

# GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH: METHODS AND SOURCES

*Revised Edition*



**Volume I**

*Editor*

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**The American Society of Genealogists**

Washington, D.C.

1980

*Philadelphia*, published in five stately volumes from 1898 to 1909, and Howard Barclay French's *Genealogy of the Descendants of Thomas French* (2 vols., 1909). These works, and others like them, rise above the strictly genealogical, and are real contributions to an understanding of our historic past.

Great progress has been made in this century in the field of genealogical education. There is no longer any excuse for the slipshod work that characterized many of the researches of the past. "How-to-do-it" books by Archibald F. Bennett, Gilbert H. Doane, Val D. Greenwood, Derek Harland, Donald Lines Jacobus, E. Kay Kirkham, Ethel W. Williams, to name a few, demonstrate the correct methods one should pursue in genealogical research. Genealogical societies throughout the country give courses in methods and sources. Genealogy is taught at such Mormon institutions of higher learning as Brigham Young University at Provo, Utah, and Ricks College in Idaho. Since 1950 the National Archives, Washington, D.C., has conducted the Institute of Genealogical Research as a three-week summer course. The Willo Institute of Genealogy was founded as a privately operated one-week summer course at Birmingham, Alabama. It was taken over by Samford University in 1965 and is now called the Samford University Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research. The Board for Certification of Genealogists was established in 1964 for the purpose of certifying competent genealogists, lineage specialists, and record searchers as part of a movement to elevate to the highest standards genealogy as a profession. (A similar organization was founded in England in 1967 — the Association of Genealogists and Record Agents.)

A surge of interest in genealogy has taken place during the past few years, largely inspired by plans for the Bicentennial celebrations in 1976. The ethnic groups gained recognition in that year when Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and Professor Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* came off the press, and in 1977, by the publication of Dan Rottenberg's *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy*.

## CHAPTER II

### TRADITION AND FAMILY HISTORY

Tradition is a chronic deceiver, and those who put faith in it are self-deceivers. This is not to say that tradition is invariably false. Sometimes a modicum of fact lies almost hidden at its base. The probability of its falsehood increases in geometric ratio as the lineage claimed increases in grandeur.

Every Rogers family has a tradition of descent from John Rogers, the Martyr; every Adams family links itself traditionally with the Braintree stem which produced two presidents. There is nothing surprising in this. It is human nature to be vain, and belief in the importance of one's family is merely an extension of personal vanity. We all prefer to hide the skeleton in the closet, and to display the heraldic device which we would fain believe our knightly ancestors sanctified with their blood.

To show how quickly and easily a tradition emerges out of nothing, let us invent a story. During the presidency of the first Adams, a humble Adams family is living in a frontier settlement. The Adams boy is asked by another whether he is related to the great man. The boy is intrigued; if a kinship can be claimed, he will be able to hold his own against the Sheriff's son when boasts of parental importance are made. So he takes the question to old "Granter" Adams, as the most likely to know. The aged man, his own days of activity over, becomes animated when thus appealed to as an authority on the family history. Well, now, he doesn't rightly know, but when he was living as a young blade back in New England, he once met a man named Adams in a tavern, and come to talk things over, they were related somehow, and he had heard it said as how this man he was talking with was connected with the Braintree Adamses. Come to think of it, there probably was a connection way back. Yes, sir, he wouldn't be surprised if there was.

The elated youngster next day, when exchanging boasts with the Sheriff's son, proudly announces that he is related to President Adams. Way back, of course, but it was the same family. His grandfather told him, and he guessed his grandfather knew what he was talking about.

Twenty-five years later, the Adams youngster is a man of affairs, with boys of his own. The Adams myth, from constant retelling in his own boyhood, has become fixed in his mind as an implacable fact, true as gospel. He could not repeat exactly, if asked to do so, the maundering words of his grandfather, but he was certainly left with a distinct impression that a relationship existed. In all these years, the reality of the claim never has been disproved, probably not even challenged. When he pridefully tells his own boys about the Adams family, he believes he is telling the strict truth. Yes, boys, we belong to the same family as President Adams; I had it straight from my grandfather's own lips.

Thus, in a quarter of a century, a strong, enduring tradition has completed its miraculous growth. Thus do the tiny seeds of vanity germinate and produce the towering trees of an illustrious Family History.

While our example is entirely fictitious, every experienced genealogist knows of erroneous and thoroughly disproved traditions which must have originated in some such way. Nor are such erroneous traditions restricted to claims of exalted lineage or connection. They may refer merely to the nationality of the immigrant ancestor, or to the original place of residence in this country, or to any other detail of the family history.

