

The Role and Weight of Primary and Secondary Documentation in Genealogy; Or... Sometimes It's Not A Duck (And Sometimes It Is)

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Introduction

The purpose of this brief document is to act as a container for the thoughts that I have had over the years concerning genealogical research and the kinds of documents and documentation (and the inherent issues of such) with which the genealogical researcher often is faced. It is a personal “thought piece” and is not an academic treatise (hence the lack of numerous footnotes as well as no formal “references cited” section).

By its very nature, this paper cannot be considered as the authoritative word either on the subject as a whole or on any subset of this subject. Readers are free to agree or disagree with this document as a whole or any part thereof (with the foreknowledge that I believe that they have every right to do either – or both) and that I encourage them to do so!

For purposes of their research, documentation, and attribution, researchers in fields such as history, literature, genealogy, anthropology, and journalism often use the terms, “primary source” and “secondary source.” Since there is some variance in the definition of these terms (depending on the field or on the preferences or definition of the individual researcher), I will now delimit these terms as they are used in this genealogy-oriented paper. Much of the information on definitions is drawn from: (<http://www.knowledgecenter.unr.edu/help/using/primary.aspx>) , (<http://www.genealogy.com/tip12.html>) , (<http://www.genealogy.com/00000812.html>) , and (<http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>).

Primary Documentation

For the purposes of this paper, a genealogy “primary source” is defined as a document or documentation source that was created: a) by the individual(s) under study, b) during the lifetime(s) of the individual(s) who are being researched or studied or, c) at the time of a specific event (such as a birth certificate or record, or a census form). In short, it was created by an eyewitness to the event (be that event a battle, worship service, birth, or journey). Such sources provide “real time” evidence or depiction of the life and times of specific individuals.

Some examples of such genealogy primary sources include: personal diaries and journals; original vital statistic (birth, marriage, death, probate) records; original manuscripts, maps, wills, and letters of the time; photographs; original audio recordings; newspaper articles of the time; and official information (national, state, local or ecclesiastical) documents such as census, church membership, tax or tithe roll, and land ownership records.

It should be noted that not all of the information listed within a specific primary source is necessarily primary source data. For example, the birth date that is listed on a death certificate is not primary source information itself (although the death date is) because the birth date was not written down during the birth period itself. Similarly, the birth place of a 40-year old man on a census record is not a piece of primary source information in and of itself because it was not written down during the birth period per se. However, the geographic location of that 40-year old man at the time of that particular census would be primary source information because it was written down in the particular census record at the time that he was known (by the census taker) to be in that location.

Secondary Documentation

A genealogy “secondary source,” for the purposes of this paper, is defined as any document, evidence or piece of information that was written or generated after the event(s) which it describes and which is removed in time and/or location from that event(s). A secondary source often is based on the analysis, interpretation, extrapolation, and compilation of primary source information.

Some examples of such genealogy secondary sources include: oral, written, or taped interviews with family members; a written narrative or compilation of information about a particular family, family lineage, or family members (even if primary sources were consulted to obtain some of the information therein – such as the Ives Family publication by A. C. Ives); memories, recollections or stories from family members; and transcribed information (for example, the use of a transcribed passenger list of a particular vessel and voyage - either from a published work or from a web page; or the quotation of a primary source within a published or transcribed work).

The era of digital information has added its own inventory to the list of available secondary sources, including: web pages containing blogs, information compilations, and downloadable documents; online family trees, documents, and photographs; online transcribed original documents; and question-and-answer genealogy forums. All of these sources can be very valuable indeed; and all of them are secondary, not primary, information sources.

It must be noted that a secondary source is not necessarily “worse” or “less desirable” or “inferior” to a primary source. While primary sources always should be sought out whenever and wherever possible, they may not exist; they may be not readily available to the researcher; or they may contain conflicting or erroneous information when compared with other primary sources.

It is in such situations that secondary sources may play a valuable role. They may, through analysis of multiple primary sources clarify or correct conflicting, erroneous, or biased primary source information. Or they may be able to ascertain the probability of the existence or correctness of certain missing or conflicting information. Or they might be able to confirm or bring into question certain primary source information based on their compilation and analysis of information. And, of course, one of the most useful functions of a secondary source can be to gather, and interpret, information from numerous primary sources into a single document or source (such a secondary source should, of course, thoroughly document and cite each and every instance and use of the specific primary sources that were used in the compiling of that information).

