

Mistakes Compromise the Credibility of Your Research

by Dee Gibson-Roles

No one is immune from making mistakes, and genealogists are certainly no exception. However, the lessons that can be learned from others' mistakes can prevent long hours of useless and unproductive family research. There are several mistakes commonly made by researchers, particularly those new to research, and other researchers can profit by remembering these.

By far the most common error is the failure to document new information. This oversight can take several forms. The first, of course, is simply neglecting to record the source in which the information is found. Few experiences are more frustrating than finding a need to revisit the source, only to realize that the said source was not recorded when initially consulted. This can result in hours of lost research time backtracking to try to find the original information and source. Needless to say, this experience does not have to occur very often until the researcher, whether new or experienced, begins to remember to record the source each and every time. It is also important to keep a research log, listing every single source consulted, whether or not that source yields positive results. Even if the source provides no useful information, it should be recorded (along with the date consulted and a note that no information was found) to prevent repeatedly returning to previously consulted sources, only to realize that one has examined the source previously.

The second form that documentation mistakes can take is the failure to locate and acquire proper documentation for any information about an ancestor. Many researchers have learned the hard way that information that is not documented is subject to error and cannot be accepted as fact without such documentation. This includes family stories, data from others which is undocumented, and family history books with no sources listed, etc. We should always remember that "genealogy without documentation is mythology!"

A quick note here on family stories and/or legends: most of these have at least a small grain of truth to them, but the information may have been passed on with a degree of inaccuracy to the story and even with embellishment as it is passed from one generation to the next. One local researcher found a very good example of this when she was told that her great-great-grandfather was accused and convicted of murder because he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be and ran away when the shooting started between two men in an argument, resulting in his being accused and convicted based on the fact that he fled. Upon researching the case, she discovered that the accused was her great grandfather (not his father, as originally told), and he was at a party with his half-brothers, one of whom actually did shoot another man. There was actually a murder, so there was truth to the story, but time had colored the story and there were many inaccuracies by the time it reached her. Stories and legends should always be researched to determine the real facts behind the story.

Another mistake that probably all researchers make at some point in time is the failure to record information on the standard genealogical forms or in a data base. Most of us at one point have found important information, either written or oral, and jotted it down on a slip of paper, fully intending to record it on a form such as a family group sheet and/or an ancestor chart. The slip of paper is misplaced or forgotten and the information never quite makes it to the standard forms or database. This leads to frustration for the researcher himself and total confusion for those who come after and try to sort the information the researcher has left behind.

One of the biggest mistakes that researchers, especially those new to family history, make is to limit research to one "straight line", ignoring siblings of the ancestors. Often valuable information is missed when this restriction is placed on research. Descendants of siblings may have located important documents and/or photographs and would be willing to share these, or perhaps even have a family bible in their possession, the existence of which is previously unknown to the researcher. Not only does the "straight line only" approach lead to missed information, but usually flags the researcher as an "inexperienced newbie" to experienced genealogists.

Ignoring alternate spellings of surnames and even given names is another error often made, especially by new genealogists. Valuable information can be lost if the researcher fails to check out all possible spellings of names and places. Even the most common names, such as Jones, Smith, or Johnson, can be found in the records with alternate spellings. We often hear someone comment that the name is misspelled on a record, particularly prior to 1900. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that often there was NOT a mistake in the spelling as standardized spelling was not established until the late 1800s – and even later in some cases. Those recording information (such as census enumerators) often spelled names phonetically, which could result in many different spellings of the same name. A wise researcher will compile a list of all possible spellings for a name before beginning to research that name. Many genealogical websites offer lists of possible alternate spellings for many names – both surnames and given names.

Most families have at least one story that the family is related to a famous person by the same surname. More often than not, these stories are just that – stories. Researchers should not make the mistake of assuming kinship with a famous person until documentation can prove the accuracy of such a claim. Likewise, one should not assume descent from a famous person until the same is proven by documentation.

Failure to research all possible sources often leads to mistaken assumptions of family relationships and kinship. An example of this would be a case in which a female child under age 8 is found in the household of a family in one census, but is absent by the next census. Many researchers would assume the child had died during that 10 year span. However, girls often married very young – sometimes as young as 13 or 14, so the child may well be a married woman by the time of the second census – perhaps even with children of her own!

Another mistake which often traps new researchers is failure to make certain of the accuracy of dates given. This can lead to completely skipping over an entire generation in the family. For example, a sixty year old woman or a young girl under age 12 is very unlikely to give birth to a child. Likewise, it is impossible to marry five years after one dies. When dates do not coincide with reasonable ages for life events such as marriage and births or other inconsistencies in dates are found, it is time to search for a possible missing generation. (Young children in the home of an elderly couple in a census could well indicate the death of a child of the couple, who are left with the responsibility of caring for that deceased child's offspring.)

Next month we will discuss the genealogical proof standard and how it can be used to avoid such mistakes as those described.