Genealogy: Skillbuilding Leads to Success

I spend a fair amount of time at Reclaiming Kin posting "mini-lessons" about genealogy skillbuilding, particularly sources and research strategies. There are ten "key" genealogy principles that I come back to repeatedly.

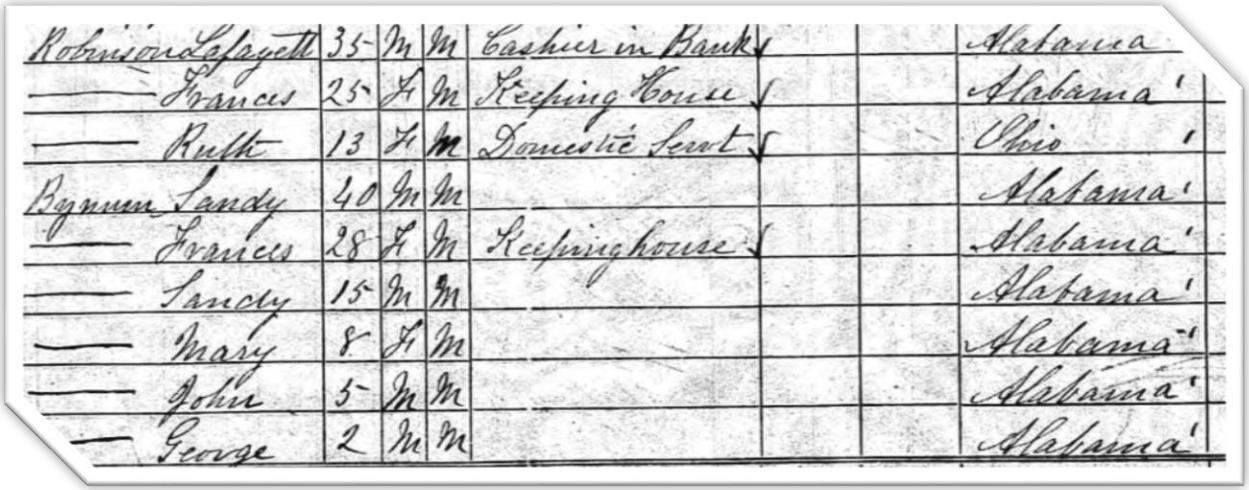
I did not invent them, but they are the principles that guide my research.

Our goal is to document the lives of our ancestors, but we need to be careful and meticulous in that task or we risk conveying erroneous information. That's what skillbuilding is all about.

Census Records

Census records form much of the skeleton of our research, and they are a favorite topic here. I hope to encourage us all to be diligent about extracting every clue from each census.

We don't want to fall into the habit of just copying names and ages and missing the valuable clues buried in those other census columns.



Robinson Lafayett	35	M	M	Cashier in Bank			Alabama
— Frances	25	F	M	Keeping House			Alabama
— Ruth	13	F	M	Domestic Servt			Ohio
Bynum Sandy	40	M	M				Alabama
— Frances	28	F	M	Keeping house			Alabama
— Sandy	15	M	M				Alabama
— Mary	8	F	M				Alabama
— John	5	M	M				Alabama
— George	2	M	M				Alabama

The census is well known for its inaccuracies, especially regarding age. Even a small mistake in a census can cause us to miss whole branches of our family tree.

How we counter that as researchers is to use the census along with information gathered from other sources.

As a general statement, we should never fully trust any source independently. All sources, even original sources, can be wrong. Only by correlating and comparing information in a wide variety of sources can we begin to arrive at accurate reconstruction of our families.

Census records are filled with traps. We have to be careful about what I call the 1880 census "donut" hole—the 20 year gap between the 1880 and 1900 censuses.

Family members can be missed entirely when a child is born after 1880 and out of the household by 1900. We also cannot assume the mother in a census household is the mother of all the children.

