

PA Ancestors Guide

# PENNSYLVANIA GENEALOGY RESEARCH SUCCESS

Find your ancestors and complete your family tree



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# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Navigating Pennsylvania Genealogy Pitfalls	5
2. Crafting Your Family Tree Blueprint	8
3. Vital Records – The Key to Unlocking Your Ancestors' Lives	12
4. The Focus Formula – Setting Clear Goals for Genealogy Research	15
5. Know County Records to Know your Ancestors	19
6. Enhancing the Accuracy of your Genealogy Research	22
7. Are You Doing Reasonably Exhaustive Research, or Just Exhausting Yourself?	26
8. Embracing Your Unique Research Journey	30



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# INTRODUCTION

I BELIEVE YOU ARE the expert in your family history, and you can complete your research the way you desire.

What's preventing you from getting your genealogy done, is the lack of structure and support available now.

In surveying genealogy researchers who read my PA Discoveries newsletter, I found 10 categories of struggles they face:

- Overwhelm
- Fuzzy focus
- Lack of notes
- Disorganization
- Struggling alone
- Ignoring sources
- Fruitless searches
- Little known records
- No historical knowledge
- Not using existing research

A lot of genealogists are in Struggle Valley with multiple struggles. It is not your fault! There was no comprehensive resource on how to do Pennsylvania genealogy research. (Until now )

DENYSE ALLEN

I want to get you out of the valley and up where you can see the path ahead of you.

These are all problems I've had personally over the years and I know what it is like trying to do research from this place.

This guide focuses on giving you tools and resources to remove these struggles and complete your Pennsylvania (and really any location!) genealogy research.

Whether you're a beginner eager to research your family's past for the first time or an experienced genealogist looking to overcome research roadblocks, this guidebook offers valuable insights, strategies, and inspiration for your family history search.

### **Here are the highlights of each chapter:**

1. **Navigating Pennsylvania Genealogy Pitfalls:** Learn about the common challenges in genealogy research, including the limitations of online records and how to extend beyond them for a more complete family history.
2. **Crafting Your Family Tree Blueprint:** A guide to planning your genealogy research like an architect, focusing on the significance of location, timing, and legal requirements in historical records.
3. **Vital Records – The Key to Unlocking Your Ancestors' Lives:** Discover the role of vital records in genealogy research and how to access them for insights into your ancestors' lives.
4. **The Focus Formula – Setting Clear Goals for Genealogy Research:** Introduces a method to streamline your research process, preventing the common pitfall of getting lost in the vast sea of genealogy websites.
5. **Know County Records to Know Your Ancestors:** Explains the importance of county records in genealogy research and how these documents can reveal details you've been searching for about your ancestors' lives.
6. **Enhancing the Accuracy of Your Genealogy Research:** Offers strategies to avoid common mistakes and ensure your

## PENNSYLVANIA GENEALOGY RESEARCH SUCCESS

research is as accurate as possible, including the use of various sources and the importance of tracking your findings.

7. **Are You Doing Reasonably Exhaustive Research or Just Exhausting Yourself?:** Discusses the concept of reasonably exhaustive research, helping you to understand when you've done the right actions.
8. **Embracing Your Unique Research Journey:** Encourages you to appreciate the personal nature of genealogy research, regardless of the challenges you may encounter, and find support among genealogists.

Pennsylvania has been frustrating to genealogy researchers for decades.

Prepare to break free from that frustration and get on the path to complete your Pennsylvania genealogy research.

Denyse Allen  
Founder, [PAancestors.com](http://PAancestors.com)





# CHAPTER 1

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## NAVIGATING PENNSYLVANIA GENEALOGY PITFALLS

WELCOME TO THE VERY first step of your journey into Pennsylvania Genealogy Research Success!

As a subscriber to PAAncestors Discoveries, chances are you have been struggling to find what you need online to complete your genealogy research.

You are not alone.

Many genealogy websites, while very useful for getting started in genealogy research, are very limited in helping people complete their family history.

