Are You Your Own Brick Wall?
Common Genealogy Mistakes and How to Overcome Them

Don't get so focused on your research, your family, or your family traditions that you ignore or overlook essential clues and resources. This class will identify some common genealogical mistakes and teach strategies for overcoming them.

Getting Started

- **Family Stories**. Did you inherit fabulous tales of your ancestors' lives which connect them to famous people and historical events? You are not alone. Most families tell stories of intrigue and excitement about their ancestors. However, many of these stories are at least somewhat untrue. Don't get caught up trying to prove your family stories. Instead, think of your family stories in the same way you would any other record. Consider each story carefully. How likely is it that those events actually happened? Extract key dates and places. Compare information from your stories with other sources and historical events. Try to disprove your family story instead of working to prove it.

- **Beyond the Internet.** The internet is a wonderful resource for genealogists. Billions of records are accessible right at your fingertips. It's easy to spend all your time searching for records online. However, only a fraction of the all the records ever created are available on the internet. Start by searching online records (including records available on smaller websites). When you've exhausted the resources of the internet, get offline. Explore the records available at archives, libraries, and societies throughout the world. Reach out to repositories located near the locations your ancestors lived. Determine which repositories hold the records of your ancestors' lives and connect with those archives. The internet is just the beginning of good genealogical research.

- **Online and Published Family Trees**. Many people have published their family information, either in book form or online. While some of these family histories and family trees are sourced and accurate, many are not. These unsourced trees may contain numerous errors and inaccuracies. As you start your research, use online trees as a starting point to see what's out there. However, do not trust the information in online family trees without first verifying the information with original records.

- **Genealogy Costs Money**. Because so many genealogical records are accessible for little or no cost, it's easy to start thinking that doing genealogy is and should be free. Your ancestors belong to you. Why should you spend money to learn more about them? In reality, genealogy is far from free. There is a cost associated with subscribing to websites, ordering records, hiring researchers, going on research trips, and purchasing DNA kits. Don't get so caught up in keeping genealogy free that you are unwilling to spend the money necessary to find the records that may answer your research question.

The Research Process

- **Planning Your Research**. With records so readily accessible, it is easy to just jump in and start researching ancestors. However, scattered searching is often unsuccessful research. Focus your research efforts by planning before you search. Start by choosing one of your ancestors. Who do you want to learn more about? Next, gather known information about that ancestor. What do you

already know about that ancestor and his or her family? Next, decide what you want to learn about that ancestor. What is your research goal? A research goal can be a relationship, (parents) an event (immigration), or a place (birth location). Finally, identify which records are most likely to include information that will answer your research goal. This list of records can be used as your research plan. If you plan your research before you start researching, you will know what you are looking for and why. Because you started your research with a plan, you will be more focused and more successful in your research efforts.

- **The Wrong Generation**. It's tempting to start by searching for information on the last known generation on your family tree. It's also tempting to start by researching an ancestor for whom you have little or no information. However, these end-of-line and unknown ancestors are the wrong place to start, especially if you're researching in a difficult time period or location. Without known information, it is very difficult to locate records that you can verify belong to your research family. Instead, work from the 'known' to the 'unknown.' Evaluate the family you are researching. Do you have exact dates and places? If not, move a generation or two closer in time to the present day. The records for the 'known' ancestor will, hopefully, lead you back to your 'unknown' ancestor.

- **One Family at a Time**. Filling out a pedigree chart with all your ancestors is seductive. It's easy to focus exclusively on identifying only your direct ancestors (meaning your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so forth) while ignoring their children and siblings. Though a completed chart can be satisfying, you may be ignoring valuable records with missing information. Your ancestor's siblings may have died later and left more complete records. For example, a sibling who outlived your ancestor may have left a death certificate listing a mother's maiden name. Or an ancestor who died in childbirth and left few records may have been survived by a brother who was a prominent member of society. Instead of focusing only on your direct ancestors, research each ancestor's entire family, including siblings and children, from death all the way to birth.

- **Spelling Variations**. In the 21st century, the way your surname is spelled is tied to your identity. Many names have one spelling that is consistently used from family to family. This was not always the case. A name spelled one way today may have been spelled numerous different ways in the past, depending on the background and literacy of the person recording the name. As you search for your ancestors, search for alternate spellings. Also look for longer or shorter variations of the same name, misspellings, mis-transcriptions, and more. Don't get so caught up in the idea that the surname you are searching for always used the modern spelling that you ignore or overlook your ancestors' records.

- **Tracking Your Research**. Have you ever searched for your ancestor in a record only to realize you already searched that record but didn't find anything? Have you ever found a record and then, when you needed it again, you couldn't remember how you found it? This is why It's important to track your research by keeping a research log or research journal. A log can be a computer-based table or a spiral-bound notebook. Research logs can help you prevent duplicate searches, locate records again, plan your research, organize your research files, and even help you pick up and work on a project after break. Though keeping a log takes time now, it will save you time in the future.

Working with Records

- **Only Using Derivatives**. It's easy to exclusively rely on derivate records. A derivative is a copy, extract, abstract, transcript, or conclusion based on original records. Because derivatives are readily available and often easier to read, it's easy to rely solely on information found in derivate records. However, derivatives are rarely complete copies of originals and may contain errors. When you locate a derivate, use it to lead you to the original. This includes online record collections. When you search an online database, always make sure to view the original image (even if that means locating it offline). Using originals will give your conclusions more credibility and prevent you from missing key details and information.

