

## Family Digging Podcast

### The Value of Original Sources, Part 1

Hi Everyone,

**Paul:** This is an exciting adventure for Carolyn and me - sharing with others what we have learned about finding our families through research, useful technology, errors we have made, and persistence. In the last ten years the worlds of family history and genealogy have moved light years ahead, with huge interest in the field today because of new technologies, what DNA can tell us, an enormous amount of information now locally available (much of it free), and an ongoing project by millions of people all over the world to safeguard our history by digitizing records, sometimes at a rate of over 1,000,000 records a day.

**Carolyn:** But with all the progress that has been made in recent years, there have been some "issues". First, let's face it, NOBODY likes to cite their sources. Just do it anyway, please. Be able to prove what you say. Do you know that your father was born on 20 May 1910 in Oak Park, Cook County, Illinois? How do you know that? Did you hear that from someone? Did you find it on someone else's family tree? These aren't sources; they are hints. Have you looked in the birth records for that place and era on the major genealogy records company sites like [Ancestry](#), [FamilySearch](#) and [MyHeritage](#)? Did you find a listing? Another hint. Did you find an image of the birth record or the original certificate itself? If so, BINGO! You may just have a primary record. Now go see if you can find a second source for his date of birth to corroborate what you found, again, getting as close as you can to the original source AND its image as possible. (Military records, especially draft cards, which were hand written by the person him/herself, and the Social Security Application tied with its Death Index are two good ways to start. The census is a secondary source - whether Federal, State or Local - but a valuable one. You need at least two secondary sources or one primary source for every fact you obtain.)

**Paul:** We will talk about the quality and types of various records on another occasion, but suffice it to say, until you have an actual record which at least begins to prove your case, you should not be putting that information on your tree, especially one that is online. You should be creating a citation for

this record and getting a photo of the image of that record (printed and scanned, and otherwise saved, not just emailed) adding where you got that image from, and the date that you accessed it. We will look at sources and tools for learning to write citations in more depth on another occasion. In the meanwhile, the gold standard for this is the book, [\*Evidence Explained\*](#) by Elizabeth Shown Mills. The reason you want to grab the images and do the citations as you go is that when you choose to wait and do it later, it may just not be there any more. That is because these images are lent to various companies for a specific period of time. The consumer (a/k/a you or me) has no way of knowing when those image contracts expire. We always hear that the images are no longer available after the fact. Time to start all over to find the proof. (Boo!)

**Carolyn:** If you think that you can just email the image of the record to yourself, think again so you don't have to go through the heartbreak that I did when a year or two after I began research I began to create my family tree. Having emailed myself the results of my research for a good number of generations, I found that what I had emailed myself was just a link to where it had originated. You could see the transcription, but the image had been removed upon the termination of that contract. So get the actual image while you can. That is your proof, not the transcription, but copy the transcription as well, and save yourself the time and heartache that I experienced as a newbie.

**Paul:** What if you didn't find the record in one of those companies? On a future occasion we will begin to talk about other ways to find the information you need. What if you could only find a transcription of the record, but not the image? The transcription is not useless, but it is not primary proof either. There can be errors along the way. Some transcribers are so bent on getting as much done in the shortest time that they forget that accuracy counts. Or they can't read the handwriting well; or they don't proofread their work. There are errors you will need to identify and correct as a result. So for every image you find, please, please compare what the actual record says with what the transcription says. If there is a difference, contact the source and let them know so that it can be corrected.

**Carolyn:** What you really need from the get-go is a journal of your research. You can do this electronically, which we recommend, or by hand. (Be sure to back it up regularly to the cloud, a portable hard drive, USB, photocopy or all of the above.) Every time you do research, you should be noting the person being researched, his or her number on your tree, the date, the question being asked (as all research begins with a question), where you searched for the answer, what hints you discovered there (and if none, say so). If a transcription of a record or image was found, and where to locate it on your computer and/or printed files. If you add a short line like "Keep Looking" "Need to....." or "Done", while it is fresh in your mind, you will have an easy time picking it up on the next occasion.

**Paul:** Some people do a separate log for each Surname or even each person, which cuts the time searching for the person you need from your log notes. A simple document program like Word or Google Docs will suffice to start. Genealogy is not a sprint, it is a marathon, often a lifetime of adventure. You will need a good quality foundation for your tree, minimizing errors. And you need ways to jog your memory. If you don't keep a journal, you will be in the business of doing things over and over again, not making progress.

**Carolyn:** The log for my paternal grandfather looks like I might have been drinking too much. There are no records that I have found for him that have his name and vital information recorded or spelled exactly the same way: his birth records, marriage record, death record, census records - it is bizarre. For instance, his birth record with Cook County, Illinois doesn't even provide his given name! It just shows "male child to" and his parents' names. (This is not unusual for Cook County, believe me.) The only way that I know that this is my grandfather's birth record is because in the census which was done the following year, 1890, clearly showed his first name (misspelled as Ray instead of Roy) in the household of his parents, who I knew definitely to be George S. and Emma F (McGowan) Harrington. Roy/Ray was shown as age 1 and the only child in the household. I knew their names because I looked at the family tree my mother did in my baby book which covered four generations, the information for which was provided by my four grandparents. When I [googled](#) Roy's parents' names,

George S. Harrington + Emma F. (McGowan) Harrington, the only results that completely matched were those of our Roy's parents.

