



Surround and Conquer

It's one aspect of Murphy's Law that the ancestor you're seeking will be the one whose life was completely un-documented or whose records were destroyed in natural disasters and fires. For this reason, it's good practice to research not only your direct line forebears, but also collateral lines. In other words, if you can't find great-grandpa, maybe you can find his brothers and sisters and use their records to backdoor into the information you're looking for. I find this to be especially true when it comes to efforts to identify the birth place of an ancestor.

Maybe your great-great-grandfather, Olaf Andersson, came to America before the place of birth was routinely provided in passenger arrival records, but his brother Nils made the journey a decade later, and his record happily does include that information. If you can't find out where Josephina Miller came from in Germany, maybe an affidavit in her brother's Civil War pension file will furnish the missing detail. Almost all our ancestors' paper trails are spotty, but paying attention to siblings and cousins can often fill your gaps.

Relatives of your ancestors are the most obvious people to research, but if you find yourself truly stuck, it can help to think of other associates. Maybe his neighbors, fellow parishioners, or classmates can help you get closer. It's not at all unusual, for instance, to discover that neighbors came from the same place in the old country or are relatives of some sort. Our ancestors often traveled in packs of people they were comfortable with.

The above is excerpted and adapted from [Who Do You Think You Are](#), companion book to the television series of the same name, by [Megan Smolenyak](#)