The relationships provided in a census (after 1870) are only to the *head* of the household. We must verify the wife's relationship to the children in the household *using other sources.*

Vital and Other Records

Vital records come in a close second to census records in terms of how often we use them. We've got to learn to deeply analyze each source type. I provide an example in this post of deeply analyzing a death certificate.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH 17398

DEPT. OF PUBLIC HEALTH — STATE OF TENNESSEE — DIV. OF VITAL STATISTICS
COOPERATING WITH DEPT. OF COMMERCE — BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

REG. NO. 4
REG. DIST. NO. 747

1. FULL NAME: William (FIRST) Barnes (LAST) 2. DATE OF DEATH: Aug. 11 (MONTH DAY) 19

3. PLACE OF DEATH:
a) COUNTY: Hardeman — CIVIL DISTRICT: #1
b) CITY OR TOWN: Near Bolivar, Rural (IF OUTSIDE CITY LIMITS, WRITE RURAL)
c) NAME OF HOSPITAL: Western State (IF NOT IN HOSPITAL OR INSTITUTION, GIVE STREET ADDRESS)
d) LENGTH OF STAY: IN HOSPITAL 27 dys — IN COMMUNITY

4. USUAL RESIDENCE
a) STATE: Tennessee
b) COUNTY: Crockett — CIVIL DISTRICT:
c) CITY OR TOWN: Humboldt - Rt 7 (IF OUTSIDE CITY LIMITS, GIVE R.F.D. NO.)
d) STREET NO:
e) CITIZEN OF FOREIGN COUNTRY: No (YES OR NO)
IF YES, NAME COUNTRY:

5. RACE OR COLOR: C — 6. SEX: M — 7. SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, DIVORCED

8. AGE: 71 YEARS — MONTHS — DAYS — IF LESS THAN ONE DAY: HRS. MINS.

9. DATE OF BIRTH: MONTH Nov. DAY 17 YEAR 1875

10. PLACE OF BIRTH: CITY OR COUNTY Hardin — STATE OR COUNTRY Tennessee

11. HUSBAND OR WIFE OF: -
AGE OF HUSBAND OR WIFE, IF LIVING: YEARS

12. IF VETERAN NAME OF WAR: No — SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER: -

13. USUAL OCCUPATION: Cabin -boy on steamboat

14. INDUSTRY OR BUSINESS: 46051

15. FULL NAME: Unknown
BIRTHPLACE: CITY OR COUNTY Unkn — STATE OR COUNTRY Unkn

16. MAIDEN NAME: Reanie Lowery
BIRTHPLACE: CITY OR COUNTY Savannah — STATE OR COUNTRY Tennessee

17. INFORMANT: Beadie Williams
ADDRESS: Humboldt, Tenn. Rt #7

18. BURIAL, REMOVAL OR CREMATION: Burns — DATE Aug 14 19 47
CEMETERY: Carthon — PLACE: Morris Chapel
UNDERTAKER: Dew Weeks Funeral Home
ADDRESS: Bolivar Tenn BY: Dew Weeks
Aug 14 1947 19 E. Price, Dy — REGISTRAR

MEDICAL CERTIFICATION

20. I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT I ATTENDED THE DECEASED FROM July 14- 19 47 TO Aug. 11- 19 47
AND THAT I LAST SAW him ALIVE ON Aug. 11 19 47
AND THAT DEATH OCCURRED ON THE DATE STATED AT 10 A.M.

IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF DEATH: Cerebral Arteriosclerosis — DURATION: 2 yrs
DUE TO: — DURATION: 24 hrs
OTHER CONDITIONS: Psychosis
(INCLUDE PREGNANCY WITHIN 3 MONTHS OF DEATH)
OPERATION? No FINDINGS
AUTOPSY? No FINDINGS

PHYSICIAN — UNDERLINE CAUSE TO WHICH DEATH SHOULD BE CHARGED STATISTICALLY

21. IF DEATH WAS DUE TO EXTERNAL CAUSES, FILL IN THE FOLLOWING:
a) ACCIDENT, SUICIDE OR HOMICIDE (SPECIFY)
b) DATE OF OCCURRENCE
c) WHERE DID INJURY OCCUR: CITY COUNTY STATE
d) DID INJURY OCCUR IN OR ABOUT HOME, ON FARM, IN INDUSTRIAL PLACE, IN PUBLIC PLACE?
WHILE AT WORK — MEANS OF INJURY

SIGNATURE: P.M. Pickrod M.D.
ADDRESS: Western State Hospital, Tennessee — DATE SIGNED

They are a tricky source since quite a bit of information they contain is secondary. This is why we need a good genealogy reference library (here are two books we should have).

