U.S. Research Process
Evaluating and Analyzing

Do you have a pile of records you collected while working a research project? Have you spent time reading through and analyzing each of those records? It's possible that the answer to your research question is hiding in the records you have already collected.

Evaluate Record Groups

Consider who created the records. Was it an individual, a government, a business or other entity?

Consider why the record was created. Knowing why a record is created can help you understand what information the record might contain.

Think about the where the record was created and who was involved. Was a government official standing at the door of someone's house? Are all of the people named in the record present when it was created?

Was there a reason to copy the record when it was created? For example, the record may have been recorded (or copied) in the court books and the original either filed in a packet or returned to the original owner. A copy may have also been created by the county and sent to a state or federal government.

Evaluate Records

Consider whether the record is an original or a derivative.
- An **original** record is still in its first recorded form
- A **derivative** is anything created by copying or otherwise manipulating the content of an original record. Derivatives include abstracts, authored works, compilations, databases, extracts, indexes, transcriptions, and translations.

When looking at an original record, consider whether this is the true original or a copy of an original. Some records were copied into court books and copies of records were sometimes created to send to a state or federal government. You may also be looking at a photocopy of a record, a microfilm of a record, or a digital version of a record (or a combination of the three). Every time a record is copied, the potential for error is introduce.

Also evaluate the record itself.
- Is there evidence of missing information?
- Is some of the information unreadable?
- Has the record been damaged? Has it been torn or is there evidence of mold?
- Is there evidence of different types of handwriting?
- Is the document handwritten or typewritten? If it's typed, was it created in an era after the typewriter was invented?
- Are you looking at a pre-printed form or is the record long-hand?

Evaluate Information

Start by extracting information. Read through each document carefully. Write down names, dates, and places. Identify other key pieces of information such as property ownership, land descriptions,

occupations, clues to socioeconomic status or religious affiliation, and so forth. If the document includes words that are hard to decipher, ask for help. Use historical or genealogical dictionaries to look up unfamiliar terms.

Consider using transcripts and tables to extract information. When working with records that contain large blocks of text, transcribe or abstract those records. Land deeds, wills, court cases, peitions, and personal letters should be transcribed or abstracted. Extract information from large sets of documents into tables. Create tables when working with a large file such as a probate, petition, or court case. Also use tables to organize information when locating your ancestor across multiple years in a single record type, such as censuses, city directories, or tax records. Tables can also be useful when your ancestor appears multiple times in a single record such, such as land indexes. Creating transcripts and tables will help you better understand and manage the information the records contain.

Once you have extracted data from your records, evaluate that information. First, compare the information to your known information. Does the record actually belong to the family for whom you are searching? Consider who provided the information (think about how the record was created). How does the informant know the information provided? Does the informant have first-hand knowledge or have access to first-hand knowledge? Does the informant have any reason to lie?

When evaluating information, consider whether the information is primary information or secondary information. A single record may include both primary and secondary information.

- **Primary information** is recorded at or near the time of the event
- **Secondary information** is recorded later

Information from a record which relates to your research goal is considered evidence. Evidence can either be direct evidence or indirect evidence.

- **Direct evidence** directly answers your research goal.
- **Indirect evidence** answers your research goal when combined with evidence from other records.

Correlate Information

After you have evaluating the information and evidence from one record, compare it was with other records. Identify conflicting information. Use your evaluation of the record and the information to help determine which record is more reliable. As you compare and correlate information, identify your answer to your research goal. Then, write out your conclusion.

Organize Research

Organize as you research. Keep track of which records you searched, even those you review but contain no information about your research goal. Write down where and how you found the record in case you (or someone else) needs to find the record again. Use a research log to track your searches and results. Research logs can also be helpful when planning future research and as an index to your filing system.

Preserve a copy of the records you find. Make sure to record on the document the source details. If the record is digital, include the source information in the title of the file. Knowing where and how you found a record will help you better evaluate it.