



TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE: Learn to Spot and Stop Genealogy Fraud

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“Accuracy is fundamental to genealogical research. Without it, a family’s history would be fiction.” -*Genealogy Standards Second Edition, p. xix*

The genealogy world has a long history of fraudsters and fabricated facts. Good family historians want to create truthful trees and avoid being conned by information that looks “too good to be true!” In this lecture, we learn about genealogy scams of the past and present, and discuss tips to avoid modern day “snake oil salesmen.” The **Genealogical Proof Standard** is also introduced, and we learn how it can be your best defense against family tree fraud.

A History of Genealogy Scams

Many early American genealogy scams center around New England colonial ancestry. Myths and hearsay about well-known historical figures such as George Washington prompted interest in family history- and created opportunities for fraudsters. Here are some examples of the two major categories of scams: inheritance fraud and non-existent ancestors.

Inheritance Fraud/Estate Scams

- **The Lawrence-Towneley Estate-** inheritance fraud that appeared in the mid-1800s and ended around WWI. Rooted in “kernels” of truth around Sir Richard Towneley of Burnely, Lancashire- but he never had a daughter named Mary.
 - Learn more about the Lawrence-Towneley scam- <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~tmark/genealogy/TowneleyFraud.html>
 - More about the real Towneley family- <https://lancashirepast.com/2018/03/30/towneley-hall-burnley/>
- **The Buchanan Estate-** Started by Texas grocer Lorenzo Buchanan, took advantage of desperate families during the Great Depression. Often tied to President James Buchanan. Lorenzo was brought to court and forced to return thousands of dollars in “processing fees,” though the scam persisted.
 - Learn more about the Buchanan estate hoax- <https://guides.loc.gov/genealogical-hoaxes/buchanan-estate-scam>
- **Baker Hoax-** Late 1800s-1930s, started with a nationwide newspaper ad seeking Baker families to claim the millions tied up in the Jacob Baker estate. The “businessmen” running the Baker Heir Associations fooled local officials for years before they were caught in the 1930s.
 - More about the Baker hoax- https://members.tripod.com/~Crystal_J/Baker-2.html

Non-existent Ancestors & Fabricated Facts

- **Thomas Nathaniel Edwards**- a colonial New England settler...that never existed! Created from another inheritance scam in the 1920s, false records (and a very common surname) proliferated a hoax that continues to plague family historians today.
 - The Edwards scam is debunked in this detailed post from *Edwards Genealogy of Colonial Virginia* historian Jason Farrell-
<https://edwardsvirginiagenealogy.blogspot.com/2020/01/who-was-thomas-nathaniel-edwards.html>
- **The Horn Papers**- William F. Horn “transcribed” and published his ancestor Jacob Horn’s records, then tried to profit. Historians caught on, and the papers were debunked in the 1940s. Unfortunately, Horn’s books are still readily available in many historical collections today.
 - The Library of Congress talks about the Horn Papers forgery-
<https://guides.loc.gov/horn-papers>
 - For those interested, you can read the Horn Papers on HathiTrust-
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001873982>
- **Gustave Anjou**- “Genealogy’s Most Wanted,” proliferator of countless fabricated family histories. An ex-con from Sweden, Anjou immigrated to New York and created a genealogy research business targeting wealthy families. At \$9,000 per pedigree, Anjou would cleverly hide fake information among the real facts in his reports. The damage he caused still lurks in family trees today.
 - Read about Anjou and many other fraudulent genealogists on the *FamilySearch Wiki*-
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Fraudulent_Genealogies
 - *Digging History Magazine* talks about Anjou, Horn, and many other fraudsters-
<https://digging-history.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Blueological-Fraud.pdf>

Modern Family Tree Fraud & How to Protect Yourself

Family tree fraud is still rampant today. Here are some tips on what to watch out for.

Fabricated Family Trees in the Digital Age- Many are a result of the aforementioned estate scams or fraudsters like Anjou. Inexperienced family historians proliferate false information without analyzing the records...

- Another list of fabricated family histories from *WikiTree*-
https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Category:Frauds_and_Fabrications
- *Family Tree Magazine* provides a great list of tips for fact-checking family trees (several of these tips align with the GPS- see below!)-
<https://familytreemagazine.com/strategies/fact-check-family-trees/>

Hiring a so-called “professional” genealogist- An amateur provides shoddy work, or a scammer creates fake facts- either way, you don’t get your money’s worth.

To locate an experienced, professional genealogist, use the **Association of Professional Genealogists** website to find a researcher that specializes in your unique research needs!

