ROBYN’S FAVORITE

RESEARCH TIPS

Copyright © 2018, Robyn N. Smith
email: msualumni33@gmail.com

Photo: Mamie Prather
1870-1951

www.reclaimingkin.com
Thank you for signing up to receive new blog posts from Reclaiming Kin! I hope you find the various genealogical and historical topics I discuss on the blog useful for your own research. I’ve been a genealogist, teacher, lecturer, and writer for 20 years and I’ve picked up many tips that I like to pass on to others, especially those just beginning their research. This collection of tips is in no particular order.

The journey of researching your family’s history is a fascinating one, packed with unexpected twists and turns. In this time of fast-paced social media and digital devices, I think it’s even more important that someone in every family be the historian and the keeper of the family stories, pictures, dates and facts.

Your family’s story is waiting to be discovered and shared!

Robyn
Tip 1. Find historic maps of the area you are researching.

Time and place greatly influenced our ancestor’s lives. Did they live near water? Then some probably worked on the water. If they were farmers, where they lived influenced what crops they grew. Did Union or Confederate armies pass through during the Civil War? Was it a place filled with large plantations or smaller farms with smaller numbers of enslaved people? Where did the early major roads and later railroads go? That affected migration.

In any event, take the time to find local maps so that you can orient yourself to the community. For the most part, these maps aren’t on sites like Ancestry.com.

My favorite places for historic maps are state archives, local historical and genealogical societies, the Library of Congress and the United State Geological Survey (USGS). There are also companies that sell historic maps and some university websites have large and popular collections of maps.

The image below is from an 1865 map of Montgomery County, Maryland. This map is the kind that genealogists love, with landowner names and institutions such as churches and schools. Several of my ancestors are named in this map as well as their former slaveholders:
I found the 1931 map of Hardin County, Tennessee below at the Tennessee State Archives’ website. The clip below zooms in on the community where my ancestors lived, and though landowners are not named, there are symbols for houses, churches, cemeteries and schools.

Unfortunately, I quickly figured out that only white schools and churches are named, but at least it shows where African-American homes and institutions were located. Some of the schools and churches no longer stand, but this map helped me find the location of a historic African-American cemetery.

The community of Holtsville shown in the map was named for my 2nd great grandfather, John W. Holt. His landing (Holt’s Landing) at the Tennessee River is even marked.

Be aware that many of the maps you find won’t be available online; you’ll have to visit the repository in person. Here are a few notable collections:

- **The Library of Congress Maps**
- **The Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection**
- **The David Rumsey Historical Map Collection**

*Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog post which discusses how I used maps to answer a research question:*

*Maps Lead the Way to Better Understanding*
Tip 2. Take the time to learn how to evaluate evidence, how to cite your sources, and what the standards are in genealogy.

Everybody wants to jump right in to all the exciting finds that we see on those popular TV shows. It sounds boring to be told to read. But doing this will save you untold hundreds of hours of research. Finds come fast and furious in the beginning, but very quickly you’ll get back far enough where you won’t find vital records and marriage records and other sources that directly state relationships. You’ll also need to be able to discern when sources are giving you inaccurate information.

Learning what a source is and how to write an accurate citation are foundational skills. If you don’t learn how to do it and get in the habit of doing it, years from now you’ll be wondering where you got a particular piece of information from. There are many sources I have completely lost because I was not aware of this in my early years as a researcher.

I recommend these two books to help you understand the basics of what evidence is, what constitutes proof and the basic principles of sound genealogical research. *Genealogical Proof Standard* (get the most recent edition!) is by Christine Rose and *Genealogy Standards* is by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. You’ll need to reference other books for more details, but these will get you started.
Learning the principles of evidence evaluation will teach you why most genealogists would preference the 1 Aug 1883 birth date shown at left for Neal (Cornelius) Broyles, from his World War I Draft Registration card as opposed to the 31 August 1883 birth date provided on his death certificate, shown below.

As your research progresses, you will find sources that conflict with one another and you’ll need to understand how to resolve those conflicts, analyze your research and draw appropriate conclusions.

The time you spend learning these principles will save you precious time over the life of your research.

Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog posts which all involve evidence evaluation:

When Original Sources are Wrong
Beware the Death Certificate
Sorting Same-Named People
Marriage Records: Look Out for Multiple Marriages
I Found You Mary Neal: Analysis Uncovers an Identity

www.reclaimingkin.com
Tip 3. Make charts and tables in order to organize and analyze your information.

