Step 6: Secondary Source Research
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the sixth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." http://www.bobcatsworld.com/genclass/lessons.htm

Quite often our students ask us what makes genealogy such a fascinating hobby. We used to think the answer was simple—the pleasure of learning about your past, who you are, and where you came from. Now, after years of roaming the globe and countless hours of poring over the dusty pages of books long out of print, we realize the answer is even simpler than that. More than anything, genealogy offers excitement.

There is an indescribable rush, a thrill if you will, when you finally locate that long-lost ancestor. This rush is the pay-off for those long unrewarding hours of research. It soon makes those anguishing hours nothing more than a distant memory.

For decades, behavioral scientists have known that the most powerful reward for shaping human behavior is one that is meaningful and motivating yet irregular in its occurrence—similar to the payoffs in genealogical research. On some days, there will be no new information discovered, no reward. On other days, there is a new discovery every hour. This is what makes genealogy so stimulating and so rewarding.

As you know, there are many possible ways to get these payoffs and we have introduced you to several general possibilities in the earlier articles. In Step 6 we will show you a specific way to discover the joy of genealogy: how to use compiled secondary sources as tools in your research.

By definition, compiled secondary sources are written records of events created long after the event occurred. Usually they are copies of the original records or the compilation of information taken from a variety of sources. Also, in this the age of the World Wide Web, a great deal of compiled secondary information is appearing online. Regardless of whether you use a compiled source in a library or at your computer, it is important to understand two fundamental rules of using compiled secondary sources:

1. Document your sources. When you consult any source, be certain to write the identifying information about that source on your research log. This should be done even if you do not find any useful data.

2. Verify any information you find in compiled secondary sources. Someone working from an original prepared these sources and errors may have been made while transferring information from one source to another. Use the compiled source to lead you to the original source, which establishes proof of the event.

With these simple caveats in mind, we'll take a closer look at some of the compiled secondary sources you might encounter, and illustrate how best to use these sources. You will remember from an earlier article that we recommend beginners check published family histories first, then turn to local histories—that is where we will begin this discussion.

Published Family Histories
These compiled secondary sources often yield a complete history for one line of your research. As with any book, they can take several different formats. Your job is to determine two points about any such book you discover. First, does it contain information relevant to your project? Second, how is the book structured and how do you interpret the information in the book?

To determine if it contains relevant information, first check the index and see if the name for which you are searching appears. There are times when several possible entries are present. If you were looking for a name such as Andrew Grant, for example, there might be as many as a dozen entries. See if the index offers any additional information for each primary entry such as a place name, event, or essential date associated with that person. Remember that some family histories have multiple indexes—a family name index, an other name index, even a places index. If you are searching for an individual with a common name, you might find it useful to consult the other indexes for a cross-reference.

For example, if Andrew Grant's wife was Lucinda Ammon, you might find her listed in the other names index, thus narrowing the number of possible pages you need to consult. Likewise, if your couple resided in Monongahela City, you might find it in the place name index, again providing you with a cross-reference to narrow your search of the book. Obviously, the ideal situation would be for you to find all three—Andrew Grant, Lucinda Ammon, and Monongahela City—appearing on the same page. When you are this fortunate, you will usually discover the people you are seeking.

Unfortunately, in some published family histories there is no index. While this is not common, it does occur and you usually encounter such a book when you are the most desperate for information—almost the Murphy's Law of genealogical research. Should this happen to you, be patient. Review the contents of the book by skimming the pages looking for clues associated with the name you are researching. Patience and perseverance can yield results but remember that a book without an index can be one of the most frustrating situations you will encounter.

As for the second point—understanding the structure of the text and how to best interpret it—the following are tips that will help you understand some of the more common elements of compiled secondary sources you will encounter in your research.

Organization
When you encounter a family history, take the time to skim the contents to determine how the work is organized. Who is the key person? What format does the book use? When was it published? Who is the author? Is there an index? These questions help in entering the information into your research log. In no time at all, books of this type will seem very familiar to you and you will become comfortable using them.