- **Collecting versus Analyzing**. Do you have a pile of records you collected while working on a research project? Have you spent time reading through and analyzing each of those records? It's possible that the answer to your research question is hiding in the records you have already collected. Spend time analyzing your documents. Read through every column, line, and field. Find definitions for words you don't know or don't understand. Transcribe or abstract each record. Use the information from your documents to create tables and timelines that compare information across multiple documents. Don't just collect documents. Spend time analyzing them
- **A Written Conclusion**. It can be satisfying to reach the end of a tough research project. You've done the research and know the answer to your research goal. However, just because you've finished researching does not mean you are finished with the research project. The final element of the Genealogical Proof Standard (or GPS) is a "soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion." (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genealogical_Proof_Standard). Once you think you have solved your research problem, write out a proof summary explaining what you believe and why. Include your research objective, the sources you reviewed (include footnotes) and acknowledge any conflicting evidence. Also attach copies of your research log, timeline, source documents, and anything else you used to reach your conclusions. You may discover gaps in your research that need to be filled before you can really come to a conclusion.

Advanced Concepts

- **Thinking Historically.** In the search for who your ancestors were and where they lived, it can be easy to forget that your ancestors lived within the context of history. Politics, war, recessions, culture, and geography impacted the world in which your ancestors lived as well as their actions and decisions. As you research your ancestors, make sure to place them within the historical context of where and when they lived. Pay attention to common migration and immigration routes. Consider the laws and acts that may have created certain records or framed your ancestors' decisions. Explore historical geography and consider how it may have impacted where your ancestor chose to live or where they moved. After all, what we call history, our ancestors called current events.
- **The Meaning of Everything**. With difficult brick walls and tough research questions, it is important to find everything for your ancestor. What does 'everything' mean? It's not just finding a birth date/place, a marriage date/place, and a death date/place. Dates and place are just the beginning. However, you will want to find 'everything,' including:
  - **Every record** - vital, census, land, probate, court, military, immigration, naturalization, newspapers, directories, voter registrations, tax, published histories, funeral home records, sexton records, family bibles, family letters, pictures, maps and gazetteers, church records, manuscript collections, government records, and much more; use the topics listed on the state and country pages of the FamilySearch Research Wiki as a checklist
  - **Every locality and every jurisdiction** – locate records from every town, parish, county, province, state, and from the national or federal government for every locality; also collect records for all neighboring localities and their jurisdictions
  - **Every repository** – search records held by every town or city government, town or county library, local historical society, county courthouse, county archives, county library, regional library or archives, state library, state historical society, university library, specialty library, and the national archives
- **The Stories We Tell**. As you research, it may be easy to start telling stories about your ancestors. Records (or the lack of records) may lead you to identify specific personality traits, tell stories, or invent details about who they were and what they were like. These stories and attributes can help connect you to your ancestors and flesh out the details of their lives. However, these stories can

sometimes take on a life of their own and may lead you to limit the records you are willing to search in order to locate your ancestors. For example, if you conclude great grandpa was poor, are you less likely to spend time searching for land and probate records? As you research, don't let your stories prevent you from looking at every record type and searching for records in nearby (or even distant) locations. Consider every possibility. Think outside the box. Search surrounding localities and for alternate names. Don't let the stories you tell about your ancestors limit your research.

- **Researching the Community**. Researching recent ancestors is oftentimes quick and easy with the discovery of one record leading to another. When you reach a brick wall in your research, you will need to implement advanced strategies in order to solve your research goals. One advanced strategy is to research communities instead of families. Your ancestor's community consisted of their friends, associates, and neighbors. These people were part of your ancestors' lives and may be relatives or even share a common origin. You can find these people in your ancestors' records listed as neighbors, witnesses, godparents, executors, bondsmen, and more. As you work to solve a tough research problem, collect the names of those in your ancestor's community. Research the lives of those that appear more often in ancestor's records. The records belonging to the members of your ancestor's community may hold the clues you need to solve your research goal.

Additional Tips

- **I Didn't Bring It with Me**. Have you ever gone on a family or business trip to a location with an ancestral connection and discovered yourself with unexpected free time? Were you prepared, with notes and family information in hand, to take advantage of local research opportunities? Carry your research with you, either on your phone or a flash drive, or by uploading it to the cloud. Be prepared to take advantage of unexpected research opportunities; carry your research with you.

- **Resuming a Research Project**. Genealogy research often happens in pieces. You may work on a project for years, only to put it aside when life happens, or another project takes its place. When it's time to continue an older research project, it can be easy to go right back to searching for records. However, this can be a mistake. You may not remember what records you have already searched or what you have already found. When you pick up an older research project, start by reviewing your earlier research. Go through all your research notes, documents, and other paperwork. It may even be helpful to take notes on your previous research. Evaluate what you have already found and consider what's missing. You are probably more experienced now than the last time you worked on this project and may be able to spot new clues. A review of your old research will ground you in what you have done and help you move forward on your research project.

- **Ask for Help**. Have you ever asked for help with a research problem? If not, you are missing out on a lot of shared knowledge. Ask for help. Archivists and librarians often know records and record groups and can help you identify and locate unknown record sets. Members of your local genealogy society or other genealogists may suggest records or strategies you may not have considered. Friends can give you a new perspective on your research and help you identify holes. Someone in an online community may know about a record you have never heard of before. Take advantage of the collective knowledge of the genealogical community. Ask for help.

- **Learn More**. Learn how to research by reading how-to guides, books, and the FamilySearch Research Wiki. Read case studies in periodicals to learn how others solved similar problems. Attend classes or watch webinars online. Answer questions or learn how other people answer questions in Facebook Groups, the FamilySearch Communities, and forums. Offer your knowledge and expertise by volunteering at the Family History Library, a local family history center, or an archive or museum. Build your skills by getting involved in the genealogical community.