### **Why Genealogy Websites Are Just the Start**

Genealogy websites are fantastic tools for sparking interest in family history. They offer a gateway to millions of records at our fingertips.

Yet, they present just a fraction of the vast records available.

Pennsylvania's rich history, spanning over 340 years, has generated countless documents, many of which remain beyond the reach of these

digital platforms.

## **The Limitations of Online Records**

It's tempting to think that *everything* you need can be found with a simple click.

However, many records crucial for piecing together your Pennsylvania ancestry are in physical archives, not digitized, or are selectively indexed online. This limited selection can lead to frustrating roadblocks in your research.

## **Incomplete Collections: A Researcher's Dilemma**

Imagine searching for a birth record on [Ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com/), only to find the collection stops just short of your ancestor's birth year. This gap isn't a dead end but a sign to look beyond digital databases.

The Pennsylvania State Archives, for example, holds the collection of every publicly available birth certificate for the state, and there is a multi year lag in showing these online.

You can still get the birth certificate, just not online with a few simple clicks.

## **The Pitfall of Inaccurate Information**

Online trees are often woven with threads of inaccurate information, passed down and amplified through repetition. This phenomenon can mislead even the most diligent researchers.

Here's an example of a very common scenario for many family historians:

You're researching and you come across a family tree on a genealogy website that includes information about your great-grandfather. You have researched your great-grandfather extensively and even knew him when you were a child. However, when you compare the website

to what you have, your jaw drops. You realize that the information on the website is incorrect - his birthdate is wrong and his parents have been incorrectly identified. And the worst thing? There is no way to correct this information on other people's family trees.

Knowing how to go beyond what is on genealogy websites is essential to complete your family history with accuracy. But first you need to assess what records you have so far. You need to a dose of reality.

### **Embrace the Reality Check Framework**

To navigate these pitfalls, we introduce the Reality Check Framework in the Discover Your Ancestors Workshop. This tool lists all the record groups available in Pennsylvania and empowers you to critically assess the completeness and accuracy of your research. Workshop participants are able to quickly see which record types are missing and then learn where to find them.

This Reality Check Framework is also perfect for evaluating other family trees you find online. You can check to see which records they have attached or cited in their genealogy and which ones they are missing.

Get a peak of the Reality Check Framework [here](#)

### **Looking Forward**

As we move through this guide, keep these initial insights in mind. The limitations of online genealogy resources and the pitfalls of inaccurate information can only be balanced with a Reality Check.

In the next chapter, we'll discuss creating a blueprint for building your family tree, and ensuring your research is as accurate and comprehensive as possible.

## CHAPTER 2

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# CRAFTING YOUR FAMILY TREE BLUEPRINT

BUILDING FAMILY TREES ONLINE gives the impression that the trees grow spontaneously. Records appear as suggestions, and it's a simple click and add to build the next generation.

But at some point in Pennsylvania research, most people get stuck. There are few or no hints, and searches of records come back with nothing useful.

This is when you need to pause and create a blueprint of what you are working to build.

Just as architects rely on blueprints to visualize and plan structures, genealogists need a plan to navigate the complex world of historical records and where to find them.

Let's break down this blueprint into its essential components: location, timing, and legal requirements.

### **Understanding the Landscape: The Importance of Location**

Pennsylvania's history is etched into its geography.

Pennsylvania has 67 counties today. But the Province (Colony) of Pennsylvania began with only 4 counties in 1682.

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As land was acquired between 1681 and 1792, counties were added to fill-in the state lines. Then as the population grew, counties of large square miles were divided into smaller counties. The state legislature decided when and how to add and divide counties.

The second location problem is know which municipality in the county the ancestor lived in.

Within every county, municipal boundaries changed frequently. One township would become two or three townships....a new city would spring up around a new industry...or a city would disappear or rename itself when its main industry closed.

