

Help! My Ancestors are Lost!

At times it seems that our ancestors are unable to be found, almost as if they are deliberately hiding from you and you come to a stop in your research.

First you must define your research question precisely. It may be that you can't find a birth, a marriage, death, military service or immigration .

Start by looking among your records for every piece of information you have on that person, every certificate, scrap of paper, photo, newspaper clipping etc. Then ideally make a timeline of your information.

It is not unusual when you review your previous research that you will find the answer to your question or an additional piece of information that will restart your research. This may be due to seeing a married sister's name that previously you did not realise was a sister, your experience in interpreting handwriting has improved, you can see a gap in the research which may be due to your knowledge of new records that have been released.

Once you have reviewed the information, consider it critically. Is it possible that some may be incorrect? Was all your information obtained from original records or was some obtained from indexes?

Indexes are both the joy and bane of our existence. Did you read the introduction to the index from which you obtained the information? Did it cover the year range you needed? Was it fully alphabetical or just indexed by first or perhaps the first three letters? Was there a transcription error? Humans compile indexes and at times we do make mistakes.

Always go back to the original source and extract all information. While most records are correct it is still possible that there may be a mistake in the record. People do "slant the truth" for a variety of reasons: upping an age to negate the necessity for parental consent to a marriage, upping an occupation eg agricultural labourer to farm baliff, seaman to master mariner or even gaining a father rather than state you don't know your father's name.

Family stories and legends often contain a grain of truth although it may be hard to find!

Spelling was not standardised until fairly recently and even then we have all had instances where our names have been misspelt!

- Accents or unfamiliarity with the name causes misspellings
- Especially true for place-names!!!!
- Records could be recorded under initials, middle names, nicknames, alias etc
- Was there a name change? (Culliccoat to Culley)
- Is the maiden name on that birth certificate the maiden name or first married name?
- Perfectly legal to change your name
 - Alias (ie also known as) step-children, illegitimacy

It is important to learn your geographic boundaries, place names change and this is particularly true in Europe. Always look for maps, preferably historic maps, of your area. These will show name changes and will show topographic features which may have influenced where your ancestor looked for work or even for a wife!

Religion is often the reason for a halt in your research. Your ancestor may not have worshipped in the established religion (whatever that may be for your ancestor's country of origin). In England post King Henry the Eighth it was Church of England but there were many non-conformist religions. People say my ancestor was a Methodist but which type: Wesleyan, Primitive, Reformed? Where was the circuit or place of worship? Maybe for convenience sake in winter your ancestor worshipped at a different church or the next door parish's church was closer so they baptised the child there?

Review your photos for any clues that may be present. The photographer's address can be useful to date photos. Use trade directories to see approximately when that photographer was at that address. The photo type, paper type, marks on the back of the more modern photos, matching people in a range of photos all can give clues about the photos.

Possible sources for that answer:

Marriage: Marriage Certificates, Marriage Banns, Marriage License, Marriage Bonds, Death Certificates, Church Records, Newspaper Notices, Family Sources, Census, Cemetery Records, Pension Records, Land Records, Will/Probate Records , Hospital Records. Police Gazettes, Criminal Records, Mental Asylum Records

Death date or location: Death Certificates, Church Records, Newspaper Notices, Newspaper Pioneer articles, Cemetery & Funeral Home Records, Family Sources, Census Mortality Schedules, Military Records, Will/Probate Records, Land Records

Names of Parents: Census Records, Newspaper Notices (wedding, engagement, obituary), Church Records, Adoption Records, Family Sources, Cemetery Records, Land Records, Will/Probate Records

Name of Spouse: Marriage & Divorce Records, Census Records, Church Records, Family Sources, Military Pension Records, Will/Probate Records, Newspaper Notices, Cemetery Records, Birth/Baptism. Hospital, Asylum, Prison records, Affiliation order

Remember to ask for help!

You are often too close to the problem so may not be seeing the answer or the missing piece of research. Write an article for the journal of the Family History Society in the ancestor's area or if not a whole article, at least write a query for the journal. You can get replies many years later as new people join and read the journals and journals are exchanged with other societies. The act of writing out the problem with your evidence to date can often show the way for further research.

Ask questions of other genealogists at monthly meetings, seminars, conferences and workshops. Get your query out there any way you can, on a mail-list or forum. Rootsweb mail-lists are indexed by Google. Remember to Google your problem!

Other people may know more about a topic, brainstorm with interested people at a family history society meeting or cruise! They may have had a similar problem, so use their experiences and they are not as emotionally attached to the problem.

Read about research methods and sources in your problem area. Learning what materials are available and how others solved similar problems may help you get over your own research hump.

Go back and ask your family again. Did they understand what you were asking the first time? Did you understand their answer?

Make lots of notes, keep track of what you find and where. Remind yourself to follow up on all the details, not just the one query you are currently tracking down.

Question, Question everything!

There are new resources coming online constantly. New indexes, new transcriptions, new original images.

Maybe the information you need to solve this problem is not available today. Your problem may not be solved right now but with perseverance it will be solved!

