Proof Standard and Citation Reliability

Contents

There is nothing more frustrating to a genealogist than locating details on an ancestor in a published book, Web page, or database, only to later find that the information is full of errors and inconsistencies. Grandparents can be linked as parents, women bear children at the tender age of 6, and often entire branches of a family tree are attached based on nothing more than a hunch or guess.

As the site is browsed, please check the names, relationships, dates, and notes carefully and inform the website author of needed corrections or additions. Sources are cited whenever possible, but we know that incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information is recorded. As the collection grows, every attempt is made to follow practices prescribed by the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) in determining and setting a level of confidence or reliability in the evidence. The information page for an individual, for the most part, shows an assigned "reliability level" number along with the evidence statement as a level of confidence in our found evidence.

Types of Sources

It is necessary to be discriminating about the source of a piece of information. Sources are the type of form in which we find our information. Sources may contain one or more pieces of information. Questions need to be asked. How credible or reliable is a particular source? When was it created, and by whom? If your father tells you that great-uncle Fred came to Canada from England in 1912, you believe him, right? But later you find Fred's marriage registered in Manitoba in 1910. Then his obituary says he came to Canada in 1910. Meanwhile, an Internet site shows a family group record for him with a specific marriage date in 1908. What are you to believe about his emigration and marriage dates? First of all, consider the sources. We ask ourselves, am I dealing with an original source, or a derivative source? Original sources are more reliable than derived sources since derived sources may contain unsubstantiated conclusions inserted by the derived source author.

An ***original*** source is one that was created at or about the time an event happened and reported by a witness or participant in that event. In other words, the informant was in a position of firsthand knowledge. An original source is one not derived from a previously existing record. It happens that sometimes an original record, like a birth or a baptism, was never created or has not survived destruction of some kind. The digitization of historic original records by reputable institutions is becoming a fast-growing segment of Internet activity. Viewing a digital image of a census return for example is just as valid as searching for the same source on a microfilm reader and considered to be accessing the original source. For purposes of evaluating evidence, this site recognizes a digitized authentic record as an original source and accompanied with a reference to the Internet site source. An original source is considered as direct evidence.

A **derivative** source is a non-original source. A derivative source is one that is based on the use of an original source, even if the original source no longer exists. Examples are family stories, indexes, transcriptions and abstracts. Derived sources cannot be taken at face value without studying who-why-how-when-where of their creation, in order to place a relative weight on the contained information. They are less reliable than a cited original source, simply because they are further removed in time or composition from an original source, and become more prone to human error or judgment. Derivative sources are used for accumulating evidence only when original records are absent, but the rationale for their use must be cited. A derived source is considered as indirect evidence.

That the lack of either an original or derived source is considered as missing evidence.

Types of Information

Family genealogical information is a statement describing an ancestor, an event where the ancestor was a participant, or a familial relationship.

The information found in a source may be primary or secondary. These two adjectives describe the level of knowledge a source offers about birth, marriage or death information for an individual.

Primary information is a statement of knowledge provided by a participant or witness to an event, whether that person reports it at the time, or later. It may sometimes be erroneous, deliberately or inadvertently recorded by a physician or clergyman, such as the varied spelling of recorded forenames and surnames.

Secondary information is a statement of knowledge reported provided by someone who was not a participant or witness to an event. Secondary information has more chance of being inaccurate such as the birth information collected by a census taker. A census taker is not a participating witness in a birth event.

As an example, a death certificate or registration is deemed as an original source with primary information, often with many pieces of information within it. We normally view the person's name, date and place of death, name of informant and cause of death as primary information. If the record also provides his age, date and place of birth, the names of his parents, and more, such information is deemed as secondary information. Even if the informant was a widow or a child, they do not have firsthand knowledge of his birth. If the informant at death was a physician or non-family member, would they be accurate about the names of parents or birth date? Maybe or maybe not!

Levels of Record Reliability

A cited source provides information; information gives either direct or indirect evidence. The collected evidence is inserted in our records when we are satisfied that we are as close as possible to a proven ancestral identity, event or relationship. The level of confidence in our evidence statement is denoted using a numbered "reliability" level ranging from zero (0) to three (3) , the higher the number, the closer we move to a proven fact, i.e., a proven name, BMD date, residence, etc.