One example of this is the town of Scotia in Centre County. The town was originally named Benore, then in 1880, Andrew Carnegie came and set up a mining operation. Railway lines were run and soon the town was renamed Scotia. By 1915, Carnegie was no longer interested in mining there, rail service stopped, and the town was abandoned. Today there is nothing left but a few concrete walls. If you had ancestors from there, you would have nothing to see on Google Maps, no way to tie a deed to an actual home to visit, and the confusion of two names for one town over the period of just 35 years.

The tale of Scotia in Centre County illustrates the transient nature of towns and their names, reminding us that the places we seek may not be as they once were.

### **Timing Is Everything: Historical Context**

The time period in which your ancestors lived significantly influences the availability and types of records.

Most genealogists know this instinctually, but are not sure how to apply it to their research.

For example, everyone knows there were no individual birth certificates or death certificates issued during the colonial period in America. The typical advice is to use church baptisms for births and cemetery

headstones for deaths. And this typical advice works well in many circumstances.

However, many of the people who lived in colonial Pennsylvania were indentured servants. Indentured servitude was a unique feature of the Province of Pennsylvania at that time and knowing that fact affects what and how you research.

Another set of records often passed over is Union Army pension applications post Civil War. Veterans and their families applied multiple times over a 40 year period as the pension laws changed. Never before or since has so much paperwork been collected by the federal government on individuals. Knowing this history re-prioritizes research.

This variability of what records were created underscores the importance of knowing not just where, but when your ancestors lived, to guide your search for records.

### **Navigating Legal Landscapes: What the Law Required**

Laws create records. Knowing the law tells us what records to look for.

The Pennsylvania State Assembly passed new laws every session regulating vital records, property deeds, probate of estates, militia service, and other requirements affected our ancestors.

Marriage licenses, for example, were not uniformly required across Pennsylvania until 1885, but Philadelphia required them in beginning in 1860.

Whether it's a marriage license or a property deed, the requirements of the law have left behind a trail of documents invaluable to genealogists. By understanding the legal framework of your ancestors' times, you can uncover new layers of their lives, from the mundane to the monumental.

### **Crafting Your Blueprint**

In the Discover Your Pennsylvania Ancestors Workshop, you can create your own blueprint to grow and complete your family tree. You'll learn how to apply the intersection of the location, the time period, and the state's laws to effectively research in the Keystone state.

## PENNSYLVANIA GENEALOGY RESEARCH SUCCESS

In the next chapter, we'll explore vital records and how to find them and use them as a framework for your ancestors' lives.

## CHAPTER 3

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# VITAL RECORDS – THE KEY TO UNLOCKING YOUR ANCESTORS' LIVES

VITAL RECORDS PLAY AN indispensable role in genealogy research. These documents, marking births, marriages, and deaths, serve as the bedrock of every family tree.

Today, we cover how these records can illuminate the lives of your Pennsylvania ancestors and how to find these records from 1682 to today.

### **The Cornerstone of Genealogy: Understanding Vital Records**

Vital records are more than just bookends of a person's life. Studying them can reveal details such as an ancestor's origins, parents, the circumstances into which they were born, family connections and social networks, and details about the times they lived in.

But this type of information is only found on the original records, in the handwriting or typewriting created at the the time of our ancestor.

### **Embracing the Originals: The Value of First-Hand Documents**

In the digital age, it's easy to settle for transcriptions or summaries of



records.

However, the true value lies in the original documents. These often contain nuanced details like the names of attending physicians, witnesses, and addresses that can open new avenues of research. Securing a photocopy or digital image of the original record ensures that you have access to all the information it holds.

In this state, the Pennsylvania State Archive is the repository of all state-issued birth and death certificates available for research by the public. Ancestry.com digitizes these certificates and makes them available on their website.

Marriage licenses and 19th century birth and death registrations were created across all our counties and are still archived there today. Some have digital copies available on websites, but not all, and not all years.

Unfortunately there is no central way to search these county records online with one easy search, but I did write a book about how to find these records and understand them in full – *Pennsylvania Vital Records Research* (available on Amazon).

