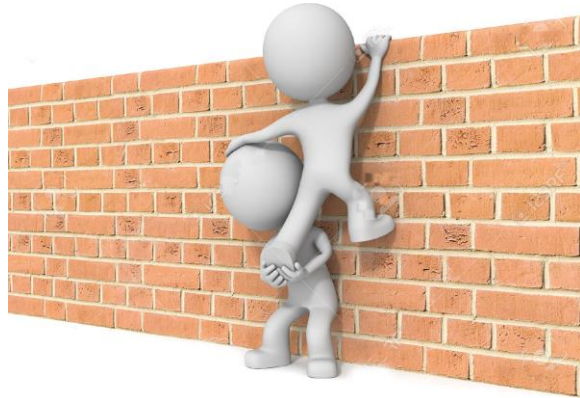


# Successfully Climbing a Genealogy Brick Wall

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We all have them - those ancestors who just refuse to be found. In genealogy, we call them “brick walls.” Whether you are brand new to the family history game or you have been doing this for decades, the strategies for climbing over, going around, or breaking through those brick walls are the same.

Don’t give up! You will be able to find more information with patience and diligence than without it.

If you haven’t done so already, organize your family research. Once it is organized, you will be able to find clues and hints to climb your brick walls.

- Chart your family tree.
- Create folders or binders for different branches of your family tree.
- Create a database on your computer just for your genealogical research.
- Create a research log to help you remember what you searched and what resources you used.
- Review your previous research.
- Verify your information with primary documents.
- Cite the source for each of your documents, including what type of document it is and where you obtained it.
- Analyze your records both separately and as a group. Often when records are gathered over a period of time, new answers, perspectives or clues can be found.
- Sort out records that contradict each other, but don’t discard them. Make note of contradictions and see if you can determine why there is conflicting information.
- Share your information with other members of your family. They may have leads for you based on the research you have already done, but the information will need to be organized for someone else to understand it.

- Do not rely on internet resources alone. There are many, many documents that are not found in popular databases like Ancestry. That being said though, Ancestry continues to add new genealogical records regularly so you should always check for new information every few months.

Remember that genealogy research is a lot like detective work. You are using clues to unlock a larger story. You will occasionally follow false leads and have to retrace your steps and you may have long intervals before another promising lead develops. But don't give up, eventually you will be able to climb that ever-so-frustrating brick wall.

When you have exhausted all the obvious possibilities, consider the less obvious.

## Names

Names are often the first brick wall that people researching their ancestors stumble upon. Here are some suggestions to work around name brick walls.

**Maiden Names** - Most countries have some kind of national identification number. In the United States they are called Social Security numbers; in Canada they are called Social Insurance numbers. Most countries also allow genealogists to search the application forms for these records if the record is older than a specified cut-off date (usually several decades, it varies by country). These applications always list the mother's maiden name. This is one of the few places on official records where maiden names are found.

Another extremely useful place to find a woman's maiden name is in court documents. Divorce cases, property disputes, immigrant change of name, applications for guardianship of a child, etc. all required a woman's maiden name. It should be noted that in early court documents (pre-1900 in the US and Canada), a woman was often represented by her husband, father or uncle so be sure to search under their names as well.

**Middle Names** – Names are more fluid than most people realize. It is not unheard of for people to start showing a preference to refer to themselves on official records by their middle name. This can happen even once a person reaches middle age. Always cross check archival records by first name and middle name.

**Common Family Names** – Trying to trace the genealogy of a family with a common surname can often be a challenge. It often comes down to probabilities. For example, wading through page after page of listings of Smiths is not an enjoyable chore. One way that you can tilt the probabilities in your favour is to look at the names of all the immediate family members. Initially, focus your research on the person in the family with the least common first name. This will increase your chances of finding a successful match and also hopefully speed up the search process.

**Short Family Names** – People with short family names often mistakenly think there is little likelihood of a misspelling of their family name in old records. After all, how could you misspell

an easy family name like Ball? Well, it is not so much the possibility of a misspelling as the possibility that the spelling of the family name has evolved over time. For example, there is a distinct possibility that a family name that ended in a double letter, like the double 'l' in Ball at one time could have had an 'e' on the end of the name. Ball becomes Balle, Tall becomes Talle, Mann becomes Manne. Always consider this possibility.

Aliases – In historical records, people used aliases all the times. A couple of common aliases: using the middle name as a last name, using the mother's maiden name as a last name and anglicizing a non-English family name.