<https://www.apgen.org/>

- APG members pay yearly dues, are required to report ongoing education hours, and abide by a code of ethics. We are held to high standards in the genealogy community.
- APG provides a complaint adjudication process to resolve client disputes-
[https://www.apgen.org/what we offer to the public.php](https://www.apgen.org/what_we_offer_to_the_public.php)
- APG also provides helpful advice and guidance for hiring a professional genealogist-
[https://www.apgen.org/what is a professional genealo.php](https://www.apgen.org/what_is_a_professional_genealo.php)
- The APG Membership Directory lists over 2,000 professionals with a broad range of research expertise and skills
- Some professional genealogists have credentials, others have degrees from universities that offer family history courses- but all of us have completed work in genealogical courses, institutes, and study groups, and have years of research experience!

Kimberly Powell discusses hiring professional genealogists, as well as other family history scams to avoid, in her *ThoughtCo* article- <https://www.thoughtco.com/family-history-scams-to-avoid-1421694>



You can protect yourself from fake family tree facts! The **Genealogical Proof Standard- GPS-** is your guide for navigating the treacherous roads of family tree fraud!

The Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)

Developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists, the GPS consists of 5 “best practices” for conducting accurate family history research. These components were expanded into the book *Genealogy Standards*, a must-read guide for every genealogist.

- 1) **Reasonably exhaustive research**
- 2) **Complete and accurate citations to sources**
- 3) **Thorough analysis and correlation of evidence (the “heart” of the GPS)**
- 4) **Resolution of any conflicting evidence**
- 5) **A soundly reasoned, written conclusion**

We see the GPS in action by looking at how the 5 components can be used to BUST family tree fraud!

1) Reasonably Exhaustive Research: The Case of J. Montgomery Seaver and the “American Historical-Genealogical Society”

Seaver served three prison terms for forgery and mail fraud. He published a whopping 41 family history books in 1929 alone...but looking at his resource list, did he really do Reasonably Exhaustive Research?

- Learn more about J. Montgomery Seaver and his schemes in a great article by Glenn Sherman of the Connecticut State Library- <https://tinyurl.com/t5j4v4bh>
- And see Seaver’s books for yourself on HathiTrust- <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Search/Home?type%5B%5D=all&lookfor%5B%5D=Seaver%2C%20J.%20Montgomery&page=1&ft=ft>

2) Complete Source Citations- The Royal Lies (and Racism) of Charles Henry Browning

Browning’s *Americans of Royal Descent* was cited in many of Seaver’s works. A member of the Aryan Order of America, Browning partnered with the self-styled “Viscount de Fronsac” to promote the superiority of the rich American elite through unsourced, inaccurate royal lineage connections. Put that book back on the shelf!

- Read more about Browning and the “Viscount” (aka Frederick Forsyth) on *WikiTree*- https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Category:Charles_Henry_Browning_Fraud
- See the lack of sources in *Royal Descent* for yourself on Google Books- <https://books.google.com/books?id=2iOBAAAQAAJ>
- Learn more about the little-known Aryan Order of America (and its sister organization, the College of Arms of Canada) in this article by Yves Drolet from the *National Library & Archives of Quebec*- <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2478526>

3) Analysis and Correlation of Evidence- Revisiting Thomas Nathaniel Edwards

A breakdown of TNE’s Ancestry family trees reveals the “smoke and mirrors” behind the myth!

- Great advice from Susan McNelley about considering sources of information, particularly the (now retired) “Family Data Collection” at Ancestry.com- <https://www.tracingsbysam.com/gen%20tips/Not%20all%20Genealogy%20Databases%20are%20Created%20Equal.pdf>

4) Resolution of Conflicting Evidence- Pierce vs. Pierce- Hero vs. Villain

Michael D. Pierce battles known fraudster Frederick Clifton Pierce- and wins the day through his use of the GPS steps! Our hero writes clear, concise arguments tackling each of Frederick's fibs with evidence and analysis. Read it here- <https://rkkeyes.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/captain-michael-pierce-and-the-fake-genealogy-of-frederick-clifton-pierce-1.pdf>

5) A Soundly Reasoned, Written Conclusion

We explore just a few of the many places where you can find soundly written, accurate genealogical histories. You don't have to be a professional genealogist to follow the GPS steps- check out some great examples of family history writing from local society publications like the *Illinois State Genealogical Society Quarterly*, *Chicago Genealogist*, and *Where the Trails Cross!*

Further Reading

- Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), *Genealogy Standards, Second Edition* (Nashville, TN: Ancestry.com, 2019).
- BCG website: <https://www.bgc certification.org/>
- Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Documentation* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2017).
- Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013).
- Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace, Third Edition* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company Inc., 2015). Note, the modernized Fourth Edition also came out recently.
- The *Evidence Explained* website and blog-
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/index.php/>
 - Link to the Evidence Analysis Process Map:
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>