Beginning Genealogy Step 5: Use What You Learned

by Lois Mackin

In the MGS Genealogy 101 Course, we encourage students to work through five steps:

1. Write down and organize what you know.
2. Decide what you want to learn.
3. Locate a useful source.
4. Learn from the source.
5. Use what you learned.

Step 5 is where you integrate everything you have learned during Steps 2 through 4 into what you knew when you started. Step 5 is very much like Step 1, except that you are working from an increased level of knowledge. In a sense, you have come full circle and are getting ready to start another cycle of research. (It may help to visualize this process as a spiral, where you reach higher levels of knowledge and greater insight as you complete each cycle.)

There are many tools available to help you organize and integrate information in Step 5.

The first is your genealogy database (or whatever you use as a centralized place to record your genealogy data). If you have not already done so, be sure to record any new facts you have learned and document their source. For example, if you found a 1900 census record for an ancestor, you might record:

- Residence.
- Year of birth calculated from age.
- Date and month of birth given on the census return.
- Year of marriage calculated from number of years married.
- For women, number of children and how many are living.
- Birthplace.
- Parents' birthplaces.
- For non-native-born individuals, year of immigration, number of years in the United States and naturalization status.
- Occupation.
- Education—attended school, can read, can write, can speak English.
- Home ownership—owner or renter, whether the dwelling was a farm or house, and whether the dwelling was mortgaged.

Each entry in your database should indicate that the 1900 census is the source of the information.

The most important activity during Step 5 goes far beyond what you record in your database or any other tool: it occurs inside your mind. If the information from your new sources conflicts with information you already have, you need to identify which information comes from each source, decide which source you consider most reliable and document the reasons for your choice. Many people do this in the notes section of their genealogy software program.

Elizabeth Shown Mills provides a useful framework for analyzing genealogical information.[1] Her framework asks us to consider three things:

1. Is the **source** *original* or *derivative*? An *original* source is "material in its first oral or recorded form." A *derivative* source is "material produced by copying an original or manipulating its content: e.g., abstracts, compilations, databases, extracts, transcripts, translations, and authored works such as historical monographs or family histories."[2] For analytical purposes, we can consider a photographic or digitized image of an original—e.g., an image of a census page—as an original. The information extracted from the image that pops up in an online database search, on the other hand, is a derivative.

2. Is the **information** in the source *primary* or *secondary*? That is, did the person recording the information have first-hand (*primary*) knowledge of the information, or second-hand (*secondary*) knowledge? If your mother told you she was born in California, she is giving you *secondary information*—even though she was present at her birth, she was not really cognizant of where the birth took place. On the other hand, her mother could provide *primary information* about the birth.

3. Is the **evidence** provided by the source *direct* or *indirect*? Mills defines evidence as "*our interpretation* of information we consider relevant to the research question or problem."[3] *Direct* evidence answers the research question by itself—for example, a marriage return recording that a marriage took place 21 April 1853 provides *direct evidence* of the date of marriage. *Indirect* evidence, on the other hand, does not answer the question alone, but rather requires the addition of other information to answer the question. Bits of evidence that don't directly answer a question can logically imply an answer, especially when several bits of information can be combined to draw a logical conclusion. For example, the birth date of a married couple's eldest child can serve as *indirect evidence* of when the marriage occurred, and when combined with other evidence may help pinpoint the couple's marriage date.

When using Mills' framework, it's important to be

aware that the distinctions between original and derivative sources, primary and secondary information, and direct and indirect evidence do not in themselves determine whether a source is right or wrong; they simply give us genealogists a common vocabulary to use when we think about how much weight to give each piece of evidence and explain the results of our analysis to each other.

Let's apply Mills' evidence analysis framework to an example. I have three sources for the birth date of my ancestor William Abromitis: the 1900 census, William's 1906 naturalization record, and his cemetery marker. The census says that William was age 27, born "May 1873."[4] The naturalization record says that he was age 28, giving a calculated birth date of 1878.[5] The cemetery marker says that he was age 34 when he died 16 May 1911,[6] giving a calculated birth date of 1877. Three sources, three dates—which one is most likely correct? Here's how the three sources for William's birth date stack up using Mills' framework (See Table 1 on next page).

We have three original sources, all with secondary information, one providing direct evidence of William's birth date, yet the sources disagree by four or five years. At least one of these sources must provide wrong information. Which source do you think is most likely to be correct? Are you comfortable accepting the evidence from any of these sources, or would you look for more information? What other sources might provide evidence of William's age or birth date? Where would you look for them?

You can see from this example an illustration of a second tool—creating a simple table – for evaluating genealogical evidence. This is only one of many ways to use tables in Step 5. You can use tables to compare the makeup of a family shown in different sources (say, two census returns and a will) or to analyze which of several same-name records belongs to your research subject. I'm sure you can think of more ideas!