Colonial era records created by the Pennsylvania Provincial government are captured in the *Pennsylvania Archives* book series. The state's earliest county records also are where researchers of Pennsylvania's first arrivals should focus their efforts.

### **Leveraging Genetic Communities in Pennsylvania**

With the advent of DNA testing for genealogy, AncestryDNA's genetic communities have become a revolutionary tool for researchers.

These communities connect DNA testers with common ancestors, providing clues to geographic origins and migration patterns. Pennsylvania's genetic communities have grown exponentially, from a dozen to over eighty, offering new insights and confirming familial connections.

Particularly when doing pre-1900 research, Ancestry's genetic communities can guide you to where in Pennsylvania to target your research. DNA is not technically a vital record, but it is an important tool we can use.

### **Use an In-depth Guide**

As you venture into the world of vital records, you'll find an in-depth guide useful. My book *Pennsylvania Vital Records Research* covers birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, and death records from 1682 to today. You'll learn both the history and law, and where these records are found today.

Participants in the Discover Your Ancestors Workshop get a copy of the book included with their enrollment, along with my other published books.

Armed with the insights from today's lesson, you're better equipped to unlock the stories of your ancestors' lives, one vital record at a time. In the next chapter, we'll explore how to focus and set clear goals for genealogy research.

## CHAPTER 4

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# THE FOCUS FORMULA – SETTING CLEAR GOALS FOR GENEALOGY RESEARCH

IN THE WORLD OF genealogy, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available. To navigate this complexity and make meaningful discoveries, enter the Focus Formula. This powerful tool will help you refine your research goals, ensuring your search efforts are directed and efficient.

One of the common expressions in genealogy is “going down the rabbit hole.” This expression is in reference to the story of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*.

Alice was sitting under a tree one day when she saw a white rabbit run by. She was very curious about the rabbit and followed it down a rabbit hole. As she fell down the rabbit hole, she noticed that the walls were lined with shelves filled with jars and books. There were also doors leading to many different rooms and corridors. Alice was surprised by all the strange things she saw, but she kept going further

and further down the rabbit hole. As Alice moved through the strange world, she met many strange and wonderful characters along the way. Finally, Alice woke up from her dream and realized that she had been asleep under the tree the whole time. She was relieved to be back in the real world, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of loss for the magical world that she had left behind.

While adventures down rabbit holes are wonderful things - and many wonderful discoveries can be made! - these "rabbit holes" keep us from our goals.

In the Discover your Ancestors Workshop, we go into depth on how to use the Focus Formula to create clear statements of our goals. Here is a preview of what the Focus Formula is and how to use it.

### **Using the Focus Formula**

The Focus Formula helps you focus your research.

The formula is Topic x Questions / Priorities = Focus.

Said another way: Topic multiplied by Questions, divided by your Priorities, equals your Focus.

Here is how it works:

### **Pick a Topic That Matter to You**

Start by identifying the specific topic or area that you want to research. This could be a specific family line, a particular location, or a specific event in your family's history.

For most genealogists their topic is finding the parents of an ancestors. Others wish to learn the exactly when and on which boat their ancestors arrived.

These are both interesting pursuits, but due to the lack of record-keeping in early Pennsylvania especially for those of Scots Irish ethnicity, you may find yourself frustrated.

What other topics could you pursue to learn more about your family

history? What else are you curious about? Write a list for yourself.

This is your research and you can do whatever you want. Be bold!

### **Crafting Questions Around Your Topic**

Once you've identified your topic, brainstorm a list of questions that you have about that topic. These questions should be open-ended (they can not be answered with a 'yes' or 'no') and focused on specific aspects of your topic.

For example, if your topic is learning more about your family's history in a specific town in Pennsylvania, your questions might include:

- What was daily life like for residents of this town during the time period I'm researching?
- What industries were present in the town and how did they affect the community?
- What ethnic or religious groups were present in the town and how did they interact with one another?
- What were the major events or developments that occurred in the town during the time period I'm researching?

### **Prioritizing Your Research**

You can research anything about your ancestors, but you can't research everything at the same time.