These are the books that teach us about researching deeds, court records, probate records, vital records, etc.

Reclaiming Kin discusses other common records genealogists rely upon:

World War Draft Registrations
Marriage Records
Newspapers
Land Records
Probate Records
Family Photographs (dating and scanning/storing)
Court Records
Bible Records

Little Used Sources

Reclaiming Kin also includes many posts about little-used sources. These include:

Published Family Histories
Petition for Letters
University Theses and Dissertations
Bastardy Records
Historic Trust Inventories
The Application for a Marriage License
Southern Claims Commission Records
Ancestor's College Records
Extension Service Records
Family Postcards
Genealogical and Historical Societies
Fall in Love with Libraries Again
Digital Library on American Slavery
The Artifacts of Our History Part 1
Voter Registration Records
Convict Records
Account Books
Records of Antebellum Slave Plantations
Sharecroppers in Deed Records
Rosenwald Schools

Our Research Process

Just as important as the quality and breadth of the sources we use is our research process. When we first begin genealogy research, we should interview the elders in the family as soon as possible.

Don't wait until you can visit in person. Call them on the phone with a set of questions. I can't tell you how many people passed away before I could get to them in person.

In-person interviews are wonderful, but what's most important is that you capture the known family history. Like any other source, we cannot accept every statement as gospel. We've got to verify the oral history.

We should understand why we need to properly cite our sources. I did not understand this early on and I paid the price, since today I don't know where many of those early documents came from.

Proving identity is a key concept. How do we know the David Jones in Montgomery County, Maryland is the same David Jones who was born in Adams County, Pennsylvania?

We cannot just assume since they have the same name and are of the same age, that they are the same person. Identity is much more than just name.

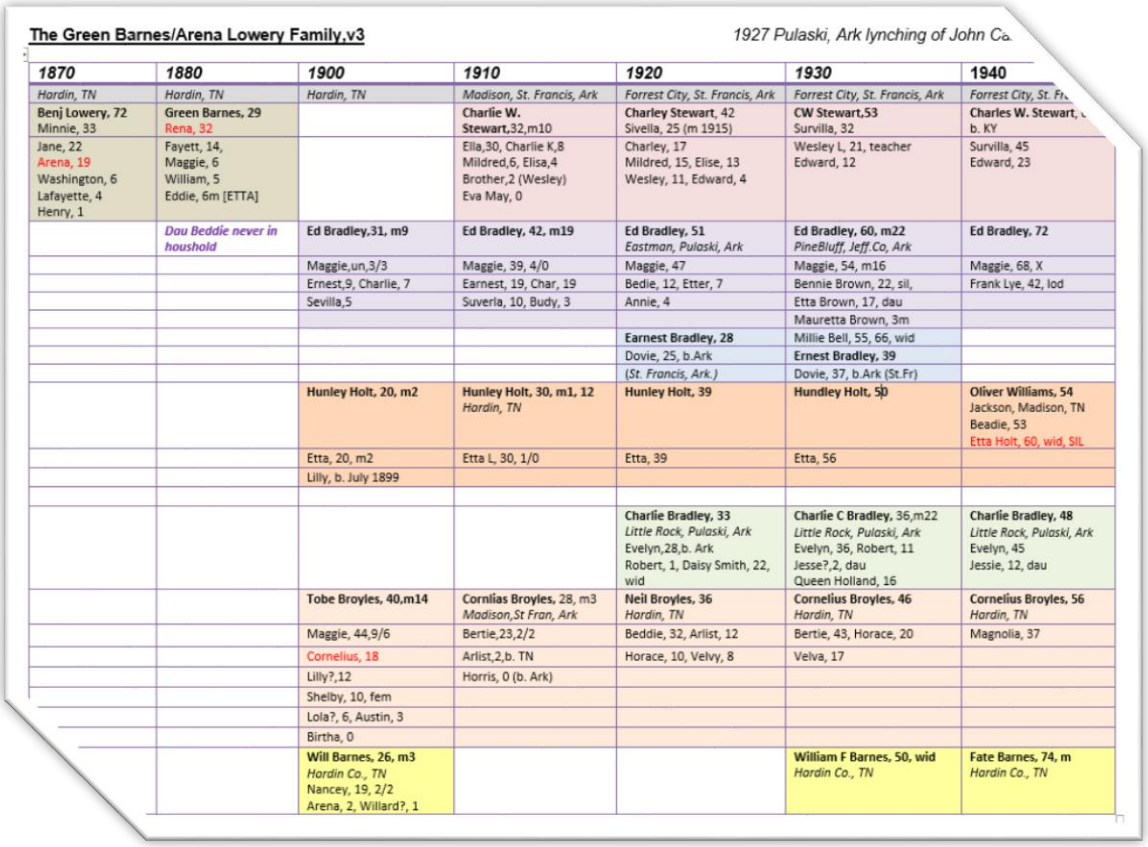
In my earlier years of research, I often just assumed someone died, when often the person had migrated somewhere else.

