What does that Document REALLY say?

Evaluating the Evidence

Suzanne Young Brayer – September 2018

**SOURCES** provide **INFORMATION** from which we select **EVIDENCE** for **ANALYSIS**

I. Genealogical Proof Standard – GPS guide to credible conclusions

* A reasonably exhaustive search
* Complete and accurate source citations
* **Analysis and correlation of the collected information**
* Resolution of conflicting evidence
* A soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion

II. Understand the need to take a professional approach to research

* Use a research log
* Keep accurate notes
* Document all sources

III. Understand the classes of research

* Sources:

 Original - created at the time of the event

 Derivative - a copy of the original

 Authored – book, article, history

* Information is:

 Primary – an eye witness account

 Secondary – a statement made by someone not present at the event.

* Evidence is:

 Direct – it answers the research

 Indirect – circumstantial i.e. more evidence is needed to draw a conclusion

 Negative – an absence of evidence when it should be there

IV. Determine the reliability of evidence. Ask these questions

* Who was the informant?
* Could the informant have provided inaccurate information; either intentionally or unintentionally?
* When was a document created? For what purpose was it created?
* Does the record support other known data?
* Does this evidence answer the research question?
* Is there missing information?
* What does the missing information tell?
* What does the record NOT report?
* Could this event have happened at the time and/or place stated?

V. One piece of evidence does not make for proof, but may provide suggestions for further search.

* If the census indicates a land holder, search land records
* Death certificate may indicate cemetery. Search there for more details
* If looking at a church record, become familiar with the laws of that denomination.
* Estate records give many clues as to literacy, property holdings, occupation, and family structure.

VI. “Rules” to remember

* Primary evidence can be wrong
* Knowing “who” provided the information is essential to its credibility
* Never accept only one source as proof; even an original
* Scanned images are still derivative sources; can contain errors
* Deeds, wills, and other court records are derivative sources; can contain errors
* Posted family trees provide clues only; NOT reliable information
* Not all problems can be solved ☹

**Suggested Resources**

“BCG Genealogical Standard Manual, The.”Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2000.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof.* Arlington: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Merriman, Brenda Dougall. *Genealogical Standards of Evidence: A Guide for Family Historians.* Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian.* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace.* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009.

Rose, Christine *Genealogical Proof Standard Building a Solid Case,* 4th ed.San Jose, California: CR Publications, 2005.