Among families whose surnames are of French origin, or are similar to French names, there is likely to be the French Huguenot tradition. Genealogists who realize how many Norman-French names were carried into England with the Conqueror, do well to view such claims with suspicion until proved. Traditions of Welsh origin of early colonial families are seldom verified.

In one family it was understood that an ancestor was French, came over with Lafayette and served under him in the Revolutionary War. But this ancestor's birth and death records were actually found in his father's family Bible, and the ancestry in this country went back to 1644; he did serve in the Revolution, and his son married a woman whose ancestry was originally French. There had been here some mingling of tradition from different sides of the family.

It was supposed in another family that the first known male

line ancestor (born in 1767) came from Martha's Vineyard. Investigation revealed not a single occurrence of the surname in the vital records of the Vineyard prior to 1850. The ancestry was eventually located elsewhere. But this ancestor married a girl who was born on Martha's Vineyard. Here the tradition was correct, except that it had become associated with the wrong ancestral line.

We all recognize the fallibility of tradition when the traditions of some other person's family are questioned. When our own are at stake, it is a different matter. Our grandmother had a marvelous memory, and we *know* that every word she told us was gospel truth. After all, she was *our* grandmother, and it is asking a great deal to suggest that we give up one detail of her cherished memoirs.

The present writer had a great-uncle who took an interest in the family history, and my mother wrote down his account. He started with his great-grandfather, who was one of three brothers who came over. Actually, he *was* one of three brothers, but they were of the fourth generation in America. Did my great-uncle merely assume that the first ancestor he knew about was the original settler, or did my mother misunderstand him? They both possessed good minds for details, yet this much of error crept into the account.

Just why so many traditions center around three brothers who came over is a problem that has never been solved. Brothers often did come to America, but there were instances of two brothers, and even of four and five, as well as of three.

The dear old aunt of the writer was born a Wilmot, and firmly believed in the high, even titled, connections of the family. She had, indeed, a detailed account which on slight provocation she could be induced to relate. We were of the same blood as the notorious John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. Parenthetically, it should be explained that the old lady did not know of Rochester's reputation for profligacy, and the writer never enlightened her. The last descendant of Rochester, according to her story, had died leaving a large property, including an entire square in London. The nearest heir was a maiden lady named Wilmot who had come to this country from England and lived in the same city with my aunt's brother. She

died before taking possession of the property. My uncle had met her and discussed the family history with her, and they were agreed that our branch of Wilmots were "next in line."

In vain did I protest that the Earl of Rochester's only son died a minor, and that the title died with him, while the family estates descended to the daughters who carried them by marriage into other families. She merely set her lips in a firm line and said, "Well, I'm not lying about it; I guess I know what I know."

Of course she was not lying. Just how this story originated can only be surmised. Quite likely the Wilmot lady from England was deluded by an "inheritance mania" and imagined much of what she told to my relatives; and it is not impossible that my aunt in part misunderstood or misinterpreted the story.

Again, on the writer's paternal side, there was a story of a lost inheritance. My grandfather, early in life, joined an association of Anneke Jans heirs, as he understood that his Doremus grandmother was a descendant. The marriage certificate of his parents was turned over to the association's lawyer, and never recovered, and it was believed that the lawyer "sold out" to the opposing interests. This was the story as it came to me from my grandfather's lips. But so far as my own investigations have gone, I have failed to find a scrap of evidence to prove that my Doremus ancestress descended from Anneke Jans at all. Perhaps she did, but it is very doubtful, and until and unless record proof is forthcoming, I shall not claim the line.

It is natural for people to feel that a special sanctity inheres in the traditions of their own family. To doubt them is to doubt the veracity of their parents and grandparents. The genealogist should therefore be gentle and tactful when his investigations run counter to the cherished traditions. Those who employ genealogists, on the other hand, should realize that their genealogist gets no pleasure out of destroying their traditions. He is employed to ascertain the truth, and it is his duty to report what the records reveal.

Although few traditions prove to be true in every particular, the genealogist should not, with a superior air, dismiss a tradition as unworthy of consideration. Occasionally, a tradi-

tional statement is found to be very close to the truth. The majority of them contain some element of truth, however misapplied or encircled with error. Therefore, traditions should be sifted, and tested, and utilized as clues, but not accepted as true until verified from contemporary documentary sources.