Most genealogical problems are not brick walls. They are simply problems we haven't done enough work on yet to solve.

Stay Organized

Once we start gathering records, it's very easy to become overwhelmed. The amount of paper and files and folders stack up quickly.

Reclaiming Kin provides posts that discuss research processes to help with organization and analysis. These include creating charts, using census trackers and creating tables to sort people with the same name.



The Green Barnes/Arena Lowery Family,v3 — *1927 Pulaski, Ark lynching of John Co.*

1870	1880	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940
Hardin, TN	*Hardin, TN*	*Hardin, TN*	*Madison, St. Francis, Ark*	*Forrest City, St. Francis, Ark*	*Forrest City, St. Francis, Ark*	*Forrest City, St. Fr.*
Benj Lowery, 72 Minnie, 33	**Green Barnes, 29** Rena, 32		**Charlie W. Stewart,**32,m10	**Charley Stewart**, 42 Sivella, 25 (m 1915)	**CW Stewart,53** Survilla, 32	**Charles W. Stewart,** b. KY
Jane, 22 Arena, 19 Washington, 6 Lafayette, 4 Henry, 1	Fayett, 14, Maggie, 6 William, 5 Eddie, 6m [ETTA]		Ella,30, Charlie K,8 Mildred,6, Elisa,4 Brother,2 (Wesley) Eva May, 0	Charley, 17 Mildred, 15, Elise, 13 Wesley, 11, Edward, 4	Wesley L, 21, teacher Edward, 12	Survilla, 45 Edward, 23
	Dau Beddie never in houshold	**Ed Bradley,31, m9**	**Ed Bradley, 42, m19**	**Ed Bradley, 51** *Eastman, Pulaski, Ark*	**Ed Bradley, 60, m22** *PineBluff, Jeff.Co, Ark*	**Ed Bradley, 72**
		Maggie,un,3/3	Maggie, 39, 4/0	Maggie, 47	Maggie, 54, m16	Maggie, 68, X
		Ernest,9, Charlie, 7	Earnest, 19, Char, 19	Bedie, 12, Etter, 7	Bennie Brown, 22, sil,	Frank Lye, 42, lod
		Sevilla,5	Suverla, 10, Budy, 3	Annie, 4	Etta Brown, 17, dau	
					Mauretta Brown, 3m	
				Earnest Bradley, 28	Millie Bell, 55, 66, wid	
				Dovie, 25, b.Ark	**Ernest Bradley, 39**	
				(St. Francis, Ark.)	Dovie, 37, b.Ark (St.Fr)	
		Hunley Holt, 20, m2	**Hunley Holt, 30, m1, 12** *Hardin, TN*	**Hunley Holt, 39**	**Hundley Holt, 50**	**Oliver Williams, 54** Jackson, Madison, TN Beadie, 53 Etta Holt, 60, wid, SIL
		Etta, 20, m2	Etta L, 30, 1/0	Etta, 39	Etta, 56	
		Lilly, b. July 1899				
				Charlie Bradley, 33 *Little Rock, Pulaski, Ark* Evelyn,28,b. Ark Robert, 1, Daisy Smith, 22, wid	**Charlie C Bradley,** 36,m22 *Little Rock, Pulaski, Ark* Evelyn, 36, Robert, 11 Jesse?,2, dau Queen Holland, 16	**Charlie Bradley, 48** *Little Rock, Pulaski, Ark* Evelyn, 45 Jessie, 12, dau
		Tobe Broyles, 40,m14	**Cornlias Broyles,** 28, m3 *Madison,St Fran, Ark*	**Neil Broyles, 36** *Hardin, TN*	**Cornelius Broyles, 46** *Hardin, TN*	**Cornelius Broyles, 56** *Hardin, TN*
		Maggie, 44,9/6	Bertie,23,2/2	Beddie, 32, Arlist, 12	Bertie, 43, Horace, 20	Magnolia, 37
		Cornelius, 18	Arlist,2,b. TN	Horace, 10, Velvy, 8	Velva, 17	
		Lilly?,12	Horris, 0 (b. Ark)			
		Shelby, 10, fem				
		Lola?, 6, Austin, 3				
		Birtha, 0				
		Will Barnes, 26, m3 *Hardin Co., TN* Nancey, 19, 2/2 Arena, 2, Willard?, 1			**William F Barnes, 50, wid** *Hardin Co., TN*	**Fate Barnes, 74, m** *Hardin Co., TN*

