



ABUNDANT GENEALOGY

How Do I Know What I Don't Know? Fast Tracking Your Genealogy Education

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Albert Einstein, the famous scientist once said: "The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know."

Genealogists who have been tracing family history for several years sometimes need to get out of their "bubble" of assumed knowledge and remind themselves that they really don't have the necessary knowledge when it comes to a research resource or methodology. This takes courage and resolve especially when you've been doing this for many years. If we don't, we run the risk of researching with blinders on our eyes and running into brick walls.

How to Identify a Knowledge Gap in Genealogy

Admitting you don't know something is half the battle. You really need to commit to consistently creating an action plan when you find the need to learn something.

Create a Knowledge Gap List.

Get it down in writing either by hand or digitally. If you discover for the first time that you have a Huguenot ancestor, create a list of sub-topics about which you want to learn more. For this example, you could include: Huguenot history, Huguenot migration to the United States, Huguenot religious practices, Huguenot surnames, etc.

Identify your research needs.

Your Knowledge Gap list will be driven by what you need to accomplish with your research. Doing so could open the door to special record sets including church and immigration records.

Using the Huguenot example above, I would want to know more about Ann Freer, my 3rd great-grandmother who has a Huguenot surname and lived in New Paltz, New York, an area with a large Huguenot population. Were there special naming conventions for children? Were there specific religious practices often found in similar ethnic groups? Where were the Huguenots based in Europe?

Be honest – no one will see your list.

Take off those blinders! If you are not honest with yourself as to the gaps in your knowledge, you won't benefit from new discoveries. You will continue to find the same records and record sets and get the same results.



Best Ways to Quickly Get Up To Speed on a Resource

Let's say you have an immediate need to "get smart" about a topic, such as World War I draft registration. You want to know who in the United States was required to register, how many registration periods occurred, what type of information is included on the cards, how can the cards be accessed online and in person?

FamilySearch Research Wiki

One of the best, free, online resources for genealogists is the **FamilySearch Wiki**. Similar to Wikipedia, this wiki has over 86,000 articles covering a variety of topics.

Use the **Search** function to look for your topic and remember to first search **broad** and not too specific. Under broader topics, such as New York, you will find sub-topics on Census, Cemeteries, etc.

What if you can't find your topic in the FamilySearch Wiki? This is a perfect opportunity for you to give back to the genealogy community once you have built up your body of knowledge on a topic. The FamilySearch Wiki is a true wiki in that any user can create a topic page and add information.

Facebook Groups

Even if you strongly dislike **Facebook**, you might consider signing up just to gain access to Facebook **Groups** related to genealogy and family history. From German Document Translations to French African Genealogy, you will find thousands of groups run by volunteers in the genealogy community.

To locate a group related to your knowledge gap, use the **Search** engine at the top left of the Facebook page. Once the results appear, it is important to focus only on **Groups**, not People or Pages. While these resources might be helpful, only Groups provide a collaborative environment where you can post a query and get a quick response from group members. In addition, don't forget to search within the group to look for previous posts and also access the **Files** section for important documents related to the topic.

Work Your Genealogy Network – Offline and Online

Along with using Facebook Groups to gain knowledge about specific topics, remember that you have access to both in-person networks as well as online networks.

Other online networks include **Ancestry Message Boards** (still active!), genealogical society websites, as well as social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest.

For offline networks look to your local genealogy society as well as genealogy department of a local public library.



Going Forward: Using Constant Curiosity for Genealogy Success

Once you learn how to identify a knowledge gap and how to fill it, you need to commit to being constantly curious especially when encountering new finds about your ancestors.

Extract Every Clue . . . and Track Them!

One of the easiest pitfalls in genealogical research, and one of which I've been guilty, is getting so excited about a find that you overlook other clues in a document. And add to that the inability to track clues for your "to do" list of research later on. Here's a quick way to overcome this "sinkhole":

- **Use a To Do List to track new information.** You can use a piece of paper, a notebook, a note taking program like **Evernote** or even a spreadsheet. But you need some way to track and remember any clues you may find when reviewing a document. Don't tell yourself that you'll remember it the next day, next week or next month.
- **Include details on how you found the new information.** Some researchers compose a "quick" source citation for new clues such as "NARA, World War I Draft Registration Card for John Ralph Austin, accessed 10 October 2017 via Ancestry. Indicates wife and child as of 5 June 1917.
- **Extrapolate clues to form To Do List questions.** When you locate a new bit of information – such as a place of employment – your mind should be working to form these questions: What type of job did he have there? Where was the employer located? When did he start working there? Is the company still in existence and do they have employee records?

Understand How Your Ancestor Lived

Very often we aren't curious about new information because we don't have solid knowledge on how our ancestors lived and what experiences they endured.

The best way to access background information on ancestor circumstances is to be curious and to use social history resources such as **JSTOR** or **Sage Publications** online or at a local library. These databases provide access to academic research articles, theses, dissertations, and more about past events and ways of life.

Example: my research shows that my great-grandfather John Ralph Austin was nearly 10 years old in 1905 when his family suddenly moved from a house they owned and a quiet life in a small upstate New York town to a rented apartment in New York City. Further social history research indicated that there was a financial "panic" in 1903 in the United States that caused John Ralph's father to lose his butcher business. He then went to work in a laundry in the Bronx in 1905 and moved his family there.



Long-Term Educational Plan

Using your Knowledge Gap List, locate genealogical educational opportunities including online webinars (**Legacy Family Tree Webinars**) as well as genealogy conferences and institutes (**Salt Lake Institute for Genealogy**). Commit to attending at least one webinar each month and one in-person conference or institute a year.

Conclusion

“When we say what we don't know, it increases the likelihood that someone who does know will offer to help.” thought leader Simon Sinek.

Don't be afraid to admit there are gaps in your genealogy knowledge. But go beyond just owning up to it, do something about it!

Resource List

- **Ancestry Message Boards**
<https://www.ancestry.com/boards/>
- **EBSCO Information Services**
<https://www.ebsco.com/>
- **Evernote**
<https://www.evernote.com>
- **FamilySearch Research Wiki**
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page
- **Genealogy on Facebook List**
<https://socialmediagenealogy.com/genealogy-on-facebook-list/>
- **Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh (GRIP)**
<http://www.gripitt.org/>
- **Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research (IGHR)**
<http://www.ighr.gagensociety.org/>
- **JSTOR**
<https://www.jstor.org/>
- **Legacy Family Tree Webinars**
<https://familytreewebinars.com/>
- **Pinterest**
<https://www.pinterest.com>
- **Sage Publishing**
<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/home>
- **Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy**
<https://slig.ugagenealogy.org/>
- **Twitter**
<https://www.twitter.com>
- **WorldCat**
<http://www.worldcat.org/>