Another great Step 5 tool is a timeline. I like to create timelines in my word processor for the families I am researching and update them as I find new information. Timelines help me untangle the sequence of events in my ancestors' lives, highlight inconsistencies and holes in my research, and start writing my ancestors' stories. I like to indicate the source of the information for each

event in my timeline either in a separate column or in a footnote, and I often include a column for notes and questions. I also include contextual information like dates of relevant wars, strikes, epidemics, or boundary changes in my timelines. Here is a timeline based on information from the three sources referenced above for William Abromitis.

You can see how Step 5—using what I learned about William—gives me the nucleus of a plan for further research. In creating and reviewing the timeline, I learned that I need to do further research on:

- Types and availability of Lithuanian sources that might document William's birth.

- William's wife Eva.

- William's departure from Europe and arrival in the United States.

- William's marriage.

- Types and availability of occupational and employment records for coal miners in Schuylkill County.

- Economic and political conditions in Schuylkill County between 1900 and 1910.

- Church or cemetery records for St. Jerome's Cemetery.

- Tamaqua newspapers.

I also need to obtain copies of William's 1910 census enumeration and death certificate.

That's Step 5—the end of one research cycle and the beginning of another.

Lois welcomes questions or suggestions for future topics! Contact her at LoisMackin@aol.com.

Sources:

1. Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Working with Historical Evidence: Genealogical Principles and Standards," *Evidence: A Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly,* 87 (September 1999): 165-184. Also "Fundamentals of Evidence Analysis," *Evidence Explained!: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009), 15-38.
2. Mills, *Evidence Explained*, 24.
3. *Ibid.*, 25.
4. 1900 U.S. census, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, population schedule, Shenandoah, Enumeration District (ED) 163, sheet 12 A, p. 119 (stamped), dwelling 182, family 182, William Abromatis; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (http://www.ancestry.com : accessed 3 March 2005), citing National Archives microfilm publication T623, roll 1484.
5. Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, Naturalization Records: loose papers, petition no. 4292, William Abromitus, 1906, petition for naturalization; Schuylkill County Archives, Pottsville.
6. New St. Jerome's Cemetery (Tamaqua, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania), William Abromitis marker; personally read, 2009.

Table 1

	Source: Original or Derivative?	Information: Primary or Secondary?	Evidence: Direct or Indirect
1900 census	Image copy of original source	Secondary. We don't know who the informant was, but we can be sure that it was not someone present at William's birth.	Direct. The "May 1873" census entry gives William's birth date.
1906 naturalization record	Image copy of original source	Secondary. William was the likely informant for his age.	Indirect. We have to calculate the birth date from the age entry on the record.
Grave marker	Original. (I looked at, transcribed, and photographed the stone in the cemetery.)	Secondary. No one with first-hand knowledge of William's birth provided information to the stone carver.	Indirect. Again, the birth date was calculated, this time from William's age at death.

Table 2

Date	Event	Notes
About 1873,[a] 1877,[b] or 1878[c]	William was born in Lithuania.	Look for evidence of birth in other U.S. records—death certificate, immigration records, newspapers, as well as in Lithuanian records.
About 1898	William married his wife Eva.[d]	Who was Eva? Did William and Eva marry before or after arriving in the U.S.? Look for immigration and marriage records. Are there emigration records for his port of departure?
About 1898	William immigrated to the United States.[e]	Find William's immigration record. What might have caused William to leave Lithuania and come to the United States?
1900	William lived in Shenandoah, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. He was married, had one child, worked as a laborer in a coal mine, and rented his house.[f]	Are there any occupational or employment records that could be consulted?
Between 1900 and 1906	William moved from Shenandoah to Tamaqua.[g]	Research local history and economics—what might have pushed William away from Shenandoah or drawn him toward Tamaqua?
1906	William became a naturalized citizen in Pottsville, the county seat of Schuylkill County.[h]	
1910	The U.S. government conducted a census.	Find William's 1910 census record. Where did he live? Who did he live with? What was his occupation?
1911	William died. He was buried in a Roman Catholic cemetery in Tamaqua, Schuylkill County.[i]	Pennsylvania recorded deaths at the state level from 1906. Get a copy of William's death certificate. See whether the cemetery or the church it was associated with have burial records. Research newspapers to locate an obituary.

Sources:

a. 1900 U.S. census, Schuylkill Co., Pa., pop. sch., ED 163, sheet 12 A, dwell. 182, fam. 182, William Abromatis.
b. Schuylkill Co., Pa., Naturalization Records: loose papers, petition no. 4292, William Abromitus, 1906.
c. New St. Jerome's Cemetery (Tamaqua, Pa.), William Abromitis marker.
d. Inference—he had been married for two years in 1900.
e. 1900 U.S. census, Schuylkill Co., Pa., pop. sch., ED 163, sheet 12 A, dwell. 182, fam. 182, William Abromatis.
f. *Ibid*.
g. Inference from William's change in residence from that recorded in the 1900 census to that recorded in the 1906 naturalization record.
h. Schuylkill Co., Pa., Naturalization Records: loose papers, petition no. 4292, William Abromitus, 1906.
i. New St. Jerome's Cemetery (Tamaqua, Pa.), William Abromitis marker.