



# Cluster Research: Using Groups of People to Find Your People

by Robyn N. Smith, email: [msualumni33@gmail.com](mailto:msualumni33@gmail.com)

Cluster research is the process of researching the “cluster” of people associated with your family. The cluster include siblings, in-laws, neighbors, cousins, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, witnesses in marriage and deed records and others.

## Research Tips:

- ✓ Be curious about anyone that has multiple interactions with your core person/couple/family
- ✓ Pay attention to the birthplaces in censuses for migration clues
- ✓ Notice any others with the same surname living nearby or others w/same birthplace
- ✓ Research those living in the same household in any census record; boarders are sometimes family members
- ✓ Find out who the witnesses are on marriage, probate & land records
- ✓ Who did they buy land from? Who did they sell land to?
- ✓ Research all marriages, even those not in your direct bloodline
- ✓ Who is buried near your ancestors with a different surname?
- ✓ Research all the military comrades of your ancestor in the local area
- ✓ Clustering is crucial for researching enslaved people. Who are the neighbors of the slaveholder? Who did the slaveholder interact with? What blacks are living nearby in 1870?
- ✓ Create aides like tables to assist with research: **Reclaiming Kin has tables for sale at:** <https://reclaimingkin.com/product-category/genealogy-forms/>
- ✓ Read case studies in genealogy journals that utilize cluster research

## Records for Clustering:

Census  
Land Records  
Maps, Headstones,  
Obituaries, Marriages,  
Tax Records  
Probate Records  
Court Records  
Voting Records  
Military Records, and more!

## References and Articles:

- ✓ Elizabeth Shown Mills, Quicksheet, *The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research*, (about \$7 on Amazon.com).
- ✓ *Evidence Explained* website, <http://www.evidenceexplained.com>, Quick Lesson #11: Identity Problems and the FAN Principle.
- ✓ Curtis Brasfield, “Tracing Slave Ancestors: Batchelor, Bradley, Branch and Wright of Desha County, Arkansas,” *NGS Quarterly* 92 (March 2004): 6-30.
- ✓ Rudena Kramer Mallory, “An African-American Odyssey through Multiple Surnames: Mortons, Tapps, and Englishes of Kansas and Missouri,” *NGS Quarterly* 85 (March 1997) 25-38.
- ✓ William M. Litchmann, “Using Cluster Methodology to Backtrack an Ancestor: The Case of John Bradberry,” *NGS Quarterly* 95 (June 2007): 103-16.
- ✓ Shirley Langdon Wilcox, “Associations Re-establish Family Links: The Young's Serial Migration from Virginia through Kentucky and Missouri to California,” *NGS Quarterly* (September 2015): 209-28.
- ✓ Donna R. Mills, “Racheal ‘Fanny’ Devereaux/Martin of Alabama and Florida, A Free Woman of Color,” *The American Genealogist* 70 (January 1995): 37-41.