Genealogical Research Documentation

Most genealogical research usually relies on both primary sources and secondary sources, as they have been defined herein. Whenever possible, we use the original birth, marriage and death documents; the original census sheets; the original handwritten letters and manuscripts; the original passenger lists; and the original personal journals. Not only do we prefer these primary sources, but we usually are pleased (and often surprised, if not stunned) that they exist in the first place, and that we actually can have access to them. However, much of our genealogical work must of needs depend upon secondary sources – given the ephemeral and vulnerable nature of the written and printed word, as well as the distances involved in traveling to the site(s) of primary source repositories and archives, and the problems inherent in determining their existence and their location(s) in the first place.

Primary Source Problems & Variables

There are a number of possible and potential problems that must be considered when it comes to dealing with primary data sources. In an ideal world, all genealogy primary sources would still exist in pristine and legible condition and would be available freely to anyone and everyone. Unfortunately, that is not the world in which genealogy researchers find themselves today as we search for missing records, try to determine if a particular letter is an 'a' or an 'e,' and look at two different government records with conflicting dates about the same person and the same event.

There can be a number of factors and variables at work in using primary sources in genealogy research and I have briefly noted some of them below in no particular order. Each of them may or may not be applicable to a given primary data source.

Deliberate Misrepresentation And Falsification – Lying – people will lie for a variety of reasons, including personal gain, blame avoidance, guilt, revenge. or personal or familial dislike; what is said in writing or under oath may not be the truth.

Deliberate Misrepresentation And Falsification – Personal Biases – all people have personal biases, and some people will let their personal biases against (or for) things such as ethnicity, family, political affiliation, or social class deliberately flavor their writings or testimony. An example: subtly or boldly denigrating a family and their achievements (orally or in writing) because they were were born with a 'silver spoon' in their mouths or because they had 'political connections' or because they were of Hungarian (or any other) ancestry.

Non-deliberate Misrepresentation And Falsification – Personal Biases – as has been noted above, people have personal biases; but, in this case, they may unconsciously let their personal biases flavor their writings or testimony. An example: a refusal to accept that a family or relative was not of the 'preferred' social class, or refusing to believe that a relative was indeed a lawbreaker of some ilk, and stating such in writing or orally.

Non-deliberate Misrepresentation And Falsification – Mis-remembering – Some people have excellent memories but most do not; names, dates, places, events that relate to a date a year ago, or ten years, or 50 years ago may not be remembered clearly or may become confused with other such occurrences. Just because an informant makes a definite statement in writing, or

orally, does not automatically legitimize that statement. Contributing factors include: age, physical and mental condition, and whether the incident in question was directly experienced or was heard or read about.

Translation/Transliteration/Transcription Mistakes – Legibility Of The Original – The original document could have been partially smeared at the time of its writing due to any number of factors, thus reducing its legibility; or it may have faded over time. The correctness of a translation from one language to another depends on the skills and knowledge of the person doing the translation, including their knowledge of the use of idioms or local dialects of that particular period. Any or all of these problems also may arise in just the simple reading of the original document.

Translation/Transliteration/Transcription Mistakes – Handwriting Changes – Handwriting styles have changed dramatically over the centuries; sixteenth or seventeenth century cursive looks nothing like the twentieth or twenty-first century with which are familiar (through the actual use of it and the daily or weekly reading of it). Even expert paleographers can have difficulty in deciphering older script depending, in part, on how careful and knowledgeable the original writer was when he wrote the text.

Image Copying/Reproduction Mistakes – Human & Technology Factors – If hand-copying text or a document, the problems noted just above concerning transcription apply. If using photography or photocopying technology, errors can be introduced if the resolution of that technology is not high enough to capture the images of the original document exactly and precisely as they appear.

Loss Through Misplacement – Misfiling – Any document, historical or modern, can be “lost” through its having been actually returned, placed, or stored in a location other than that in which the human filer or handler thought that he or she had placed it (and other than that in which it originally reposed).