I am a visual learner. Using charts and tables for my genealogy research has proven to be a great aid. I use Microsoft Word and sometimes Excel, but it doesn’t have to be anything fancy; use a writing pad and a pencil if that is more comfortable for you. Sometimes I use tables to organize one type of source, for example, I might make a table of all the obituaries, funeral programs, or death certificates that I have for a particular family line.

I make sure when I create something like this that I include all of the information I need to make a proper source citation (which means you have to first know what is needed for the source citation—see tip number 2!).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Grantor</th>
<th>Grantee</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Consideration</th>
<th>Book/Page</th>
<th>Witnesses/near</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Levin Pollitt</td>
<td>Stephen Waters</td>
<td>9 April 1831</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>GH5, 590</td>
<td>Isaac Adams</td>
<td>7/8 acre, “NewTown”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>John Lankford</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>John J. Dennis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Edward P. Cliff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nancy &amp; Mary Adams, Joseph &amp; Priscilla Murphy (Inherited from John Adams)</td>
<td>Stephen Waters (free negro)</td>
<td>26 March 1835</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>GH8, 106</td>
<td>William Polk, JP</td>
<td>Land “Bengall”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>William Whayland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Susan Adams</td>
<td>Stephen Waters</td>
<td>2 Dec 1835</td>
<td>$18.75</td>
<td>GH8, 217</td>
<td>William Polk, JP</td>
<td>Land “Bengall”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>William Whayland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fielder &amp; Lovey Austin (Inherited from John Adams)</td>
<td>Harry, Thomas &amp; Daniel Waters (free negro)</td>
<td>18 July 1838</td>
<td>$85</td>
<td>GH9, 577</td>
<td>William Polk, JP</td>
<td>Part of “Bengall”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>John Leatherbury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other times, I use charts and tables for analysis. Seeing information in these ways allows me to see patterns and connections that I might not see if I had the documents in a stack in front of me. I can see clues that I can then follow up on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of Slaves</th>
<th>Document</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tax Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tax Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tax Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tax Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tax Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Slave Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Slave Tax Assesment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Slave Tax Assesment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Slave Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Slave Statistics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shown at left is a simple chart that I often use to track the number of slaves that a slaveholder owned over time. Large increases in numbers may suggest a marriage or an inheritance.

Trying to distinguish between same-named people in a community is another problem that a chart is very helpful in solving.

We can use various records to keep track of what things distinguish one person from another. In the example below, I created a
table to distinguish the various men all named Levin Waters who lived around the same community in Somerset County, Maryland (this is just a snippet of a larger table):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levin</th>
<th>Birth/Death</th>
<th>Censuses Appeared In</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Wife &amp; Kids</th>
<th>Sources/Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Levin J. Waters, Sr.</td>
<td>1825 - bef. 1900</td>
<td>1850, 1860, 1870, 1880</td>
<td>Joshua Waters</td>
<td>Married Sarah, Children</td>
<td>-no death cert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elena, John W., Emmanuel,</td>
<td>-proximity makes him a likely brother of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fred, Sarah, Christie,</td>
<td>Daniel and Samuel G. Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>-married Sarah Waters, dau of Lucy &amp; Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Waters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-purchased land in 1855, LW 4, 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-1863 Civil War draft is likely him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Levin James Waters, Jr.</td>
<td>5 Jul 1854-25 Nov 1914</td>
<td>1880, 1900, 1910</td>
<td>Levin J. Waters and Martha Small</td>
<td>Married Elizabeth Selby.</td>
<td>-headstone in Waters Cemetery -death cert provides parents, mm &quot;James&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It goes without saying that you will accumulate an ungodly amount of data over the years as you research and it’s critical to find a process that helps you to stay organized and to make sense of what the various sources are actually saying when taken together.

Making charts and tables is one small way I have found to make that task just a little easier.

Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog posts which show a few other types of charts:

Using Charts in Your Genealogy Research
Beyond the Will and Inventory: Tracing Enslaved Ancestors through Probate
Collateral Research: Research All Siblings
Tip 4. **Double the time and effort you spend searching for people in the census. Learn different ways to search.**

Census records form the basis of much of our work. Census records are an imperfect source, and information can be accurate, a little off base, or completely false and misleading. The reasons for this are numerous. Census enumerators had guidelines and rules they were supposed to follow, but they did not always do so. People were not always home and enumerators may have asked neighbors for a household’s makeup. Most former slaves did not know how old they were. Large families may not get all the children’s ages correct. Even with all these flaws, census records are critical to the work we do.

