

Granny Possum's Pointers

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As researchers at some time—usually many times—we will find ourselves facing the proverbial brick wall. Some of these brick walls will, because of record loss or other reasons, be difficult if not impossible to overcome. Others are created by ourselves because we fail to understand a record or the law that created it, believed what we should not have, or simply failed to look in the right place at the right time. This lecture looks at some of these pitfalls and false trails and suggests ways to avoid them and or to uncover new leads.

False trails—

Family legends—of royalty, manor houses, Indian princesses, shanghaied cabin boys, lost fortunes and military service

Divorces, second marriages, unwed mothers and other events that are never mentioned in the family

Bible records and altered dates

Published genealogies

Deliberate misstatements to officials or interviewers

Errors—

Transcription errors

in the official record

in published records

certified mistakes

Misunderstanding—What was that you said?

Misreading

Errors, continued

Missing

from the index

from the record

from the published version

Sorry, it doesn't exist—

the courthouse burned

the clerk doesn't know or doesn't care

misfiled

incorrectly identified

computer databases and Web searches

False assumptions—

know the law

when the experts are wrong

reliable sources, but were they the source

public servants and public records

of tax and census takers

when was it written, by whom and for what purpose

over reliance on a particular record

perjury is not a 20th-century phenomena

the census missed people in 1820, too

The Ever Widening Circle

When a hound dog loses a trail he moves in ever-widening circles searching until he finds it again. As genealogists we, too, need at times to move in ever widening circles of time, place and people in our search to pick up our ancestor's trail.

Re-examine completed research—

Re-read and re-evaluate your work

Build a time line

Create an in-and-out table for land

Look for what's missing

Examine the records more closely—

Margin notes in deeds

Witnesses

Acknowledgment, certification, dower releases and recording

Order book entries

Military service and pension records

Property descriptions

Begin new research—

Follow the widow

Follow the collaterals

Look at the neighbors

Expand the time period of your search

Expand the area of your search

Look for records in new places

Look for new records—

Cousins

WPA

Pension records—unselected records and rejected pensions

State level records—legislative records, governor's papers, etc.

Published papers of government officials

Merchant's accounts

Private papers

Court suits and loose papers—depositions, subpoenas

Road orders

Theses and dissertations

Church records

The other census records

Surveys and maps

Postmasters, phone books and city directories

Institutional and fraternal organization records

And remember Granny Possum's recipe for success—

If at first you don't succeed try, try, again.