

How Do I Know What I Don't Know in Genealogy?

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Genealogists who have been tracing family history for several years sometimes need to get out of their “bubble” of assumed knowledge and remind themselves that they really don't have the necessary knowledge when it comes to a research resource or methodology. This takes courage and resolve especially when you've been doing this for many years. If we don't, we run the risk of researching with blinders on our eyes and running into brick walls.



How to Identify a Knowledge Gap in Genealogy

- Create a Knowledge Gap List.** Get it down in writing either by hand or digitally. If you discover for the first time that you have a Huguenot ancestor, create a list of sub-topics about which you want to learn more. For example, you could include Huguenot history, Huguenot migration to the United States, Huguenot religious practices, Huguenot surnames, etc.
- Identify your research needs** Your *Knowledge Gap List* will be driven by what you need to accomplish with your research. Doing so could open the door to special record sets including church and immigration records. Using the Huguenot example, I want to know more about Ann Freer, my 3rd great-grandmother who has a Huguenot surname and lived in New Paltz, New York, an area with a large Huguenot population. Were there special naming conventions for children? Were there specific religious practices often found in similar ethnic groups? Where were the Huguenots based in Europe?
- Be honest – no one will see your list.** Take off those blinders! If you are not honest with yourself as to the gaps in your knowledge, you won't benefit from new discoveries. You will continue to find the same records and record sets and get the same results.

Best Ways to Quickly Get Up To Speed on a Resource

- FamilySearch Research Wiki.** A free, online resource is the FamilySearch Wiki. Similar to Wikipedia, this wiki has over 100,000 articles covering a variety of topics. Use the **Search** function to look for your topic and remember to first search broad and not too specific. Under broader topics, such as New York, you will find sub-topics on Census, Cemeteries, etc. What if you can't find your topic in the FamilySearch Wiki? This is a perfect opportunity for you to give back to the genealogy community once you have built up your body of knowledge on a topic. The FamilySearch Wiki is a true wiki in that any user can create a topic page and add information.
- Facebook Groups** Even if you strongly dislike Facebook, sign up just to gain access to **Facebook Groups** related to genealogy. You will find thousands of groups run by volunteers in the genealogy community. To locate a group, use the **Search** engine at the top left of the Facebook page. Select **Groups**, since only Groups are where you can post a query and get a quick response from group members. Don't forget to search **within the group** to look for previous posts and access the Files section for important documents related to the topic.
- Work Your Genealogy Network – Offline and Online.** Along with using **Facebook Groups**, remember that you have access to both in-person networks as well as online networks. Other online networks include **Ancestry Message Boards** (still active!), genealogical society websites, as well as social media platforms such as **Twitter** and **Pinterest**. For offline networks look to your local genealogy society as well as the genealogy department of a local public library.

Extract Every Clue . . . and Track Them!

- Slow down!** One of the easiest pitfalls in genealogical research, and one of which I've been guilty, is getting so excited about a find that you overlook other clues in a document. And add to that the inability to track clues for your "to do" list of research later on. There are ways to overcome this "sinkhole."
- Use a To Do List to track new information.** Use paper, a notebook, a note taking program (**Evernote**) or even a spreadsheet. You need some way to track and remember any clues you may find when reviewing a document. Don't tell yourself you'll remember it the next day.
- Include details on how you found the new information.** Compose a "quick" source citation for new clues: "NARA, World War I Draft Registration Card, John Ralph Austin, accessed 10 October 2017 via Ancestry. Wife and child as of 5 June 1917."
- Extrapolate clues to form To Do List questions.** When locating new information – such as employer – form these questions: What type of job? Where was the employer located? When did he start? Are employee records available?

Understand How Your Ancestor Lived

- Be curious!** Very often we aren't curious about new information because we don't have solid knowledge on how our ancestors lived and what experiences they endured. One way to access background information on ancestor circumstances is to use social history resources such as **JSTOR** or **Sage Publications** online or at a local library. These databases provide access to academic research articles, theses, dissertations, and more about past events and ways of life.

Create a Long-Term Educational Plan

- Using your Knowledge Gap List, locate genealogical educational opportunities including online webinars (**Legacy Family Tree Webinars**) as well as genealogy conferences and institutes (**RootsTech**, **Salt Lake Institute for Genealogy**). Commit to attending at least one webinar each month and one in-person conference or institute a year.

Resource List

- **Ancestry Message Boards**
<https://www.ancestry.com/boards/>
- **EBSCO Information Services**
<https://www.ebsco.com/>
- **Evernote**
<https://www.evernote.com>
- **FamilySearch Research Wiki**
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page
- **Genealogy on Facebook List**
<https://socialmediagenealogy.com/genealogy-on-facebook-list/>
- **Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh (GRIP)**
<http://www.gripitt.org/>
- **Institute of Genealogy & Historical Research (IGHR)**
<http://www.ighr.gagensociety.org/>
- **JSTOR**
<https://www.jstor.org/>
- **Legacy Family Tree Webinars**
<https://familytreewebinars.com/>
- **Pinterest**
<https://www.pinterest.com>
- **Sage Publishing**
<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/home>
- **Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy**
<https://slig.ugagenealogy.org/>
- **Twitter**
<https://www.twitter.com>
- **WorldCat**
<http://www.worldcat.org/>