Loss Through Deliberate or Accidental Destruction – Armed Conflict – Documents can be destroyed through actions in armed conflicts, war, or revolutions through the destruction or damage of the documents' storage places (accidentally or deliberately) through fire, explosions, water damage, or debris impact or burial.

Loss Through Deliberate or Accidental Destruction – Malice – Documents can be destroyed deliberately through vandalism or through actions seeking results such as revenge or evidence expunging.

Loss Through Deliberate or Accidental Destruction – Acts of Nature – Documents can be damaged or destroyed through the impacts of forces such as hurricanes, floods, fires, accidental explosions, earthquakes, and tornadoes.

Issuance Of Erroneous Replacement Documentation – Deliberate Intent – Documents that have been damaged or destroyed can, sometimes, be replaced by an appropriate official or official agency. Such replacement may depend upon the reliability and truthfulness of the person supplying any information (e.g., birth date or place, parent's name) needed to replace or re-issue the official document. I know of a close relative who has two separate birth certificates

in which all of the information is identical – except for the name of the birth father (her mother deliberately giving false information).

Issuance Of Erroneous Replacement Documentation – Misremembering The Original Information – It also is quite possible that the person or persons supplying the information that will be used to replace or re-issue an official document do not remember the facts correctly and are supplying such information (erroneous though it may be) to the best of their recollection.

Improper Storage – Decay Over Time – The legibility, and even the existence, of original documents can be affected by their storage conditions over time. Factors such as dampness, mildew, foxing, insects, sunlight, storage temperature and humidity, red rot, acid content of the paper, handling by numerous persons, and even the chemical content of the ink or paper can each, or severally, adversely affect the appearance and use-life of any given document.

Secondary Source Problems & Variables

There can be a number of factors and variables at work in using secondary sources in genealogy research and I have briefly noted a few of them below in no particular order (note: factors that impinge on primary sources also can affect secondary sources). Each of these factors may or may not be applicable to a given secondary data source.

Lack Of Primary Source Attribution – Absent Citations – Some secondary sources (compilations, reports, non-fiction writings) do not specifically note which primary sources, if any, were used in the process of their generation or production. Statements of fact (including names, dates and places) can be made in such secondary sources without the reader having any idea as to the original source of that particular information. This can leave the impression that the author of the secondary source knows this information firsthand (which they may; or may not).

Personal Biases – Being Human – There is not a human on the planet that does not have some personal biases and there always is the possibility that the author of a secondary source has let one or more of those biases affect their research, data compilation, and writing – consciously or unconsciously.

Deliberate Misrepresentation – Being Human Redux – There also is the possibility that the author of a secondary source has deliberately represented names, place, events, explanations or other factors in the writing of the document (or has deliberately excluded certain information or information sources). Such deliberate misrepresentation can be done to obtain some personal benefit or advantage, or for political, personal, or religious reasons.

So What?

The “so what?” of this little tome is nothing earth-shattering or astounding. This brief was written to, primarily, scratch a mental itch that had been nagging me for quite some time. No source, primary or secondary, should be assumed to be either the be-all or end-all of a particular person, lineage, or family;

nor should any source be approached with the mindset of, “well, it so-and-so wrote it, it must contain only absolute true facts.” This, of course, applies to this brief document as well!

The “so what?” includes a repetitive reminder that just because a document is a primary source doesn't mean that everything in it is true or accurate; and that the same must be said for secondary sources.

An inaccurate or biased primary source can be of far less use than will an accurate and well-researched secondary source.

Secondary sources that do not cite their primary sources seriously weaken the validity of their content and conclusions.

The numerous factors that can, do, and will affect primary sources means that the genealogist must rely on secondary sources in situations where there is no other recourse.

Human beings, as direct and current sources of genealogical information, are not necessarily the most reliable sources of that information; being affected by factors such as misremembering, prevarication, biases, reliance on oft-heard oral family history/stories, and other such human foibles.

However, facing a lack of primary sources and/or reliable secondary sources, the genealogist has no choice but to use the human informants that may be available – use fully but use with caution.