

Genealogy Surprises, Discoveries and Outright Lies: Sorting Out the Facts

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Most genealogists have made discoveries, found surprises, and documented some family information that was outright lies. Whether we are doing the genealogy happy dance or shocked by what we have found, it is important that we document this information for future generations. Good or bad, it all tells the story of our ancestors and knowing how to sort out the facts is important.

Oral Histories

Let's face it, we all have them! Oral histories or family lore that has been handed down from one generation to another. Stories like, "Three Brothers came from Europe to the United States...", "Our family has an Indian Princess in our lineage..." and others like these can be totally true, have a grain of truth to them or outright lies. As genealogists, what should we be handling these family stories?

- Document the story as it has been told from generation to generation.
- Start researching all aspects of the story, no matter how insignificant it may seem.
- Locate actual records to back up the facts of the story.
- Start retelling the story with the proven facts so that future generations get it right.

Record Errors

Yes, it's true, many of our records have errors, mistakes and outright lies on them. Even those records that are considered "official records" have mistakes and purposefully wrong information included on them. As genealogists, how can we be sure the information contained on our ancestor's records is true and correct?

- Read the records you have and compare the information to other records.
- Obtain more than one record to prove a piece of information.

- Develop a healthy skepticism when reading official records or any records about your ancestor.
- If you find wrong information on a record, document it and document the correct information.

Unexpected Discoveries

Most genealogists can say they have experienced that “I can’t believe that” moment when researching one or more of their ancestors. We should never shy away from those unexpected discoveries that we make while conducting our genealogy research. What should we do with these pieces of information that have taken us by total surprise?

- Embrace that unexpected discovery about your ancestor.
- Understand that our ancestors lived during a different time and place and what might be a discovery to you could have been the norm for them.
- Look for records and histories to help you understand what you have discovered.
- Remember that your ancestors have a story to tell and the unexpected discoveries are part of that story. Stay Focused!

Surprises!

Our ancestors can really surprise us just when we think we have figured them out. No ancestor is a “cookie cutter ancestor”, they are all different and they all have their own secrets and surprises. It is our job to flush out the secrets and surprises. Exploring these aspects of our ancestors will help us to understand what they did, why they did it and who they did it with.

- Once you get over the shock of the surprise, get down to the research.
- Use the surprise piece of information to your advantage. Whether that surprise was found in a document or from a family member story, document the information fully.
- Don’t be surprised if one surprise leads you to another and another and another. Sometimes surprises lead us to more that we never knew.
- Try to understand the who, what, when, where and why of the surprise. Some surprises are going to be hard to accept and digest.

Outright Lies!

We would all like to think our ancestors were fine upstanding pillars of the community and would never tell a lie or even a fib. But the fact is, there are many outright lies on many of the records we have for our ancestors. There are even more lies interwoven in the family stories that have been told for generations. So, how do we as genealogists handle the lies we encounter?

- Admit that our ancestor lied so that we can work through the misinformation to get to the truth, if possible.
- Question every piece of information and all documents to verify they are valid.
- Do not assume because it's an "official document" that it contains all truths.
- Research to see if there could be a reason behind the lie.

Sorting Out the Facts

Once we have gotten over the shock of that surprise, did our genealogy happy dance with our discovery or come to terms with that outright lie; it's now time to sort out the facts.

- Create a timeline of our ancestor's lives so we can see the facts as we know them.
- Write a narrative or story about our ancestor, include that surprise piece of information, that discovery and put into context the lie you have found out.
- Talk to family members about what you have found to see if they have anything to add.
- Talk to other genealogists about what you are dealing with and see if they have experienced the same thing and can help you understand.
- Document it! If you don't, the error, misinformation or lie will continue down the chain of descendants and will never be dealt with or addressed.

We should never be afraid of what we will find when we are researching our ancestors. In this day and age of DNA and more records becoming available, we are going to find out things about our ancestors and family members that will shock us, surprise us, and make us take a closer look at our family tree.