Naming Conventions – Most families and many cultures have naming conventions for first and middle names. It is worth asking family members if they know of any naming conventions in the family. Knowledge of naming conventions can often be used to determine the names of the parents and grandparents. For example, it was common in Victorian England that the first name of the first male child was named after the father's father. The second male child was named after the mother's father. The third male child was named after the father. The first female child was named after the mother's mother and the second female child is named after the father's mother and the third female was named after the mother. You can use this information to take a reasonable guess as to the first names of the parents and grandparents if you know the names and order of birth of all the children.

Of course, this naming convention had a downside. Children of the period often died at childbirth or at a very young age. It was not uncommon for the name of a parent or grandparent to be recycled or reused and given to the next child that was born. To put this another way, if you have an ancestor with a large family and two of the children have the same name, this tells you two things: the first child likely died before the second child was born and the name has great significance to the family.

Surnames Beginning With a Vowel – Most genealogists are familiar with the need to check spelling variations of family names in old records. People tracing American ancestors need to become familiar with Soundex. However, there is a special case for family names that begin with the vowels a, e, i, o, u and y. These names are often misspelled in records by people adding a consonant in front of the vowel. The most common consonant added to a family name in this kind of situation is an H. So a name like All becomes Hall, And becomes Hand, Illier becomes Hillier, etc. The reverse is also true for all names that begin with H. Consider searching the family name with the H removed.

Use wildcards to replace one or multiple letters in a name if all other research methods are unsuccessful. If you find wildcards confusing, please [click here](#) for more information on using wildcards on various websites.

## Geography

Search by Town or Village – Most genealogists get fixated on searching for their ancestors by name. They will then get frustrated when they cannot find a match even after having tried

multiple spelling variations on the name. Have you ever thought about searching for someone via another avenue? For example, if you know your ancestor came from a small town or village and you know the approximate date of the record you are looking for, consider performing a search by the town or village name for that date range. Small towns or villages do not produce that many records. A quick read of the records that pop up for the town or village may produce some interesting surprises such as other previously unknown relatives.

**Street Names Change.** Over time, villages grow into towns and towns grown into cities. At least that is how most people envision the past. Actually, towns rarely grow into cities. What usually happens is that several towns close to each other merge to form a city. When this happens, new cities have a problem. There are too many streets with the same name. In other words, there are overlapping street names across the merged towns.

Every town has a Main Street, an Elm Street, a Church Street, etc. but a city can only have one Main Street, one Elm Street and so on. That means many streets in the former towns have to change names. Therefore, for example, never assume the Church Street that is listed on your ancestor's record is the same Church Street today. The best way to check the location of a street name is to consult an old map of the region before the amalgamation and formation of smaller towns and villages into cities.

**Local Histories –** Local histories can be an invaluable source of clues as to what happened to family members. Local histories typically talk about major events in the region that could have impacted the lives of your ancestors. For example, a major drought or a major flood could have forced your ancestor to move. Military conflicts, disease and social influences can also play a major role in migrations. Often, if there a mass exodus of people leaving the region, the local history will give some clue as to where they went.

**Changing Jurisdictions –** Regional and county lines change over time. So do state, provincial and country lines. Genealogists are often tripped up by this fact. When searching for old records in local county libraries and county courthouses, make sure you have the correct county for the time period in question.

**Towns and Occupations –** During the industrial revolution (and even today), certain towns were associated with certain industries. Often the associations were very specific. For example, in England there were towns that specialized in making just gloves. This trait can sometimes be applied to entire cities. For example, Detroit is still associated with the automobile.

If the trail of an ancestor has gone cold and you think your ancestor may have moved somewhere else, consider doing a bit of research on the history of the town. It is possible that the town specialized in one industry. This can give a clue as to the occupation of your ancestor. It can also be used to make a reasonable guess as to where your ancestor may have moved. The most common reason people moved was to look for work (which by the way still holds true today). Find other towns that specialized in the same industry as the town where you last traced your ancestor. You may find that your ancestor has moved to one of these towns looking for work in their field of expertise.

## Local Resources

**Local Schools** – If your ancestor came from a small town or village, you may want to consider writing to the local school. Creating family trees is a popular educational lesson for young school children today in many countries. You might find a teacher who is willing to take up the challenge of helping you find a local ancestor. As well, don't forget the children in the local school are the living descendants of the people from the region. It is quite possible that one of the parents of the children would know something about the person or family you are researching.

Schoolhouse records are a resource often overlooked by genealogists. Schools always kept detailed class rolls. Schools also took class pictures, which is an excellent way to find photographs of your ancestors when they were children. Schoolhouse records can also be used to confirm dates for an ancestor.