I know firsthand the excitement of searching for new records. However, we have to learn to stop *gathering sources* and start trying to understand and piece together the information we already have.

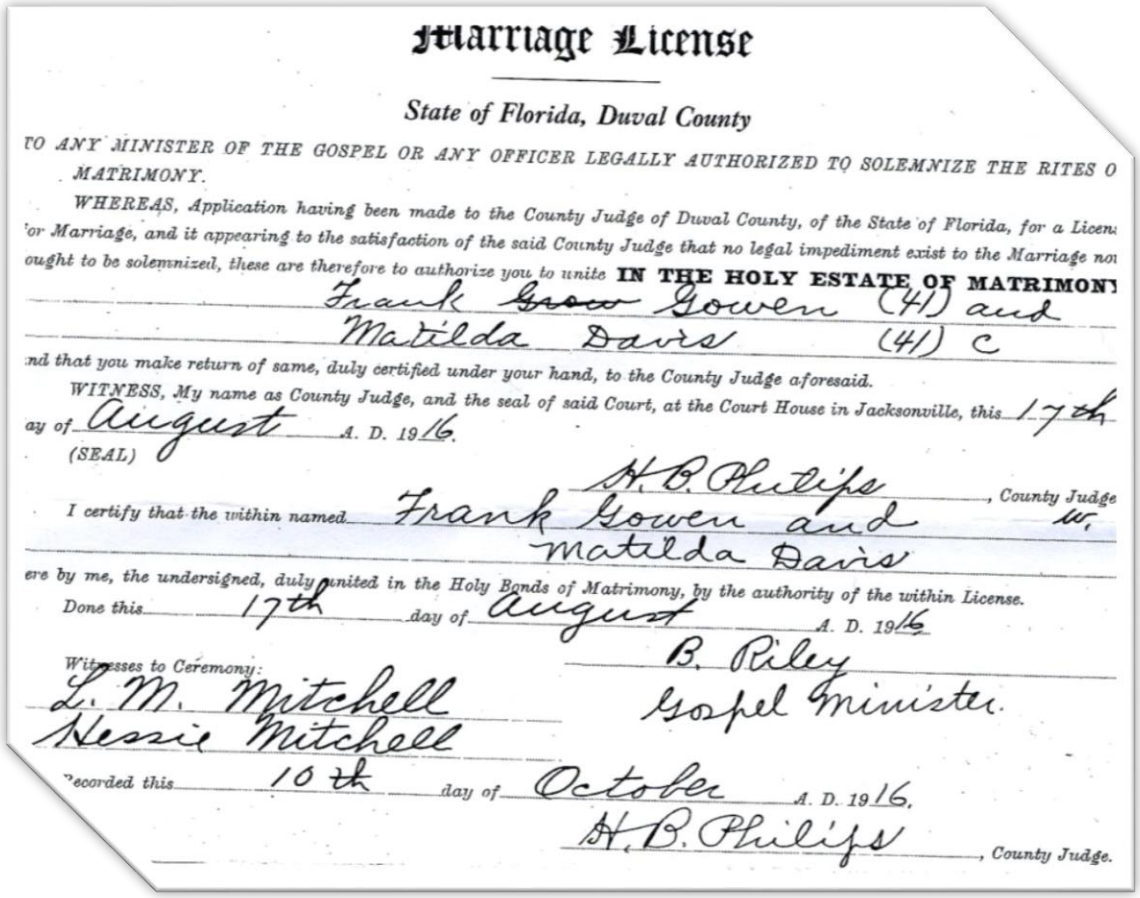
Writing up your research is a great way to do this. Writing forces us to clarify our thoughts, and place events in context. It makes it easier to see where the our research has gaps.

