

Breaking through Genealogical Roadblocks

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The Bad News

You will encounter roadblocks in your research. It's simple mathematics, considering that the number of ancestors doubles with every generation backwards in time.

The Good News

There are ways to break through. Every solution, however, is as unique as its corresponding problem. In general, we hit roadblocks when we have:

- 1) not enough information
- 2) the wrong information
- 3) wrong assumptions about the information

Not Enough Information: To be successful, a search requires three things:

- a) the person's full name
- b) a place
- c) a date

The more specific and complete you can be, the better. The particular document you're looking for may not exist. It may have been destroyed, or it may never have existed. Look for alternate sources.

The Wrong Information: Having the wrong information without knowing that it's wrong may mean you can't find anything where you would expect to find it—OR that what you find is inconsistent with what you know to be correct. You will have to think "outside the box." Some ways to do this:

- ⊕ Search all possible surname variations
- ⊕ Check the index for years *before* and *after* your target date
- ⊕ Search the adjacent county, or the parent county
- ⊕ Search records of *all* churches in the area (not just their denomination)
- ⊕ Try searching records for a different port of entry
- ⊕ Look for records of their siblings or collateral relatives

You will have to look for all available sources.

- ⊕ Even primary documents may contain wrong information.
- ⊕ Preponderance of evidence can establish proof; therefore, if some of your sources contain errors, you will need other, correct sources to make your case.
- ⊕ Has someone deliberately been misleading?

Wrong Assumptions about the Information: If the facts are the bricks in the brick wall, then the assumptions we make are the mortar that holds them together. Although our facts must be solid, our assumptions may be more fluid. We can change them.

- ⊕ Recheck your sources. Have you been documenting everything? Your sources may contain details you overlooked the first time.
- ⊕ Play “What if...?” e.g. “What if William and Sarah were married before coming to America?”
- ⊕ Get better information.
- ⊕ Try to access a primary rather than a secondary source. Go beyond the index or the abstract.
- ⊕ Compare different maps and use aerial views
- ⊕ Ask for the entire file or full military service record.
- ⊕ Ask other relatives for their version of the story.

At what point do you give up your fruitless search and start rethinking it?

- ⊕ Have you checked all available sources?
- ⊕ Can you identify assumptions as opposed to facts?
- ⊕ Are you satisfied that what you know is correct?

Read More History

Check catalogs and bibliographies for history sources. The more localized, the better. Don't forget manuscript sources.

Ask for Help

- ⊕ Write queries and post them to both surname and locality message boards.
- ⊕ Hire a professional researcher.

For further reading:

Christensen, Dr. Penelope. *How Do I Prove It?* Ontario, Canada: Ontario Genealogical Society, 2000.

Everton and Rasmussen, *The Handy Book for Genealogists*. 11th edition. Logan, UT: Everton Publishers, 2006.

500 Brickwall Solutions to Genealogy Problems. By the publishers of *Family Chronicle* magazine. Niagara Falls, NY, 2003.

McDowell, Vera. *When Your Ox Is in the Ditch*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1996.