Numbering Systems
Virtually all published genealogies use a numbering system to identify the individuals in the book and to show how they fit into the complete family history. You need to identify the key person and you need to familiarize yourself with the numbering system that extends from this key

person. Most compiled family histories employ a system that resembles an outline. The key person is assigned the number 1 and each descendant is assigned the next available number. If you are fortunate enough to locate one of your ancestors, or even yourself, in a published family history, using the book's numbering system may lead you back in time and provide several generations of data. Remember to verify this information by checking the relevant primary record.

Superscripting
One of the most common features of a compiled history is superscripting. As with any work involving research, footnotes indicate where the information came from. In family histories, footnotes may also contain useful information about an individual that just did not fit into the text or was perhaps added later. Be sure to read any footnotes that pertain to your ancestor. Superscripting is also used to identify the generation an individual fits into. When you see superscripts in this context, it informs you of how many generations an individual is removed from the key person. In some cases, an entire paternal lineage is displayed in parentheses following the person's name.

Abbreviations
When you first encounter a compiled family history, you will be struck by the variety and number of abbreviations. Abbreviations save space and avoid the tedium of writing the same information over and over. Unfortunately, there is no true standard for what they mean. As a result, you need to familiarize yourself with what they mean in a particular work. Usually there is a guide to these abbreviations (and other symbols used in the text) to refer to when you encounter any new or questionable entries in the text.

Town & County Histories
If any of your families were among the early settlers of the United States, or if they were among the early settlers of a particular community, town, county, or state, histories could be invaluable compiled secondary sources. In virtually every village, town, city, county, or state, someone has written and published a history of that area.

These histories serve two very important functions. First, they provide historical context for your family even if they are not mentioned by name in the book. A good local history can give you insight into the day-to-day life of your ancestors and allow you a glimpse of what the townspeople did for work, where they shopped, how they farmed, even how much they paid for taxes. Second, local histories often provide genealogies for many families who lived in the community at a particular time. Some extend the genealogies of certain families down two, three, and even four generations from the settling couple. Other town histories will provide chronological listings of births, marriages, and/or deaths that may have occurred within that area. Such a reference provides a direct link to the original source.

The two libraries with the best collections of local histories are the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Many local libraries have guides in their reference sections that list the extensive holdings of these libraries. Also, if travel and research are in your plans, state libraries (usually located in the state's capital city) have

excellent collections of local histories for their state and usually those near them. It would be time well spent to plan a research trip to any state library.

Genealogical Dictionaries
Another type of useful source, especially for early settlers to a particular area, is the genealogical dictionary. In many regions, multi-volume books have been published on the settlers or important families of that region, which are presented in dictionary form and arranged alphabetically by family name.

Like published family histories, these dictionaries also utilize numerous abbreviations. Consult the beginning of the book to understand what these abbreviations mean.

One major shortcoming of these works is the frequent omission of information on female family members. While this is a hindrance, the information gained on the male family members will lead you to primary source material where you can find data on the women in the family. Be sure to check the card or computer catalog at the library for these general sources. It is also a good idea to check with the genealogy reference librarian. Once you have been pointed in the right direction, spend the time to thoroughly investigate this potentially valuable source.

Assorted Compiled Sources
The primary emphasis of this article has been on those compiled sources that can aid you the most in your quest for ancestors. Hopefully, one or more of these will prove useful to you. Should you not have any luck, however, there are additional compiled sources that might help you locate valuable data. These were discussed in Step 5 of this series, but let us list some of them here as a reminder:

- • Family Association Newsletters
- • Genealogical Society Newsletters
- • Historical Society Publications
- • Ethnic Society Publications
- • Newspaper Obituaries
- • Published Cemetery Inscriptions
- • Biographies
- • College Yearbooks

These auxiliary sources come with some cautionary notes, however. First, they can be difficult to use. In many respects they resemble any book that either has a poor index or no index at all. Also, they represent the type of research that requires many hours of work with little or no payoff. We advise beginners to turn to these sources only when all other sources have produced nothing. Use these sources as a break from your other research. When you accomplish one of your research objectives, turn to these other sources and pursue one of your difficult lines. This gives you some distance from the other types of material you are using and often gives you a different perspective when you turn to your next objective.

Doing genealogical research can be very demanding. There will be times when you will feel like the proverbial laboratory rat racing on your treadmill or wandering aimlessly through the maze that is the trail leading to our ancestors. But persevere! That elusive ancestor could be just around the corner.