

WHAT IS THE “GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD?”

Gene F. Williams, CGSM

GENEALOGICAL PROOF STANDARD

- It is the measure by which we judge the credibility of any stated “fact”
- It is our protection against the speculation we see in print, in all misinterpreted records, and insufficient research upon which conclusions are often based
- We use it to measure our own work as well

BASIC TERMS

SOURCES

Are the means (persons, document, book, articles or repository) through which we acquire information

EVIDENCE

Is the information the source provides

PROOF

Is the thought process by which we reach a convincing conclusion based on the evidence we gleaned from the sources we examined¹

1. Mills, Elizabeth Shown, ed. *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001) 332

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORDS & INFORMATION

Modern genealogy has *Three Sets* of criteria by which sources & their information are classed:

Original vs. Derivative Sources

Primary vs. Secondary Information or Knowledge

Direct vs. Indirect or Circumstantial Evidence

ORIGINAL SOURCES - Meet Two Criteria:

- **Genealogical Definition** - *Made at or near the time of the event & their informants are in a position to know the facts firsthand*
- **Historian’s Definition** – *The first or earliest documents that record the information – usually manuscripts, typescript copies or oral interviews*

DERIVATIVE SOURCES

- All records that are not originals are “derivatives”
- *Copied or compiled from original materials (BUT **one** or more steps from the original)*
- *May be a synthesis of many sources – original or derivative – that reflect the conclusions of others*

PRIMARY VS. SECONDARY INFORMATION

Any source or record may contain information based on both **primary** or **secondary** knowledge – one of many reasons a genealogist must distinguish between the source and the information it offers

PRIMARY SOURCE -A **STATEMENT** by someone who was a knowledgeable participant in an event or an eyewitness to it.

- *Can be either written or oral*
- *Statement may have been made at the time of the event or at a later date*
- *Statement may have been made at the time of the event or at a later date*
- *The information in the statement may be either correct or incorrect*
 - *Family Tradition & Local Lore*
 - *Abstracts & unofficial transcripts of original records*
 - *Online Genealogical Databases*
 - *Example: Birth data found in a Death Certificate*

- *Hearsay information about the birth given by the informant*

DIRECT VS. INDIRECT are not rigid types of evidence; they are classifications we assign to statements in relation to a particular issue

DIRECT EVIDENCE - Information that provides an answer without the need for additional facts or further explanation

- *As with primary information, the answer it provides may be true or false*

INDIRECT EVIDENCE - Information that does not explicitly answer the question at hand, but relates to it in some other way

- *In the quest for proof, where direct evidence is lacking or appears to be incorrect, indirect evidence from various sources is assembled to arrive at a reasonable conclusion or “proof”*

SCREENING SOURCES

- In law, *evidence* refers to all the information that a jury may use to reach a decision or verdict

- As Genealogists *we perform this process ourselves* as our exhaustive and systematic research turns up potentially useful materials

We follow two distinct tracts:

- ***Credibility***: whether the source’s information is likely to reflect past reality, and

- ***Relevance***: whether information relates to the person or question of immediate concern

CREDIBILITY

- In Genealogy, eye witnesses are seldom available

- ***Original records*** become our first choice; when they don’t exist we turn to

- ***Derivatives*** as evidence, even though they are not generally as reliable as the original

Example: When we must use a published source because the original is no longer extant, we should evaluate the general reliability of the work by the quality of its overall documentation & soundness of its reasoning

RELEVANCE

- We ***SCREEN*** the materials to determine how reliably they present their information

- We ***DECIDE*** whether the content applies to the person or question we are investigating

- In the “PROOF” process ***we look for sound reason*** to associate a particular document with a specific individual

- *If no sound reason emerges, we reject the information as evidence*

- We can go back and forth between *credibility* and *relevance* and *accept or reject it as our reasoning dictates*

WEIGHING EVIDENCE - The result of our source screening is “***evidence***,” but evidence is not “***proof***”

“***Proof***” is the process that takes place in the mind and is distinct from the information on which it is based

In weighing “***evidence***” we assess two broad areas:

- *The extent to which the information reflects reality*

- *The strength of the reasons for identifying it with the person*

- *At this point we begin our reasoning --- the process of reaching a conclusion as to what the entire body of evidence proves*

Elizabeth Shown Mills stated recently:

“We are no closer to concrete definitions of concepts as “truth” or “proof”. To me, the better standards to use are thoroughness (in our research), accuracy (in our reporting), and knowledge that’s broad and deep (to provide a sound base for all our interpretations and judgments):

*I would argue that proof and process are inseparable ---. Similarly, I would argue that research is not just a physical act, but a mental continuum we go through --- a series of conclusions we reach about whatever has turned up during the act of searching. To me, the very difference between “search” and “research” pivots on this point. “Search” is the basic physical action. “Research” is the mental process that occurs as each decision to search something generates either evidence or negative evidence that we mentally process in order to lead us to more evidence until eventually, we reach that mental conclusion we present to the world as “proof.”***

*** Elizabeth Shown Mills statement, online email to the Board of Certification list [dated 27 February 2008]
Used by permission of Author.*

SHOW ME HOW!!

- **Review** the information you already have
- **Identify** the problem then write a Research Plan
- **Complete** the Research
- **Identify** all relevant records - Not just the microfilm, what’s conveniently available, nicely indexed, in paper form, online, databases, ordinary sources such as the census, newspapers, compiled service records, etc., but all that exists
- **Evaluate** the type of records you found
- Are they Original or Derivative Sources?
- **Organize** the Details
- **Outline** a Theory --- then try to **disprove** it!
 - If it survives
 - **Accept it!**

NOTE: The chart on the back of this page is reproduced with the permission of Elizabeth Shown Mills who is the author. Permission for reproduction in this handout given March 2008

NOTES: