
Follow the GPS: It Will Not Steer You Wrong

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What is the GPS? GPS stands for Genealogical Proof Standard, which, when followed, will help ensure credible conclusions about the identities of our ancestors, their relationships, and life events. The GPS has five components outlined as follows in the Board for Certification of Genealogists' *Genealogy Standards*:¹

- Reasonably exhaustive research—emphasizing original records providing participant's information—for all evidence that might answer a genealogist's question about an identity, relationship, event, or situation
- Complete, accurate citations to the source or sources of each information item contributing—directly, indirectly, or negatively—to answers about that identify, relationship, event, or situation
- Tests—through processes of analysis and correlation—of all sources, information items, and evidence contributing to an answer to a genealogical question or problem
- Resolution of conflicts among evidence items pertaining to the proposed answer
- A soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion based on the strongest available evidence

A genealogical conclusion is proved when it reflects all five components.

When working to solve a problem, always start with a clearly defined research question, thoroughly examine all information currently known to you, and develop a research plan that will help you to stay focused on answering the question.

Reasonably exhaustive research often involves looking beyond sources for the person of interest. Applying cluster research (also known as the "FAN Principle," coined by Elizabeth Shown Mills) can often solve major "brick walls."² This approach extends research into those individuals who were associated with the subject of your research: Family, Associates, and Neighbors (the FAN Club).

Reasonably exhaustive research also involves looking into a variety of sources beyond vital records, including:

- Land records
- Probate records
- Newspapers
- Census records
- Tax records
- Church records
- Court records

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2d. ed. rev. (Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing, 2021), 1-2.

² Elizabeth Shown Mills, *The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (The FAN Principle): Quicksheet*, pamphlet (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2009). Note: This can be purchased on Amazon.com.

Analyze and correlate the information you gather to ensure that all of the pieces fit together and there is no conflicting evidence.

Never leave a rock unturned or a conflict unresolved. A clue not followed up on could result in an incorrect conclusion.

Interrogate each record and piece of evidence you encounter to thoroughly understand it. Seemingly minor information could prove to be a clue that may be significant in solving your research problem.

An excellent online resource for identifying and viewing digitized but unindexed records is the catalog on FamilySearch.org. This is accessed as follows: FamilySearch.org > Search > Catalog. You can search by place, surname, titles, author, subjects, and keywords. Searching on the state and county of interest will help you to identify the record collections that are available for viewing but not indexed. It's the next best thing to taking a trip to your local county courthouse.

Do not limit yourself to only records you can find online. We have become very dependent on the online resources available to us, but still only a fraction of records that could answer a research question have been digitized. And only a fraction of those digitized have been indexed.

State archives are repositories rich in original records. Information to access records at the state archives can often be found at the local county level (e.g., indexes to civil court records). It is not uncommon for family members to become involved in litigation with or against each other. Do not rely on indexes or other derivative records. Always seek to find the original record if it might exist.

Useful Resources:

Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards*, 2d. ed. rev. Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing, 2021.

Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 4th ed. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2017.

Hogan, Roseanne Reinemuth. *Kentucky Ancestry: A Guide to Genealogical and Historical Research*. Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 1992.

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

Leary, Helen F. M., ed. *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History*, 2d. ed. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Genealogical Society, 1996. Note: This resource, although focused on records available in North Carolina, discusses various research strategies that have applicability in most southern states. The types of records discussed are also the same types of records found in most southern states.

Rose, Christine. *Courthouse Research for Family Historians*. San Jose, CA: CR Publications, 2004.