

HOW COULD GRANDMA BE WRONG?

Finding the Pitfalls of Family Records

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PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

What is a **primary** source?

A primary source is a record created during or near the time of the event. It is an eyewitness account of the event. For example, your mother's knowledge of your birth is a **primary** source.

Primary sources can include:

- Vital records, such as birth certificates
- Newspaper articles
- Personal journals
- Court documents
- Church records, such as baptisms or marriages
- Photographs

Primary sources are generally original records. Original records are usually held at archives or in collections.

What is a **secondary** source?

A secondary source is a record created after the event, sometimes long after. It is a secondhand account of the event, and is created by someone who did not witness the event. It can also be an interpretation of a primary source. Your knowledge of your birth date is a **secondary** source.

Secondary sources can include:

- Published town or county histories
- Published family trees and family histories
- Translations or transcriptions of documents
- Online family trees, including FamilySearch's Family Tree
- Indexes of records. This includes all indexes on FamilySearch or Ancestry. Many images are primary sources.
- You should never rely on the secondary index – **always look for the primary image!**

Secondary sources are usually compiled records, and are usually printed in book or compiled into websites online.

When should I trust secondary sources?

Secondary sources are more trustworthy when they are backed up by primary sources. They may include copies, citations of primary records, and/or citations of secondary records which in turn contain citations of primary records. A **citation** tells you the source where you got the information. A citation should provide enough information so another person can easily find the original record or book where the information came from.

EVALUATING A RECORD

Are all primary records correct? Ask yourself:

- Who created this document?
- Why was this document created?
- What is the creator's bias? A bias is a preconceived opinion or idea. Everyone has a bias.
- Could there be an unintentional or intentional error in the record?
- Is the information in the primary record actually primary information?

How do I evaluate a secondary record? Ask yourself:

- Does the information make sense, historically and geographically?
- Is all the information in a secondary record backed up by primary records?
 - Do the citations lead to original documents?
 - Do the original documents agree with each other?
 - If the original documents don't agree, has the author of the secondary source explained why there is a difference?

SEARCHING FOR ORIGINAL RECORDS

Where do I find original records?

Original records can be found in archives and agencies (at all church and government levels), libraries (including the Family History Library and university and local libraries), and online websites (such as FamilySearch, Ancestry, MyHeritage, Fold3, and websites of individual archives or agencies).

To locate original record collections, try searching the **FamilySearch Catalog** and the **FamilySearch Wiki** for the town, county, state, and country level where your person lived, and see what resources are available.