

## Avoiding Brick Walls

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At some point in family history research, almost every researcher encounters the dreaded “brick wall” — the point where research seems to come to a dead end or an ancestor seems to disappear from the records.

There are a number of mistakes the researcher can make that increase the likelihood of encountering these brick walls. One is accepting information on the Internet as fact without checking for documentation or for other resources.

Many a family historian has spent hours following a family line based on what turns out to be false information, then retracing steps and starting all over again.

Another common mistake is failing to research the dates of formation of the counties in which ancestors lived. It is not uncommon to find that an ancestor lived in three or four different counties in his lifetime, yet lived in the same house the entire time.

This was especially true of those who were the early settlers in a given area, when new counties were often formed from the original county.

For example, Buncombe County was formed in 1791 from Burke and Rutherford counties. In 1808 Haywood County was formed from Buncombe, and in 1828, Macon was formed from Haywood.

Yancey County was formed in 1833 from Buncombe and Burke counties, and Henderson was next, formed in 1838 from Buncombe. That pattern continued elsewhere in North Carolina and in other states.

It is also important to remember that in the first few months after the formation of a new county, the records may well have been recorded in the parent county until the government of the new county was set up and underway.

States themselves may fall into this realm. For example, Tennessee was part of North Carolina before becoming a state in 1796. Many early records for present day northeast Tennessee reside in the North Carolina State Archives.

Often the researcher finds a document or information giving a name, date or other fact and accepts that as fact without any further search.

A “reasonably exhaustive search” must be made to determine if different sources corroborate each or if the information in one conflicts with information in another.

Some conflicting data may be as simple as finding a person on two or more different census records with the birthplace given as different places, or may be as critical as a discovering that a child has been listed with different parents in two different sources.

One must first analyze the importance of the data to the research. For example, it may not matter if a person was born in June or in July, but it may be very significant if the years of birth given are several years apart.

In the case of a man who is married more than once, the birth year of his child can be used to determine which wife was the mother of this child.

Resolving conflicting data involves analyzing each piece, determining the source of each and how reliable that source may be.

One must look carefully at the source of each piece of evidence. Is it primary or secondary information? Would it behoove the person providing the data to stretch the truth in any way? How well would this person know the facts and/or the family members?

Are we looking at an original document or a transcription or abstract of the document? If the latter, how reliable is the person who did the abstraction or transcription? Is the data stated as a fact itself, or is it providing indirect information from which we must infer facts?

There are many more questions which may be asked in an effort to resolve conflicting information. A very good source for analyzing information is "Evidence Explained" by Elizabeth Shown Mills, a very well-known and respected certified genealogist.

Once the analysis of each piece of evidence is complete, we must correlate all the analysis to determine which to accept, based on the credibility of each. This is not always easy.

Sometimes there is no one source that stands out as more credible than others. If this is the case, it is a good idea to prepare lists, such as timelines, charts, diagrams and even the old-fashioned index cards with each source listed.

The various pieces of evidence can then be shifted around in placement, perhaps enabling the researcher to see patterns or points previously missed.

Writing the analysis in narrative and/or report form, defending or refuting each "fact," can also be helpful in resolving the conflict. This can help the researcher see points that may have been missed or fallacies in conclusions drawn.

An added bonus to this is that those observing the work in the future will be able to see how and why each conclusion was drawn.

Next month we will discuss methods and tactics for overcoming "brick walls" in our research.