So what is correct? That will be the subject of another podcast, but if you find the same thing, be sure to note how the record is spelled or otherwise recorded in the actual record, the way it spelled in the transcription, and reference the full file name/number that you have set up to hold that record. That way you can always find it again. And by the way, it's a good thing I could find the record in the 1890 census, because Roy's dad passed away before the following census; this is the only way I have thus far found that connects one generation to the next, because George died intestate, but his wife, Emma, was named as the Administer of the estate.

As to my father's birth record (in Oak Park, IL) I was unable to find it anywhere, but then remembered that my mother had given me a small packet of documents about her and Dad which I had in my safe deposit box. A short time later, I had copies of them in my hands and discovered that there was no formal certificate of his birth anywhere. Dad was born on a farm in Illinois in 1910. There was a handwritten record of his birth written by his mother, signed by her and her sister, who helped deliver the baby, with no one else present, with both signatures notarized. As it turned out, Dad needed a social security number when Social Security became effective to provide to his employer; proof of date of birth was required for registration. There was no birth certificate, so this document, an "alternative birth record", was used. A suggestion, if you find yourself in a similar situation: instead of just going into Ancestry or FamilySearch and searching by name, go to their respective catalogs and search for birth records in Cook County, Illinois in 1910. It will bring up all the types of birth records for that place and time. You may well find it in a list titled on the order of "Alternative Birth Records" or "Birth Records Filed Late" or "Affidavits of Birth" or "Delayed Births".

**Paul:** So how do the things we just discussed relate to the title of this podcast, "The Value of Original Resources"? First, the original resource may not be perfect, but it is likely to be much closer to perfect than something that has been copied over and over again. It reduces a lot of errors. It also gives you standing; if you see incorrect information on a shared tree, for instance, for which you have proof that your case is actually true, you can

often get the other person's misinformation corrected. So many trees today have no sources at all, or have been sourced by a Gedcom or shared tree that does not provide you with resources, or that is perpetuated incorrectly because the original story was fraudulent (the subject of another podcast), or because they turned the assumptions of someone's alleged mind into "facts" without any proof at all. If you have proof and the other person does not, it is perfectly proper (and desirable) to provide the original author or tree manager with a copy of it so they can correct their records.

**Carolyn:** The days are over when you can just say or write something and have it believed without proof. This is no small thing in genealogy - because the practice of stealing from other people's work is rampant, but it does not necessarily lead to accuracy, and it sure isn't ethical. So don't ever be afraid of applying "unproven" or "disputed" or "unknown" or "circa/c." or "abt./about" "estimated/est." or just leaving that area blank in your work until you do have something that you can use as actual proof, whether from an original source or from at least two secondary sources. You can explain yourself more fully in the body of your work. Use your journal for recording hints and whether they proved out as true. And never accept a hint onto your tree until and unless you have searched and found the actual proof yourself. Too many of us are now familiar with "fact checking". To maintain a good reputation for accuracy, prove it before publishing it. And always cite your sources for each fact you present. (Another person's tree is just a hint.)

**Paul:** The very good news is that because of the huge digitization projects going on all over the world, more and more information is becoming available on the internet; many more original sources are now online to help your research along. Part of the race is against deteriorating paper documents and film before original documents become destroyed by time. So, whereas I could find nothing about some of my ancestors ten or fifteen years ago (even five years ago), today there is information and then some to explore and record. It's exciting for us to be able to research at home, but everything is not on the internet. In fact not even a quarter of the information for which there are relevant records is currently online. So our local genealogy libraries and Family History Centers can also come in very handy (and there are other workarounds that may be of use). They have access to subscriptions that you might not want to purchase on your own (but most are closed during this pandemic). It used to be that you needed

to go on multiple road trips to access the information you needed to get at the facts. Gradually that is becoming less necessary. And researching at home for free sounds good to many: no limit to the day or time you can research, no reason to have to expose yourself to Covid-19, a great way to prevent boredom in a pandemic...all good stuff, especially in our current environment.

**Carolyn:** If you go to our website (<http://familydigging.com>) and look in our Scripts file, you will find a copy of this Podcast as well as a list of sources that you may want to visit to learn more. You can listen at any time of your choosing, or you can read the podcast script. Feel free to copy anything in the Scripts file for personal use only. Otherwise, please contact the copyright holder, namely us, (familydigging.com) via email for permission. While you are there, and especially if you would like to be automatically notified when another podcast is available, please subscribe. We encourage your comments (but keep them civil, please).

**Paul:** We will come back to our Original Records series on another occasion soon, but next time we will begin a series on Getting Started in Genealogy so that people who have not had much experience in this subject can join in the fun. We hope you will join us. (See resources for this podcast on the next page.)

Stay Safe!

Paul and Carolyn  
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