**Define: Barking up the Wrong Tree**

To completely misunderstand a situation
To make a false assumption about a situation

Research can lead us in many different directions

- We may end up simply looking at the wrong family tree and then wasting valuable time following that tree.
- By following the wrong tree and the limited information about those relatives, you may be missing out on readily available info on your own family tree.
- It may be that you start following good data but are distracted by something more interesting, which may be potentially treacherous or frustrating.
- You may even find that the research may lead to something so confusing that you just get completely stuck.

Never fear! Here are some tips that will help you avoid ‘barking up the wrong family tree’:

1. **Verify Other’s Research**

   There are lots of common mistakes the beginning (and even more experienced) genealogist can make. The first one is unverified research. Just because you read something in print or see it on the Internet does not make it true or even applicable to your family. Treat these items as sources that are simply hints. The best material is material that can be verified through other sources.

2. **Verify Family Data**

   Another common mistake is to just assume that family stories are 100% accurate. Many times there is a grain of truth to family folklore, but it has been twisted over time so that becomes less than accurate. Rather than as facts taken at face value, use family stories as clues from which to start your investigation. One of your jobs as a researcher is to verify all the facts that you collect even though you are assured that they are true.

3. **Start Now With Living Relatives**

   If you haven’t already done so, gather information from your older relatives. Your time with them is limited. Sometimes disease or old age wreaks havoc a relative's memory. Even if they don’t seem too old, an accident may incapacitate them.

   A common regret heard from genealogists is, "I wished I had asked my parents more when they were alive." Ask your questions now! Don’t wait until sometime in the future. Interviewing these people is a great way to preserve information from those who may have been closest to the events. Information they have can point you in directions you might not have thought of on your own.

   You may also run across someone in your family who also doing research on the family tree. It may be someone who has already done a lot of research and can help you with yours. You’ll then be able to collaborate and share data.

   Make sure that you contact all of your known relatives - even if they are distant relatives, you have lost contact with them, or don’t think they will help.
• Don’t Skip Generations
Skipping generations in your research is the most common mistake made by beginners. Even if you think you know everything about yourself and your parents, you shouldn't skip directly to your grandparents or an immigrant ancestor. Work your way back one generation at a time, which lessens your chances of linking the wrong ancestor to your family tree, because you'll have the supporting documents to support the link between each generation.

• Don't Make Assumptions About Family Relationships
Family terms such as "Junior" and "Senior" as well as "aunt" and "cousin" are often used differently in different cultures or historical timeframes. For example, the designations of Jr. and Sr. may have been used in official records to distinguish between two men of the same name, even if they weren’t related. Also, be careful about assuming relationships between people living in a household unless it is specifically stated.

• Don’t Just Follow Surname Spellings
Just because someone’s surname is spelled the same as the one you are researching it doesn’t mean they are related. It may also be true that the surname spelling among related families may change even within the time frame you are researching. Just because a possible family line in another country doesn’t spell a surname the same way does not mean it is not a part of your extended family. After immigrating, local ethnic groups may have altered the spelling of names out of convenience or to be more accepted by their communities. Be careful about your name research. If you find various sources that tell you they are related, they probably are.

• Write It Down
You cannot use information that you cannot remember. When you make discoveries, write them down carefully and methodically. If you locate a record that may be useful but isn't related to your current search, write it down anyway. You may think that if a fact is important or interesting you will remember it, but you may not.

Write down how and where you find your information.

➢ If family information is from a relative, document whom the information came from and when the interview took place.
➢ If found on a website, write down the title of the site, the URL (website address) and the date found. It is also helpful to either copy the information word-for-word, print out hard copies or save digital versions for reference in case the data is taken offline or changes.
➢ If the data came from a book or microfilm, write down the title, author, publisher, publication date and the repository.

There will be many times when you'll run across conflicting data, and you'll need to know where your information came from and possibly be able to find it again for further research.

• Get Organized
Having no organizational system is a common mistake for genealogy beginners and it can cause a lot of problems. Keeping the many family tree details straight can be difficult so make sure that you start your research with some sound organizational principles. Establish a system that makes sense to you and that you will use. It could be binders with dividers, file boxes with organized file folders, keep everything on the computer in a folder structure, or a combination of all of them. An organizational system will prevent you from researching the same place twice, help you evaluate people with similar names or keep you from losing information altogether.
• Does it Make Sense?
Review each piece of new information that you add to your family tree to make sure that it is at least plausible. If your ancestor's marriage is only 8 years after they were born there is a problem. The same goes for two children born less than 9 months apart, or children born before their parents. Does the birthplace listed in the census match with what you've learned about your ancestor? If not, look for more information. Might you have possibly skipped a generation? Look at the information you've found and ask yourself, "Does this make sense?"

• Rule Out Other Possibilities
You know that your 3rd great grandfather lived in Massachusetts in the late 1800s, so you look him up in the 1880 U.S. Federal Census and there he is. However, it is just someone else with the same name living in the same area during the same time period. It is a scenario that sadly isn’t all that unusual, even with names you might think are unique. Always check the surrounding area to see if there is someone else who could fit the bill.

• Be Critical of Data Found
Be sure that the records say what you think they say. Sometimes you end up working with a new type of record and interpret things incorrectly. You may miss an important detail due to your unfamiliarity with the records. Find a specialist or someone to help guide you through this new type of data. Make sure with the records that you find that you take ALL the details into account. Ask yourself how trustworthy the record is and if it is relevant.

• Don’t Follow Fame
Don’t let the belief that you are descended from someone famous lead your research. It may be an exciting possibility, but most people will have relatives that aren’t necessarily well known. Some may be famous or infamous in their own way, but never made it into the history books. You may end up being related to a famous person in a peripheral way, but it can skew your research in that direction - supported with weak or coincidental pieces of information.

• Look to DNA
DNA may be the way to go to determine where the blood relatives come into play. DNA tests don’t currently tell you who your specific ancestors are, but they can help narrow things down quite a bit. These tests involve the comparison of certain sequences of the DNA of two individuals in order to estimate the probability that they share a common ancestor in a genealogical time frame and to estimate the number of generations separating the two individuals from their most recent common ancestor.

• Share & Collaborate
Finally, share what you learn! There are people out there searching for information that you may have (and vice versa), so post it online via a family page, shared trees or use social media sites to let others know that you have gathered information about your ancestral surnames. An extremely rewarding part of genealogy is all the new people you meet – especially those that are related to!