“Missing” data denoted by a blank reliability level has yet to be determined and assigned. The contributor or researcher has not yet recorded a source. Events fields are usually marked as “unknown”.

“Possible” data denoted by reliability level 0 is assigned where a genealogical fact is advanced based on a research theory or anecdotal evidence. Level 0 is not yet supported by any source and is considered as missing evidence. Possible data is a theory advanced by a researcher or other contributor and simply recorded as a “hunch”. Example, if a John Smith was born in 1850, it is possible to theorize that he is the child of Robert Smith and Ann Jones, who were married in 1849, but no convincing evidence of any kind has yet been brought forward to connect John to possible parents Robert and Ann, (i.e., there is no evidence identifying the relationship, the residence, a birth location, etc.). An accompanying research note is always provided for a *possible* reliability level 0.

“Plausible” data denoted by reliability level 1 is assigned where a possible genealogical fact is supported by a single line of indirect evidence, which is not refuted by any other known or accepted fact, or proven yet by an original or derived source. In general, the collected evidence goes beyond a theory and starts to "make sense". Plausible data, however, does not rise to the level where it can be clearly accepted as probable—it’s merely an accepted guess consistent with the general sense of the collected evidence. That is, while it doesn't conflict with any other accepted data, it has not been confirmed by an original source, nor is the available information sufficient enough to consider it true. As an example of "plausible” data, if a John Smith was born in 1850 in the city of Ottawa, it would be both possible and plausible that he could be the child of a Robert Smith and Ann Jones, who were married in 1849 in Ottawa. This data would not rise to the level of "probable" because there might be more than one Smith family residing in Ottawa in 1849 who could be the parents of John Smith. An original source such as a birth record stating the names of both parents and the location would raise the plausible data to “proven”. An accompanying Research Note for a plausible reliability level documents the proof argument for conflicting or complex findings. An accompanying research note is provided for a *plausible* reliability level 1.

“Probable” data denoted by reliability level 2 is assigned where a plausible genealogical fact is supported by more than a single line of indirect evidence, suggesting that the fact is likely more true than not, but it still remains that there is no original source or direct evidence that can be cited to show that the fact is absolutely proven true. Generally, the reliability level reaches "probable” where several indirect sources independently point to a probable fact. No single line of evidence except for an original source is sufficient enough by itself to raise the data above the level of "plausible", but taken together, the various lines of evidence suggest that it is in fact "probable". Using our previous example, if there is documented evidence showing that

- John Smith was born in Ottawa in 1850,
- Robert and Ann Smith were married in Ottawa in 1849,
- John's mother has a forename Ann,
- there is only one Smith couple in Ottawa in 1850,

then it can be concluded that John's parents were probably Robert and Ann Smith, and that John was born before the 1851 census was taken, but no direct source was found such as a birth record which

specifies the parent-child relationship and acts a witness to John's birth. The fact can't be accepted as proven, because the evidence for the connection is largely circumstantial, i.e., the evidence relies on inference to connect facts to a subjective conclusion and therefore all facts collectively are considered as indirect evidence. An accompanying research note is always provided for a *probable* reliability level 2.

"Proven" data denoted by reliability level 3 is assigned where a genealogical fact is supported by an original source, such as a birth record that demonstrates the fact to be indisputably true and considered as direct evidence. A census is not deemed as an original source for a birth record neither is a family bible. For example, if a family bible for Robert and Ann Smith showed that their son John was born in December of 1850, in Ottawa, most reasonable people would probably conclude that Robert and Ann were indeed the parents of the John Smith example since the birth event was witnessed by a close family member. However, depending on the extent of the effort made to gather comprehensive evidence to support this conclusion, and the additional evidence that could be mustered to support it, this might still not even reach the level of proven, if in our example, the birth record for John was available, but not pursued. It's been known that a family member recorded the wrong birth or death date for others in a family bible. In this case, the context of the source must be considered. No accompanying research note is provided for a *proven* reliability level 3.

Proof Process