Once you've brainstormed a list of questions in your topic, narrow them down to one or two that you feel are the most important and relevant to your research. These are your priorities.

For example, your priority out of the above questions might be on the industries in the town where your ancestors lived. You know there are remains of the factories which were once there, but you have no idea what was made and when the factories were open.

### **Finding Your Focus**

Take your priority and turn it into a question. The human brain loves a good question to ponder.

Here's an example with the priority above: "What were the major industries in my family's hometown in Pennsylvania in the late 1800s and how did they shape the community?"

This question is specific enough to guide your research, but broad enough to allow for exploration and discovery. This question is also perfectly worded to post in genealogy or history Facebook groups.

By adopting the Focus Formula, we not only streamline our research but also enhance our connection with our ancestry. This clear, goal-oriented approach allows us to uncover the rich stories and complex lives of those who came before us, one focused question at a time.

In the Discover Your Ancestors Workshop, participants help each other stay focused and motivated to complete their research. We become better researchers together.

And if you should fall down a rabbit hole, wave to Alice, then come back and finish your research.

In the next chapter, we'll discuss the most under-utilized set of records in Pennsylvania research – county courthouse records.

## CHAPTER 5

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# KNOW COUNTY RECORDS TO KNOW YOUR ANCESTORS

IN GENEALOGY RESEARCH, COUNTY courthouse records hold the keys to answer many genealogists questions.

These documents, housed in the historic courthouses and administration centers of Pennsylvania's counties, offer proof of things such as arrival dates to America, family relationships, and births, marriages, and deaths.

Researching in county records is a "must do" for every genealogist.

When you know county records, you'll know your ancestors.

### **The Significance of Courthouse Records**

From the time Pennsylvania was founded, it had county courthouses.

These government offices were intended to be no farther than an easy day's travel by foot or horse for a majority of the population. Past that distance, a county boundary line was created, and the next county began.

As the population grew, the number of counties grew, starting with 3 in

1682 and ending with the 67th in 1878.

The county courthouse was – and still is – where people conduct their most personal business. Major life events like marriage, divorce, adoption, death, and real estate sales all have records at the county courthouse. Other events like becoming a U.S. citizen were also recorded during some time periods at county courthouse.

In the past Harrisburg, the state capitol, could have been a couple day's journey by horse or foot before the train and automobile. Same with Washington D.C.

Your ancestors' lives centered around the county courthouse. Its next to impossible to find a person who did not have at least one record created at their local county courthouse.

In short, to research the people of Pennsylvania's past, you have to research in county courthouses.

### **Accessing Courthouse Records**

While millions of courthouse records have been digitized, a significant portion of these historical documents are not easily searchable on websites. AI, artificial intelligence may change this, but if you want to get your research done now, you have a different path.

The key to searching these records is to imagine you are paging through the original ledger book these records are in. The original books are 18 inches by 24 inches and weigh about 7 to 10 pounds. Each book has an index in the front, or in a separate book, telling you where each person's record is located.

Whether it is a real estate deed, a will, a birth or death registration, a marriage license application, or a naturalization record, the clerk for that office kept a index for him or her to use, and you can use it too!

You'll find images of these books in the FamilySearch Catalog, free to access for you.

### **Aligning Your Goals with Records**

Your research objectives dictate the courthouse records most relevant



for you.

If you can't find what you need online, here are some places to look:

- Wills are found in the Register of Wills office, but make sure to ask for the whole probate file.
- Property Deeds are found in the Recorder of Deeds office, but deeds could have transferred decades after the sale so check broadly.
- Naturalization Records are found in the Prothonotary office, but these could also be in state court files or federal government files.

The locations of some records changed over the years because of the law, but they are still located in the courthouse of the county where your ancestor lived.

For example: Birth and Death Registrations, and Marriage License Applications are found in either the Orphan's Court or Register of Wills office. These offices work closely together in every courthouse (and in some courthouses they are combined into one office), so starting in either one will get you to your goal.