Children often went to school for several years. It is only necessary to find your ancestor listed in just one school year to be able to make a reasonable estimate of their year of birth. Therefore, always try to determine where your ancestor may have gone to school and then see if the schoolhouse records are still available. Typically, old schoolhouse records are located at the local archives.

**Poorhouses** – Poorhouses go by various names in various countries and over different periods of time. However, they always share one common trait of providing welfare and living assistance to those in need. Since this assistance comes at a financial cost, local authorities always recorded and documented who received the aid. Thus, the poorest people in society often had the best records kept on them. Check with local poorhouse societies to see if any of your ancestors are in the records.

**Electoral Rolls** – Electoral rolls are often kept at the municipal or city level to allow local authorities to know who is registered to vote. As well, electoral rolls are often updated on a set schedule, usually at a much higher frequency than census records (which are typically every ten years). Looking through electoral rolls is a good way to narrow down the date range to find out when somebody died or moved out of a region. Electoral rolls are arguably the most powerful yet overlooked resource available to genealogists. Even countries that do not have census records kept electoral rolls.

**Neighbourhood Church/Synagogue** – Most local religious organizations kept annual rosters of their active members. Often, these rosters list the full name of each individual, (sometimes) the date of birth, and place of origin. Besides providing such information, these records also provide an excellent date range for determining when someone moved or died.

**Vanished Church/Synagogue** - During times when government records were sparse or nonexistent, records from religious organizations often provide the best proxy for ancestral information. Churches and synagogues are an excellent place to find records of births, marriages and burials. Do not be discouraged if the church/synagogue of your ancestor has

been torn down or disbanded over the years. This does not mean the records have disappeared. Often the records were passed to successor institutions in the region or the records were moved to regional offices. Always check out this possibility.

Old Phone Books – In the absence of census information, old phone books can be an invaluable resource. Phone books were usually published once a year. Tracking down old phone books, however, can sometimes be a challenge. Usually the best place to look is the national library of the country. They often maintained the most complete collection. Sometimes major city libraries also maintain old phone book collections of the city and surrounding region.

One thing to remember about very old telephone books (pre 1950s) is that your ancestor might not be listed. It was very expensive to own a telephone back then and typically only merchants, wealthy farmers and very rich people could afford such a luxury.

City Directories – City directories sorted by street address can also be a valuable source of information. City or street directories (the predecessor of the modern telephone book) often listed useful information such as the occupation of the resident. As well, remember recent immigrants to a city often wanted to live near relatives who had already established a presence in the city. A reading of who lived within two blocks of your ancestor can often produce several previously unknown aunts, uncles and cousins.

## Migration

Port of Entry – This is a fun one for people looking through passenger ship manifestos to track down ancestors arriving in Northeastern United States or Eastern Canada. Consider the possibility that they may have arrived by ship in either country. People migrating to Eastern Canada could have arrived in Boston or another port on the Eastern US seaboard. Similarly, ancestors in the Northeastern United States may have first arrived in Montreal or another Eastern Canadian port and then travelled to the United States.

To understand why this may have occurred, it helps to think like your ancestor. Border guards at the Canada/US border were only formally started in May 1924. Before this time there was usually not even a guard at the border. Thus, crossing the border was not an impediment like it is today. Given that your ancestor's choice of ships was often limited, they would have planned their migration route based on cost, convenience and accessibility. The Canada/US border would not have been a factor at all.

Migration Home - First generation migrants to a new region or country often got homesick for 'the old country'. When looking for ancestors where the trail has run cold in later years, consider the possibility that they may have moved back to the region where they were born or where their parents were born. This is more common than most people realize.

Migrating Family Units – When a family migrates long distances (and especially across an ocean), don't assume that all the children migrated with the parents. Check the age of the

children at the time of migration. Older children may have stayed behind in the old country. This is a fact that is often overlooked when tracing ancestors.

Land Records – If your ancestors migrated to farmstead, then they most likely received a land grant. Always check federal and state government land grant records.

Place of Birth – One of the great challenges of genealogy is dealing with conflicting information from different sources. For example, a common problem is having two documents showing two different places of birth for the same individual. It is a well-known fact that immigrants often change their name when they move to new countries. For example, immigrants moving to English-speaking countries often try to anglicize their family name. However, it does not necessarily end at just a name change.

Over time immigrants will sometimes want to mask their place of birth and make it look like they were born in their new country, not their old country. Often this is done to fit in better in their new community.

It is fairly common for immigrants to change their place of birth later in life if their real place of birth has fallen out of favour. For example, during World Wars I and II immigrants living in the United States or Canada would hide the fact they were born in Germany. Always consider this as a possibility when looking at conflicting information on place of birth and any other information that would tie an individual back to the old country.