



Willowtree Research Genealogy Services
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Collateral and Cluster Research

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Definitions

a. ANCESTORS

- Descend from directly – your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. Direct line ancestors are those shown on a Pedigree chart. Primarily focused on INDIVIDUALS.

b. COLLATERAL RELATIVES

- Relatives / family members from whom you do not directly descend, but who share a common ancestor with you. Collateral relatives would then extend to include aunts & uncles, great-aunts & uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins.
- RESEARCHING COLLATERAL LINES means conducting research on the surnames who married into your surname of interest: aunts and uncles by marriage, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, additional spouses of ancestors along with any stepchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins, etc. Typically, more focused on FAMILY GROUPS.

c. CLUSTER SEARCHING

- An extension of Collateral Searching, searching within an entire geographic area, or group of records, or known associates of your ancestor, looking for clues about people, places, historical happenings, or other connections that may not involve your direct ancestors but can illuminate their lifestyles. In best cases, Cluster Research puts a number of pieces of indirect evidence together in ways that can solve a Brick Wall puzzle. For example - try researching all the names in the same Census neighborhood as your ancestor. Or maybe all those with similar ethnicity (which might lead to a potential foreign hometown) since people often migrated in groups.

Why are these important tools?

- **BOTH** Collateral AND Cluster research can confirm information on direct ancestors or resolve discrepancies concerning those direct ancestors. For example, a brother serving in the military of a certain country or state can indicate a place to search for other family members. Collateral relatives can lead us to missing ancestors.
- Collateral research, in particular, can lead you to other genealogists who are researching a common ancestor. Other genealogists may be able to answer questions, provide new information, or share unknown photographs of your ancestors with you. Exchanging information with other genealogists is an efficient way to progress your own genealogical research. You might also locate inherited family documents, photos, or stories, or even document family medical conditions.
- Remember, COLLATERAL research targets are shirt-tail relatives. By contrast, CLUSTER research targets could be anyone, including relatives, but are typically not related at all.

Collateral and Cluster Research

More points about Collateral & Cluster research:

- Both are often missed by rookies (because they can be time-consuming), but there is a great deal of power in both collateral and cluster searching.
- Both are a type of “back-door approach” or “fishing expedition” that can yield high dividends in the long run.
- They are both particularly good at helping break down brick walls.
- Most genealogists eventually need these techniques, and in fact, using them successfully often means we are maturing in our skills.
- Successfully applying these techniques can often indicate a genealogist who is maturing in their skills. Genealogists who used collateral and cluster searching typically succeed the best in extending their research back in time.

Our Ancestors knew how to NETWORK! Think about each of the following common sayings. How might they apply to your research?

- Birds of a feather flock together.
 - We are known by the company we keep.
 - We’re all in this together.
 - Guilt by association.
 - No man is an island.
- a. These sayings hold true for us and also in the daily lives of our ancestors. When people immigrated to America they typically went somewhere that they had a connection in order to ease their transition to a new life.
 - b. These were not isolated individuals but were integral members of a community. They were part of a family – often a large one! **Groups of relatives often lived together, migrated cross-country together, worshipped together, witnessed each other’s documents and were buried in the same cemetery.**

F.A.N. Club Principle

F = Friends

A = Associates

N = Neighbors

Collateral and Cluster Research

BEST PRACTICES FOR CLUSTER AND COLLATERAL SEARCHING

For COLLATERAL Research:

- Start out with a direct line ancestor.
- Spend time researching that person's spouse, including parents and siblings.
- Collect and record as much information as possible, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Include occupation, address and other details.
- Fill out Family Group sheets for ALL family members.
- If needed, branch out with research on other non-direct relatives.
- Here's one example as to why go to this effort - the birth location of a mother may ONLY be found on one of her OTHER children's death certificates (as opposed to that of your direct ancestor).

For CLUSTER Research:

- Always use a research log. Jotting down insignificant leads may prove extremely valuable later on. Remember that you are looking for items (data) that will indirectly provide clues to your own family line.
- Formulate theories ... and write them down! Make sure you have a "Possible theories" or "Notes" section in your research log. And do it right away before you forget your train of thought.
- Try all sorts of Spelling Variations for all names (including reversing first and middle names).
- Try searching by your ancestor's address rather than by name.
- Search beyond township, county, or state line boundaries.
- Don't rely on only indexed records.
- For example, when you do a general search on FamilySearch it does not search EVERYTHING! See below:
 - A search at <https://familysearch.org/search/> searches all their indexed historical records, including the extracted part of the old IGI.
 - A search at <https://books.familysearch.org> searches their digitized family history books.
 - A search at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/tree/name?from=tree> their shared, global Family Tree. (To search Family Tree, you must first register and login with a free account.)

It always pays to do both Collateral (& Cluster) Research BEFORE moving on to the next generation. This puts us on solid ground before extending to the unknown. (paraphrased from an Elissa Scalise Powell quote)

This is all part of GPS Step One – perform a “reasonably exhaustive” search. Remember that?

MY EXAMPLE: CHAPLIN > WOOD > PEACH families – Sometimes it pays to follow a hunch!

Collateral and Cluster Research

FURTHER RESOURCES

- 1) QuickSheet: Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (The F.A.N. principle) by Elizabeth Shown Mills can be purchased at www.genealogical.com by searching that title.
- 2) Cyndi's List – Research Methodology – Fan Club: <https://cyndislist.com/research-methodology/fan-club/>
- 3) FamilySearch Research Wiki – Research a Family in Community Context: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Research_a_Family_in_Community_Context
- 4) Historic Pathways – Elizabeth Shown Mills examples of several case study articles: <http://historicpathways.com/articles.html>
- 5) Inferential Genealogy – Tom Jones handout and article: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Inferential_Genealogy
- 6) It Takes a Village: How to Do Cluster and Collateral Research – Family Tree Magazine: <https://familytreemagazine.com/research/cluster-collateral-research/#:~:text=Cluster%20research%20examines%20the%20“clusters,non%2Ddirect%2Dline%20ancestors>
- 7) Reconstructing Your Ancestor's Neighborhood – Family Tree Magazine: <https://familytreemagazine.com/house-history/reconstructing-your-family-home/>

VIDEOS:

- 8) Using Historical Sources to Make Inference - Jerroleen Sorensen (5 Jun 2022) video, pt 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXde-Z4rocM>
- 9) Using Historical Sources to Make Inference - Jerroleen Sorensen (12 Jun 2022) video pt 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTvFATQbnqE>
- 10) What is Cluster and Collateral Research? Family Tree Magazine (2024) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZU7hyJ9IPI>
- 11) Using DNA of Collateral Lines in Your Genealogy Research – Lisa Lisson with Mary Eberle (2023) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZU7hyJ9IPI>
- 12) What is Cluster Genealogy Research? Family History Fanatics (2023) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwFephN6Ei8>
- 13) Easiest tools to Use for Cluster Genealogy – Family History Fanatics (2023) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEgl9yzGDpk>
- 14) Genealogy Cluster Research: Common Beginner Questions – Family History Genealogy (2023) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtVWWY1u5OI>