When unraveling familial relationships, knowing the genealogical value of each record type in the courthouse is crucial. These records not only confirm familial connections but also provide insights into the social, economic, and legal landscapes in which our ancestors lived. We cover locating courthouse records in detail in the Discover Your Ancestors Workshop.

In the next chapter, we'll tackle how to avoid making common mistakes in your family tree, ensuring your research is as accurate and fruitful as possible.

## CHAPTER 6

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# ENHANCING THE ACCURACY OF YOUR GENEALOGY RESEARCH

THE MARKETING FOR GENEALOGY emphasizes how easy it is to get quick answers.

My favorite example of this is a TV commercial from 2015 featuring a woman who put her grandparents' names into a genealogy website, and within 20 minutes she discovered she was related to George Washington.

Incredible story!

And also not the experience of 99.9% of genealogy researchers.

Few of us are descended from famous historical figures with well-documented family trees. Most of us are descended from people who started with little and worked hard all their lives. These are not easy people to find.

We want to honor their memories and not make mistakes about their lives.

We can avoid making mistakes when we use all the sources available to us, track our research, and write up what we find.

### **Using All Available Sources**

The most common mistake in creating a family tree is relying on only online sources.

While genealogy websites are useful tools, they shouldn't be the only source of information. When you do a Reality Check of the sources you used and did not use in your family tree, you get a to-do list of what to search for.

It's also important to consult with family members on what they know or records they have. All kinds of historical documents, such as Bibles, letters, vital record certificates, and photographs get passed down in families. Ask and see what turns up!

Another little used source is local genealogical societies. The family you are researching could have been documented 30 years ago, before the internet was created. None of that documentation is online and can only be found in that local genealogical society.

Most genealogists find that offline sources are more valuable than online sources. In my book, *Archives of Pennsylvania*, I cover over 800 different places researchers can find records of their ancestors. We have a lot of sources here in PA!

### **Tracking Your Research Trail**

No one says "Gee, I'm really glad I didn't write down that discovery I just made."

And yet, everyday genealogists click around websites never stopped to note what they found and did not find.

Our brains are not built to recall every action we do during the day. For example, what did you have for lunch three Tuesdays ago? Unless it was a special event or you eat the same meal every day, you'll be scratching your head trying to figure out.

The most common way genealogists track research is through a research log. There are dozens of different formats of research logs available, and you can use any that work for you.

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I keep my research log in Notion. Notion is an app that manages information and documents in a user-made databases. Its customizable, flexible, and easy to use.

I've created a Research Log Template in Notion you can try. The template includes sections for recording information about your research goals, the sources you've consulted, the information you've found, and any notes or comments related to your research process.

Simply click on the following link: **PA Ancestors Research Log Template**. From there, you can follow the directions to download and try it for free.

If Notion isn't for you, use a spreadsheet or even a simple document to collect your research notes and sources as you go.

The important thing is to write down each search you do and the results of that search.

### **Writing is a Gift You Give Your Future Self**

Once you've collected some records, it's time to write and share about what you found with family and friends.

But, wait! Shouldn't you write and share only after all the research is complete?

No. Writing and sharing at the end of each research period - whether that is hours, days, or weeks - is essential.

Write what you found and why it matters.

Some examples: It can be a screenshot of record and just 50 words about its significance. It can be 200 words explaining how two people are related based on what you found. It can be the history of the town your ancestors lived in.

I keep all my writing when I first research in my Notion Research Log. Then I write again about what I found and share it with family in what I call a chronicle. Chronicles capture these moments-in-time in my family tree and bring my ancestors to life. If you are interested in doing similar writing, I share how to create chronicles on [chroniclemakers.com](http://chroniclemakers.com).

Writing also makes you a better researcher. You'll see how people, places, and dates fit together. You'll also quickly see what is missing or what contradicts each other.

Writing up your research has an additional bonus few know about. When you return to your genealogy research in a couple months or a couple years, you'll immediately get excited about all the previous work you completed.