Specific research questions should guide our research. For example, "Who were the children of David and Amy King of Nashville, Tennessee?"

The questions are important because they help to focus our research on the sources most likely to help us answer the question.

Questions also prevent us from searching randomly and haphazardly, which often simply leads to frustration. That frustration can cause people to give up their research entirely and declare a brick wall.

Research Strategies



Marriage License

State of Florida, Duval County

TO ANY MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL OR ANY OFFICER LEGALLY AUTHORIZED TO SOLEMNIZE THE RITES O MATRIMONY.

WHEREAS, Application having been made to the County Judge of Duval County, of the State of Florida, for a Licen for Marriage, and it appearing to the satisfaction of the said County Judge that no legal impediment exist to the Marriage no ought to be solemnized, these are therefore to authorize you to unite IN THE HOLY ESTATE OF MATRIMON Frank Gowen (41) and Matilda Davis (41) C

and that you make return of same, duly certified under your hand, to the County Judge aforesaid.

WITNESS, My name as County Judge, and the seal of said Court, at the Court House in Jacksonville, this 17th day of August A. D. 1916.

(SEAL) H. B. Philips, County Judge

I certify that the within named Frank Gowen and Matilda Davis W.

were by me, the undersigned, duly united in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony, by the authority of the within License.

Done this 17th day of August A. D. 1916

B. Riley

Witnesses to Ceremony: Gospel Minister.

L. M. Mitchell

Hessie Mitchell

Recorded this 10th day of October A. D. 1916.

H. B. Philips, County Judge.

Our ancestor's activities can bedevil us when we aren't conscious of our assumptions. Some married two or three times, and the family may have no knowledge of previous marriages or children.

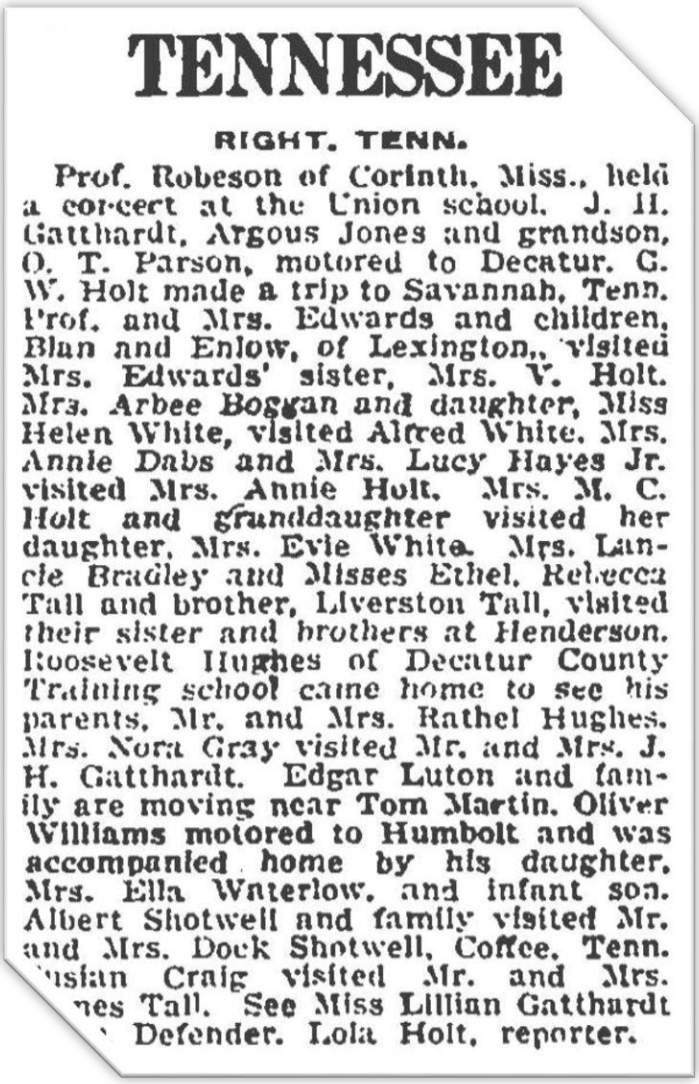
Affairs of the past (literally) may have resulted in other children. Brushes with the law, stints in prison, or even murders in the family may not have been passed down, for obvious reasons.

