. Extract assertions
6. Assign the assertion to identities you have already created
7. If any assertion mentions someone who doesn't clearly fit with an existing identity then either-
8. Set the assertion aside temporarily or
9. Create a new identity and assign the assertion to it
10. Continue extracting or go back to step 1 or
11. Join two or more identities into an individual (not shown in the figure)
12. Go back to step 1



FURTHER READING:

- Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained*, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017)
- Robert Charles Anderson, *Elements of Genealogical Analysis*, (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014)

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