Our human brains quickly forget what we've accomplished, so our writing is actually better than our memories. You'll also be able to pick back up where you left off. There is nothing lost or forgotten.

Give your future self the gift of your writing. You will thank yourself!

Using all the sources we can, plus keeping a research log and writing our findings, might not make us related to George Washington, but it does show the relationship with our ancestors.

In the next chapter, we'll discuss how to tell if you are following the genealogy standard of reasonably exhaustive research, or just exhausting yourself while researching.

## CHAPTER 7

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# ARE YOU DOING REASONABLY EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH, OR JUST EXHAUSTING YOURSELF?

NO ONE WANTS “WRONG” genealogy.

But it is also hard to know when we are “right” in our genealogy research. Even the top people in professional genealogy will not use the words “right” or “correct”. They advise researchers to do “reasonably exhaustive research” as they analyze what is found.

Let’s look at what it means to be right or wrong, and how to do reasonably exhaustive research.

### **Being More Right than Wrong**

One way to think of how correct genealogy research is, is to think of it as a continual scale vs. an either/or scenario.

Most people think of genealogy research being all right or all wrong. It looks something like a toggle switch. If we just collect the right records, then we can flip the switch, and it is considered complete and right.

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For example, let's say there is an ancestor on our family tree born in 1820 in Pennsylvania and there is a birth, marriage, and death date listed, a location for him, and all his children listed. What is there seems complete.

But in the research log is the detail that this ancestor served in the Mexican War of 1848. And there is a mention of a sister in the probate records we have, and this sister is a person not documented on the family tree.

So is the research done so far correct? Was reasonably exhaustive research done?

Truthfully, probably no. But does that make the research completed wrong? Again, probably no. Much of it is correct, its just not complete.

Our research is not a switch between right and wrong, but more like a scale that slides from one extreme to the other.

On one end of the scale, we have zero research begun on an individual. At the other end of the scale, we have researched in all the expected sources for the location and time of our ancestor – this is called reasonably exhaustive research. Everyone has research somewhere on this scale.

Let's get more specific. To reach the standard of reasonably exhaustive research in our example, the Mexican War records and sister must be researched through the following:

- Military pension records with the federal government
- Military award records with the state government
- Building out the sister's life, which likely means religious records from area churches.

This additional genealogy work makes our existing work more thorough and more likely to be “right”. It also tips the scale to the reasonably exhaustive side.

### **What It Looks Like When You Are Exhausting Yourself**

Let's return to our example of an ancestor born in 1820 in Pennsylvania,

and now remove the birth, marriage, and death dates, location, and children from his record. We are starting from zero, as many people do when researching in Pennsylvania at this time period.

Here is what it looks like to do unproductive research:

1. Open up Ancestry or FamilySearch and search the ancestor's name. Use the hint information to add the birth, marriage, and death dates to your tree, despite there being no sources attached.
2. Go off and try to find sources on Ancestry and FamilySearch. Try different spellings of names. Broaden the search to other states. Broaden the dates. Do not record any results of the searches made.
3. Do searches on Google for information on the ancestor. Post questions to Facebook groups.
4. Attend free webinars. Read free blogs. Try more free websites.
5. Keep repeating the above steps for weeks, months, or years.

There is a lot of time spent on these actions, and the amount of hours feels like perceived progress. But its not progress because there is no focus and no recording of results as you go.

Repeating the same behaviors over and over with little to no results is exhausting. Its also demoralizing. Genealogists end up feeling like "bad researchers".

In reality, genealogy in the 21st century is set up to have everyone chasing their own tail through the steps above. There are few guides who walk alongside researchers and support them.

You need a focus, real knowledge of sources available and where to find them, and a community of peers.

### **Getting Feedback from Peers**

Another way to move your genealogy closer towards right and away from wrong is to share it with fellow genealogists.

Sharing your genealogy research with peers and getting feedback can be



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an incredibly helpful. You get a fresh perspective on your findings and identify potential errors or discrepancies that you may have overlooked. You learn about new sources just as you need them. You quickly catch your errors.