Most beginning researchers do input a name into the search box and if the person is not found, they declare that the person is missing. Often, they are there. Maybe they are living someone else. Or their names are mangled or reversed.

Enumerators often spelled words by how they sounded. Because we know our ancestor’s name with one spelling, we often aren’t thinking about all the other ways it could have been spelled. And finally, with the rise of sites like Ancestry.com, we are relying on transcribers who could have mis-transcribed the written names they saw.

I spend anywhere from 45 minutes to one hour researching each person or family in the census. I try to find them in every census during their lifetimes.

You’ll need to learn how to use the wildcard characters in order to search effectively. The wildcard (“*”) stands in for multiple letters, while the single character wildcard (“?”) stands in for one letter. For example, the surname “HOLT” is often mis-transcribed as “HALT.” So searching with “H?LT” should find both of those spellings. Similarly, if I was searching for the surname “HARBOUR,” it may have been spelled “HARBER.” So a search using “HAR*” should find those spellings.

I use multiple strategies to try to find people. I start on Ancestry, and here is a partial list of the search strategies I use in the county I expect to find the person or family I am researching:

- Search with last name only, then with first name only, then with wildcards for both
- Search the name of a child who should be living
- Search the birth state, if the birth state is a different state
- (For African-Americans) Search with the names blank, and only the race selected
- Search neighboring counties, especially nearby large cities
- Search neighboring states
- Search using a neighbor who owns land as an anchor
- Search using Familysearch or Heritage Quest; their transcriptions will be different
- Read through, page by page, the entire district where you expect to find them

You read that right: I will not conclude someone is missing until I read the actual census images line by line with my own eyes, going through the neighborhood. I have concluded many times that someone was not in the census (or dead), only to discover later that the person or family was in fact there. Yes, some people were actually missed in the census, but we shouldn’t easily jump to that conclusion.
The following example for Cora Hughes is the kind of thing that happens all the time in census records. This is Cora’s 1920 household:

![Cora's 1920 Household]

This is Cora’s household in 1930—transcribed under the name Cora Huse:

![Cora's 1930 Household]

Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog posts which discuss various problems arising from the census:

- Never Rely on Just the Census
- Fooled Again: the Green Barnes Family
- Extracting Every Clue from the Census
- Is the Wife Really the Mother of All Those Children?
- Phillip Holt is Not Dead After All
- The 1880 Donut Hole

www.reclaimingkin.com
Tip 5. Enrich the stories of your ancestor’s lives by discovering what organizations they created and participated in.

No one, I repeat, no one wants to read a dry list of names, birth, and death dates. While these items are important to document for families, it does not induce excitement or reveal much besides the fact that they lived.

But how did they live? The stories of our ancestors in every generation are what hold the promise of richness. Where did they work, how did they play, what did they do for recreation, what rituals and practices were important to them? How people celebrated, grieved, made a living, played and worshipped tells us much about their values and beliefs. In places long before radio and television and today’s Internet and social media, people socialized. The evidence is all around us and we should seek out those stories and include them in our research.

I don’t think I really know a family until I can place them firmly within the community and the culture of which they were apart. There were an endless number of clubs of all types: religious, occupational, hobby, social, benevolent, literary, political, temperance, military veterans, secret societies and on and on.

Some of my favorite sources to find those groups and organizations are:

- newspapers
- deed records
- city directories
- historical and genealogical societies
- oral history collections

Sometimes I think with the rise of technology, we’ve really lost something. There is such a beauty in all the ways in the past that people sustained connections with one another.

At right is a photo of my grandfather, William Smith (center front), as a member of a Jacksonville, FL social group called the Revelers.
Shown left is a Freedman’s Bank card for an organization called the Benevolent Association Bloom of Youth. Numerous organizations had accounts at one of the 37 branches of this bank:

The back pages of city directories can contain a wealth of information about organizations in a community, as an 1885 example from a Washington, D.C. city directory shows, bottom right:

Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog posts which discuss other ways I’ve uncovered some of the organizations my ancestors joined or worked with:

The Artifacts of Our History, Part 1
The Artifacts of Our History, Part 2
Pauline Waters: Documenting a Life
Ancestor’s College Records
Tip 6. Always research the cluster of people associated with your family. This research strategy will pay off again and again and again.  

