

Don't Chop Off That Branch!

A Genealogy Arborist's Handbook

Thomas MacEntee, of Genealogy Bargains
<https://genealogybargains.com> hifefgen@gmail.com

You are at a crossroads after years of genealogy research: should you delete an entire branch of your family tree due to faulty research? Or is there a better way to correct family history research errors and salvage information that took years to find?

The Problem of Bad Research

Some call it “junk genealogy” which is an overly pejorative term if you ask me. We all make mistakes in our genealogy research. Some mistakes are made through a lack of education, i.e. not understanding source citations. Other mistakes are made through a lack of standardized practices, such as using the Genealogical Proof Standard.

While many complain that “bad genealogy” is “ruining it for everyone else.” This means complaining about new genealogists who post incorrect information to online family trees and other sites. We need to remember that we were all “new” once, right? Remember your first genealogy society meeting? Feeling like a “newbie” on a genealogy Facebook group?

Compassion goes along way in resolving the issue of bad genealogy research. Compassion for yourself and your mistakes. Compassion for those researchers who may not have had access to educational materials or guidance from other genealogists. Bad genealogy research can only be resolved through acceptance and education.

Bad Research or Sloppy Research?

Is there really “bad research” ... I mean intentionally awful attempts to prove a relationship or a fact? No. I think bad research is “sloppy research” and again should be addressed for what it is: an opportunity to improve.

The cure for sloppy research is EDUCATION. There are so many available opportunities, especially in a genealogy community that is more and more “online” and accessible 24/7. Avail yourself of webinars, online courses, and join genealogy groups on Facebook. A community exists where you can meet like minds who've made the same mistakes you have with your genealogy.

Mapping Out a Correction Plan

Here is the approach that I use when “pruning” my family tree:

- **Make a backup.** Don’t even MARK an ancestor for deletion until you make a backup of your current genealogy research.
- **Track changes.** Create a document or use a special genealogy log spreadsheet to track any suspected bad data, the evaluation, and the final resolution. At some point in the future you may need to even “re-evaluate” the bad data if new records or information is made available.
- **Write up a new proof.** Remember that sometimes as genealogists we need to write a genealogical proof based on negative evidence. No need to reference the previous mistakes; just construct a solid proof argument with conclusion.
- **Get the word out.** See the recommendations below for Correcting Genealogical Research Errors. Notifying others and having them correct their information raises the genealogical “bar” for everyone.

Correcting Genealogical Research Errors

We all started somewhere right? And if like me, you believe the genealogy journey is a learning process, you understand that people make mistakes. Even you. But with genealogy we also need to understand that very often what seems like facts and academic research are also filled with lore, legend, family stories and emotion. There is a personal sense of ownership for many genealogists and correcting information can sometimes be a difficult process.

- **Understand the capabilities of the platform.** When dealing with websites that display family trees and or indexed and transcribed records, do your homework and determine what can and what cannot be correct. This may include having to read the Terms of Service agreement to understand who owns user data once it is uploaded.
- **Ask and ask nicely.** When dealing with other researchers online, a “virtual” smile goes a long way. Let the other person know that you have found other information related to a specific person, place or event and ask them if they’d like the data for their own research. Also ask them to update any online postings not to prove that your research is “correct” or “better,” but to help all genealogists who come upon the research in the future.
- **Avoid “right” and “wrong” statements.** The easiest way to alienate a fellow genealogist is to tell them that their research is wrong. Even if the research is incorrect, your goal should be to improve the current research and to help future researchers.
- **If necessary, publish your own research.** Sometimes either you can’t contact the other genealogist, or they refuse to update their information. Remember that you have at your disposal a variety of tools to make sure your research is just as visible as any other genealogist.

Salvaging That Branch

So, what if you wanted to GRAFT a branch BACK on to your family tree? Well, that is why we “saved” that old branch in case we needed it later. Remember that new records sets come online every day. In addition, old records sets are reindexed or have features added. While many think record sets are stable, never changing, and almost stagnant, this is not true. Online record sets maintained by Ancestry, FamilySearch and others are seeing improvements to data content and architecture on a constant basis.

PRESERVE any branch you delete from your family tree. Do what ever it takes such as:

- Simply printing out information from your genealogy database software is all it takes.

Another approach is to SAVE your current tree as a NEW tree with ONLY the deleted information or the tree branch in question. If using a public platform, see if you can make the tree private or mark it as “UNSOURCED” so others will not use the information in their own trees.

Save the new online tree out to a GEDCOM file and rename it appropriate so you and others understand the quality of the research data.

Tips and Tricks for Evaluating and Possibly Deleting Genealogy Research

- **Trust Your Gut.** If you have been doing genealogy research for several years, you may have a sneaking suspicion about a few ancestors in your tree that are “shaky.” And I do not mean as a good hint.
- **Review and Take Inventory.** You can’t put together review plan if you don’t know the exact genealogy data that might be incorrect. Work with the earliest ancestor in your tree. Carefully review whether you have strong sources for your data. Create a tracking list or spreadsheet and mark off items that have been reviewed, the source of the information, and whether it or not you feel that person is a candidate for being “cut off” the tree.
- **Create a backup or a restore point.** DO NOT DELETE ANYTHING until you have backed up your data AND you know how to restore it. I like to “tag” or “mark” my family tree entries with a color (like red) if the platform allows me to do so. This way I know the “shaky branches.”
- **Evaluate. Evaluate. Evaluate.** The most important step in the review process is to thoroughly evaluate each data point – such as a birth date – and ensure that it is valid. Remember to use the Genealogy Proof Standard as a guide; if any data seems “iffy,” err on the side of NOT adding it to your research.
- **Never import outside data directly into your genealogy database.** Whether the data is in a GEDCOM file or some other format, always know what you are bringing into your genealogy database. Remember that is not always easy to remove data once it has been incorporated into your research.

- **SAVE the deleted data.** If there is a way to export the “bad” data or segregate it from your research, try to do so. Even if it means printing to a PDF or paper copy.
- **Admit your mistakes.** This is never an easy one, especially if it means a HUGE branch gets lopped off your tree. Or your mistake has impacted other researchers. Write up your “proof” even if it involves negative evidence and a DISPROVING of information.
- **Update other researchers and share responsibly.** Use the opportunity to communicate change in your genealogy research as one to EDUCATE others on genealogy research methodology. Be honest, show your mistakes, and how you’ve remedied the research errors.

Resource List

- **Genealogy Research Log**
<https://www.genealogyresearchlog.com>
- **Evidence Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Sources**
<https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/researching/>
- **I just inherited a huge pile of genealogy. Now what?**
<https://genealogysstar.blogspot.com/2015/03/i-just-inherited-huge-pile-of-genealogy.html>
- **QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map**
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>
- **The 3 Cs: Organizing Research Inherited from a Relative**
<https://blog.myheritage.com/2016/06/the-3-cs-organizing-research-inherited-from-a-relative/>
- **Where to Start When You Inherit Genealogy**
<http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=byufamilyhistorian>