Our ancestors may have stayed in one place their entire lives, only to move with their children in their elder years.

Instead of just researching our direct ancestors, we should broaden our scope and research each generation of our family, including all the siblings.

Siblings remembered different things about their parents. The information you need may be in the records of an aunt or great-aunt.

Expand your research lens to the *community* where your ancestors lived, and you will often find them surrounded by their relatives. This is why using the research strategy often referred to as "cluster research" is so successful.



TENNESSEE

RIGHT, TENN.

Prof. Robeson of Corinth, Miss., held a concert at the Union school. J. H. Gatthardt, Argous Jones and grandson, O. T. Parson, motored to Decatur. G. W. Holt made a trip to Savannah, Tenn. Prof. and Mrs. Edwards and children, Blan and Enlow, of Lexington,, visited Mrs. Edwards' sister, Mrs. V. Holt. Mrs. Arbee Boggan and daughter, Miss Helen White, visited Alfred White. Mrs. Annie Dabs and Mrs. Lucy Hayes Jr. visited Mrs. Annie Holt. Mrs. M. C. Holt and granddaughter visited her daughter, Mrs. Evie White. Mrs. Lancie Bradley and Misses Ethel, Rebecca Tall and brother, Liverston Tall, visited their sister and brothers at Henderson. Roosevelt Hughes of Decatur County Training school came home to see his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rathel Hughes. Mrs. Nora Gray visited Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Gatthardt. Edgar Luton and family are moving near Tom Martin. Oliver Williams motored to Humbolt and was accompanied home by his daughter, Mrs. Ella Waterlow, and infant son. Albert Shotwell and family visited Mr. and Mrs. Dock Shotwell, Coffee, Tenn. [illegible] Craig visited Mr. and Mrs. [illegible]nes Tall. See Miss Lillian Gatthardt [illegible] Defender. Lola Holt, reporter.

It's the concept that researching the *group* of people associated with our ancestors will lead to greater success.

Using cluster research, I found one ancestor's sister and discovered the parents and origins of another. I have followed the witness in genealogical sources and found relatives.

Cluster research can be utilized in a wide range of sources and apply to all sorts of problems. It is my single most successful research strategy and one that pays off repeatedly.

Online Research

The Internet provides instant access to records and has been a boon to genealogists. But it also has drawbacks. The search box means fewer people will view the census *image* and other original records in search of ancestors.

Beginners often do not realize that sites like Ancestry require that we do more work to understand the underlying sources of their large databases.

Moreover, most sources are not and will not be available online. Success in genealogical research depends upon your willingness to go out and explore cemeteries, state archives, local libraries, and genealogical and historical societies.

Many of their records can only be discovered in person.

When we find indexes, transcriptions and abstracts online, we must to be in the habit of reviewing the original source. The transcriber or indexer may have made a copying mistake.

The original source may have more clues the discerning researcher can glean. Every clue counts. This requires that we either visit a repository in person or write off and pay for a copy of the original source.

Closing Thoughts

Finally, genealogy is a learned skill that improves with study and application. After 20 years, I am still taking lectures, attending conferences and reading journal articles and genealogy books.

I know it's not as exciting as the big discoveries we have in research (like this DNA bombshell), but that's how you improve. I'm continually learning from other researchers and I encourage everyone to do the same.

Genealogy has brought such joy to my life. The things I have learned about not just my family, but also the communities they created, has been soul satisfying.

I've met many new cousins along the way and thought more deeply about history in general.

I've got a sneaky feeling that this feeling is not mine alone.

Thanks for reading!

Robyn N. Smith, ©2019
msualumni33@gmail.com