

# PROVING IMMIGRANT IDENTITIES

## Methods of Proving Identity

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### **Class Outline:**

1. The Genealogical Proof Standard.
  - a. Reasonably exhaustive research.
  - b. Complete citations for each source.
  - c. Analyze the data.
  - d. Resolve conflicting evidence.
  - e. Write a conclusion based on the evidence.
2. Document Analysis.
  - a. Analyze documents carefully.
  - b. Infer information from the data.
  - c. Be cautious of inferences.
  - d. Write down why you draw conclusions.
3. American Church Books.
  - a. American church records frequently list birth place.
  - b. Church records can be difficult to locate.
  - c. It is worth the effort to find them.
4. Spelling and Names.
  - a. Be a creative “schpeller” with surnames and town names.
  - b. Check for European equivalents of English given names. Charles/Carl, John/Johann, Louis/Ludwig, Trudy/Gertraud, etc.
5. Look for discrepancies in names and dates and compare data.
  - a. Compare data and resolve discrepancies.
  - b. Summarize research clues.
  - c. Track the source for each clue.
  - d. How do you know what you know?
  - e. Compare potential connections with document clues.
6. Associates.
  - a. Look for names of associates that appear more than once.
  - b. Tracing friends and associates will break brick wall problems.

7. Gazetteers.
  - a. Gazetteers, when effectively used are the most important tool to identify the correct town.
  - b. Learn the difference between a town and a parish. Be sure you identify the town where the civil or church records were kept.
  - c. Be a creative speller for town names.
  - d. Check for levels of jurisdiction
  - e. Why levels of jurisdiction are important.
  - f. Check for several towns with the same name.
  - g. How to use a gazetteer to identify the towns to be used in an area search.
  - h. Often one gazetteer is not enough, compare the information in several gazetteers to get as complete a picture as possible about the possible towns of origin.
  - i. Come back to the gazetteer often when initial searches don't work out.
  - j. Gazetteers often indicate how many churches were in a town.
  - k. Search records of each church.
8. Maps.
  - a. Use maps to identify outlying communities from which an ancestor may have come.
  - b. How to do an area search.
  - c. Use maps to determine if an area search is needed.
9. Church and Civil Records.
  - a. Getting the most out of church and civil records.
  - b. Pay attention to witnesses and godparents.
  - c. Confirmation and first communion records are often your best clue for people who were "from" a town, but not born there.
  - d. Begin with the assumption that more than one person in town has the same name, identify every one of them, and try to eliminate them all.
10. Names.
  - a. Names uncommon in the U.S. may be common in Europe.
  - b. A person of the same or similar name as your ancestor may not be him/her.
11. Area Searches.
  - a. An area search may reveal other people with similar names.
  - b. An area search is part of doing exhaustive research.
  - c. Be sure you don't miss small towns in the area.
  - d. Begin the search in a small circle, expand to a larger circle.

12. Develop a Theory.
  - a. Find the best candidates.
  - b. Develop a theory.
  - c. Test the theory.
  - d. Try to disprove the theory.
  - e. Ask questions.
  
13. Try to disprove the theory.
  - a. Search confirmation records.
  - b. Corroborate unrecorded births.
  - c. Prove which children died.
  - d. Find families that have moved in.
  
14. Avoiding Common Pitfalls.
  - a. A rare name in the US may be a common area of Europe from which your ancestor came.
  - b. Learn as much as possible in U.S. records so you don't identify a distant cousin in Europe as your ancestor.
  - c. Always be open to further evidence.
  - d. Collaborate with other researchers.
  - e. Find friends and neighbors. People traveled together.
  - f. People can't live on two continents at once.
  - g. Try to disprove theories.
  - h. Create checklists and compare them.

### SELECTED PUBLISHED CASE STUDIES

1. Thomas W. Jones. "Organizing Meager Evidence to Reveal Lineages: An Irish Example — Geddes of Tyrone." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 89 (June 2001): 98-112. (This article is a superb example of using very little information to its best advantage. A brilliant case study!)
2. Elizabeth Shown Mills. "Building a Case When No Record 'Proves a Point.'" *Ancestry* 16 (April-May 1998): 26-31.
3. \_\_\_\_\_. "The Search for Margaret Ball: Building Steps over a Brick-wall Research Problem." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 77 (March 1989): 43-65.
4. Kay Haviland Freilich. "Was She Really Alice Fling? Righting a Wrong Identity." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 88 (September 2000): 225-28. (A short example of excellent research.)
5. Linda Bennett Johnson. "Name Changes Within the Melting Pot: The Search for 'Sarah Frances Gilmore' of Detroit." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 84 (June 1997): 85-93.
6. F. Warren Bittner. "Dora Lühr's Hannover Origin: A Case of Conflicting Direct Evidence." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (September 2010): 165-76. (This article expands the research for this lecture.)