

## Do It Right! Using Primary and Secondary Sources in Your Research

by Paula Gammell

Are you making a family history or are you creating a fairy tale? Are you compiling a genealogy or conjuring up a fantasy?

Too many researchers – not just ‘newbies’ but experienced ones as well – fall into the trap of skipping vital steps, making leaps of faith unsupported by evidence, and basically just believing anything and everything they see.

This results in a genealogy that is *wrong*.

Ah, but so what?

Well, for all the many arguments against this, perhaps the best is: would you like somebody to pluck you out of your family and put you into another? Would you like them to have your spouse marry someone else? Would you like them to attribute your life experiences to another? My guess is no.

Then why would you do it to them?

Your finished work needs to be based when at all possible on primary sources; you should rely on secondary sources only as a last resort.

Think of primary sources as records generated at the time of the event by a participant or at the very least by an eyewitness. This includes not only legal documents like marriages, births, deaths, and so forth, but also letters, diaries, journals, and Family Bibles.

Documents written after the fact *can* also be primary sources. Pension applications, for instance, contain a description of battles that the applicant participated in, even though written down many years after the fact.

Secondary sources are removed from primary sources by at least one degree. Good examples of secondary sources are the various compiled record books that are so useful to us: marriages, wills, census transcripts, deed abstracts, and so forth. The compiler worked from the original – the primary source – and asks you to trust that their work was done accurately.

Now, don't misunderstand: there is nothing inherently *wrong* with using secondary sources; in fact they are just fine to use. But let secondary sources be the beginning of your research, not the end. When you find, for example, a marriage transcribed in a book don't stop there; go to the primary source to verify it and obtain a copy. Your work is not complete until you do.

Your finished work should cite a source – if at all possible, a *primary* source – for each claim you make. Birthdate? Cite their Family Bible. Marriage date? Cite the marriage record. Death date? Cite the death certifi-

cate, monument inscription, and so forth.

If a claim comes from neither a primary source nor a secondary source, then it has no place in your work unless you are *very* clear that it is an undocumented claim.

If you rely on primary sources for every fact, will you have a perfectly accurate genealogy?

Sorry, no. Primary sources can contain errors: words sworn to in court, chiseled in stone, or poured in bronze, can be wrong. Keep a critical eye out and use common sense, and if you can prove a primary record is wrong, then please do.

And, remember this: just because a document is old doesn't make it right! The passage of time doesn't magically turn false statements true. If it was wrong when it was written, its still wrong now!

The same holds, many times multiplied, for information found on the internet! At least with a printed book one had a chance of tracing false information to its source and thus being able to address it. But on the internet its almost impossible to get to the root of falsehoods.

I did – just once – see what I could find on my mother's family on... umm... let's just say one of the major online genealogy sites – you know, where you submit your own 'family tree' and copy/paste thousands of names into it. I soon found that someone had submitted a 'family tree' and included Mom's family.

Mom was one of ten children. The submitter had at least one vital stat – birth, death, or marriage – incorrect on each of those ten children; plus she had mixed up some spouses, had some of their names wrong, and even had some locations wrong.

I assumed the submitter would want to be accurate. Oh, my mistake. My friendly email offering to send her a copy of their Family Bible went ignored. And that wrong information has no doubt multiplied exponentially.

Its wrong. Period.

It was wrong from the get-go. Being posted on the internet didn't make it right. And after its copied and pasted ten (or fifty, or one hundred, or one thousand) times, it still won't be right.

So, which is it: family genealogy or a fable?

Its entirely within your power to contribute a factual family history that will stand up to scrutiny and make your ancestors proud – or to fabricate a story about them that they wouldn't even recognize. Its your call.