I’m sure you’ve heard the saying that people are not islands unto themselves. This was especially true in times past. People married people from the neighborhood and from their church. They moved to other states for jobs because other people they knew were already there, and relatives, near and distant, lived in the same census households with their kin from time to time.

Beginning researchers usually focus on their direct ancestors only. However, learning to expand the focus to the group of people (the cluster) that your ancestors associated with will yield much greater success in almost every case. These people include the extended family of cousins and in-laws and aunts and uncles, neighbors, members of their church, people they worked with, and witnesses and bondsmen on their legal documents.

When we broaden the scope and widen the lens of our research, we will find family members that are not always identified as such. It is especially useful when trying to discover who daughters and sisters married which can be very difficult to tease out.

I found my 2nd great-grandfather Mike Fendricks living with a man named Dee Suggs, in the 1920 Hardin County, TN census clip shown above. I also noticed that Mike served as a bondsman on Dee Suggs’ marriage bond, shown at left.
Additional research revealed that Dee and Mike were brothers, which explains their close association. They were never identified as such in the individual records and they used different surnames. I eventually used Mike’s brother Dee to trace the family’s roots all the way back to the 1870 census in Franklin County, Alabama, and to the name of their mother, Sophronia Suggs.

The 1862 church record listing “colored” church members (below) is a good example of the value of cluster research.\textsuperscript{12} Married couples and other families are listed, and other sources indicate that many of the white leaders of the church were employers for these individuals worked and sold them land.

These black families were eventually able to form their own church in 1885. These records and others also explain why so many African-American men were Methodist ministers, even very early on in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.
The three civil war enlistment card images below are of Union soldiers who all lived in the same community (and served in the same regiment). I have researched them all, as the cluster of soldiers reveals much more about the families in this locale than any one individually.¹³

Learning this effective strategy will prove one of the best in your research toolbox!

Did you enjoy this? Then you’ll probably enjoy the following blog posts where I illustrate the cluster strategy:

Cluster Research Reunites Sisters
Cluster Research at the Cemetery
Follow the Witness: They May Have the Answer
Postcards Provide Clues to Family
Slaves are in the FAN Club, Too
Tip 7. Use oral history collections to add to the detail of your family story.

We have a tendency to prefer documents in genealogy, even though the unique riches of oral history cannot be denied (though we must always verify it). I’ve noticed that more and more universities and other institutions are creating rich repositories of oral histories.

The subject matter is broad: there are collections of residents of a specific city, events such as the Civil Rights Movement, special topics such as jazz music, and collections of groups such as workers in a specific industry or teachers.

Duke University hosts a wonderful collection of African-American interviews called “Behind the Veil.” The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill hosts one of my favorite research collections, Documenting the American South. It includes oral histories:

While of course we want the oral histories of our family members, consider that interviews by others we don’t know can also help us.

www.reclaimingkin.com
My great-grandfather Lawson Holt served in the 317th Sanitary Train during World War I. Imagine my joy when I found an oral history interview of an African-American man, William T. Knox, who also served in the 317th. It was transcribed and online at the website of the National World War I Museum and Memorial:

The details from this interview helped me to understand and more accurately write about what my ancestor’s experience might have been like. I also frequently use the Slave Narratives oral history collection to provide first hand testimony of what life was like for some of my enslaved ancestors.

One of the largest collections is contained at the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center. Their Veterans History Project, StoryCorps, Civil Rights History, and Occupational Folklife Project represent just a few items from their colossal repository.

Also, do not neglect to check local libraries and state archives. I have found some of the best oral histories in local libraries.

---

William Smith photograph, ca. 1940; privately held by author, [address for private use.] Elkridge, Maryland, 1999. William’s wife Pauline had this photograph, passed it to her son Paul, who provided it to the author. Picture was in good condition, though the image has been digitally retouched for clarity.


10 1920 U.S. census, Hardin County, TN, population schedule, 4th CD, PO Savannah; ED 75, pg. 161 A. (stamped), dwelling 3, family 3, Mike Fendrix [sic] in Dee Suggs household; citing NARA mtf T625, roll 1744.


12 “1862 Colored Church Members,” Church Record for Fairmount Station, Somerset County, Maryland, photocopy provided to author by David Briddell on 20 January 1999. Original record was copied from Drew University, which serves as a Methodist repository.