In short, you stop chasing your own tail.

Participants in the Discover your Ancestors Workshop have the opportunity to share their writing in small groups and collaborate. They bounce ideas off each other and ask specific questions to help each other become better researchers.

There is power in community to help us see the best in our work and learn where we can improve.

Discover Your Ancestors Workshoppers are no longer exhausted with their research. They are energized and focused and getting it done.

You don't have to go it alone. You can be a part of a genealogy community to share, learn, and grow together.

If you don't join the Workshop, be sure to make your own community where you can get support and stop exhausting yourself.

In the final chapter, we'll provide a vision of how you can move forward and complete your genealogy research.

## CHAPTER 8

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# EMBRACING YOUR UNIQUE RESEARCH JOURNEY

THE PROCESS TO COMPLETE genealogy research is simple: craft a research focus, search sources of records, log results, and write up findings.

However, this simple process is not easy and it is not the same sequence of records research for everyone. We'll talk about why that is and what to do about it.

### **Why Genealogy Can be a Hard**

At the beginning of this guide, I covered the typical advice genealogists get. These are the four simple steps for success in genealogy research according to experts:

1. Knowing what kinds of records exist and where to find them,
2. Focusing on one topic, then searching relevant records,
3. Saving those search results (even when nothing),
4. And, compiling all the research findings into written form.

Yet despite these simple steps, genealogy research often can get

confusing and complicated.

- We get misleading information.
- The records we want are hard to find.
- We look in the wrong places for records.
- We find records but misinterpret what they mean.
- We give up rather than ask for help when needed.

What is simple, is not easy.

Genealogy research is a journey and everyone makes their own research path.

### **Your Unique Research Path**

The first three years I was doing professional genealogy research, I participated in National Genealogical Society Quarterly reading groups where we interviewed authors of NGSQ journal articles. These authors were handpicked by editors of the "Q" for their high-quality genealogy research.

Each month we'd ask these renowned authors to tell us about their research process. And do you know what each author said every time?

*I had no idea where my research would lead.*

Professional after professional explained how their initial research plan took them in unexpected directions. They had to trust that doing the simple steps of logging their research, writing as they researched, and using all the available records would lead to a conclusion.

After the hearing this response, or something similar to it a dozen times, I realized two things:

1. The experts don't have any secret resources. They fumble like everyone else.
2. Each person doing genealogy research is an expert in their family history and risks getting stuck and not making progress.

DENYSE ALLEN

Whether we are top professionals in genealogy or just beginning in genealogy, we each have a unique research path before us.

I find this to be great news and very encouraging. I hope you do too.

## A Final Word

We have no guarantees in genealogy research.

We can persist for years in pursuit of our research questions and still not get answers we want.

And if that is you, it's okay to stop and write up everything found and call it success. You got further than anyone else has gone! And by saving what you completed, a future researcher may be able to pick it up and travel further down the path.

If you would like to move faster down your research path right now, I have several products and services to help you with your Pennsylvania genealogy research:

- Discover Your Ancestors Workshop (\$\$\$)  
<https://discoveryourancestors.online>
- PA Ancestors Membership (\$\$)  
<https://www.paancestors.com/membership-offer/>
- Research Trip Planners and Guides (\$)  
<https://paancestors.gumroad.com>
- *Archives of Pennsylvania* book (\$) <https://a.co/d/hVpp690>
- *Pennsylvania Vital Records Research* book (\$) <https://a.co/d/fatRnKk>
- Your Pennsylvania Ancestors podcast (Free)  
<https://www.paancestors.com/tag/podcast/>
- PAancestors.com articles (Free) <https://www.paancestors.com>

Regardless of what you choose, PA Ancestors is here for you to help you get your research completed in Pennsylvania when you ready to get it done.

## PENNSYLVANIA GENEALOGY RESEARCH SUCCESS

I hope you enjoyed *Pennsylvania Genealogy Research Success*. I wish you many discoveries on your Pennsylvania ancestors!