



Leave a Trail of Bread Crumbs

One of the admittedly less thrilling but important aspects of genealogy is citing your sources. A source is any document, database, interview or other resource that provides a nugget of information in your quest. Yes, I know, the very thought might make you flash back to school days painstakingly creating footnotes and endnotes for your papers. And the elements are more or less the same – author, title, publication details, location and specifics. But getting into this habit early will make you a better researcher and save you and others unnecessary effort.

There are definite parallels between genealogy and detective work, and one of them is the central role of evidence. Think of some of the popular TV crime shows. A major portion of every show is devoted to the gathering of evidence, and what's the first thing they do when they find something? They protect, label and log it. They must do this whether the particular piece of evidence they've just found supports or contradicts their working theory, and ultimately, to build a compelling case that will convince others and stand up in a court of law. Unless you become an heir searcher, your research isn't apt to take you into a courtroom, but shouldn't you care enough about your sleuthing to be sure you're right and be able to prove to your kinfolk that your latest discovery is accurate?

You might think early on that you can remember it all – where you got this or that bit of information – but as you add more newly found relatives to your database, you'll quickly realize that it's simply not possible. One day, you'll find yourself staring at a great-grandfather's date of death with no clue how you came across this information or how reliable it might be. Did you get his death certificate, interview his last surviving child, find it on a random website, snag his obituary, or see his tombstone? Where did you find it and can you trust it? His son, your great-uncle, might have seemed certain when he gave you the date off the top of his head, but is it possible his memory could be a little off? Might it be worth verifying with some other sources, just to be sure it's correct?

Failing to cite your sources also causes you to reinvent the wheel. You could easily find yourself ordering the same marriage record two or three times because you didn't record it the first time. And you'll inevitably encounter some situations that send you mixed signals. Three documents indicate that your immigrant ancestor was born around 1873, but his baptism from the old country has him born in 1869. Which is right? If you cited all your sources, you'll be able to weigh the reliability of each one against the others and reach a reasoned conclusion – and so will your cousins and descendants! Think how frustrating it would be for your great-great-grandkids to come across your database 100 years from now, but not be able to follow your trail. Make it easy on yourself and them. Get into the sprinkling-bread-crumbs habit from the very start.

*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](#).*