



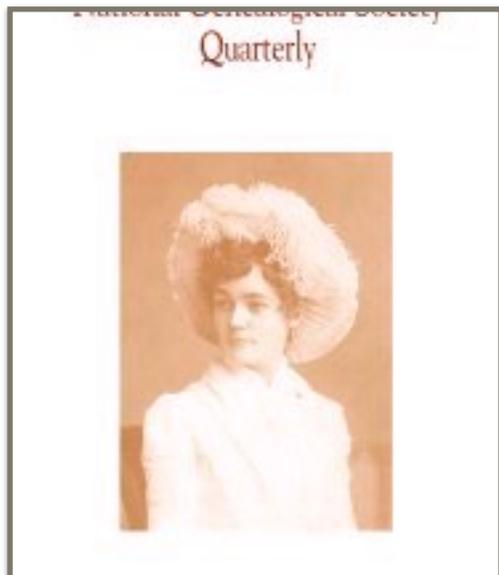
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A LESSON IN REASONABLY EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH

by Melissa Johnson, CG



Genealogists who reconstruct their family histories must meet the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) to ensure that their conclusions are sound. The first element of the GPS is “reasonably exhaustive research—emphasizing original records providing participants’ information—for all evidence that might answer a genealogist’s question about an identity, relationship, event, or situation.”[1] In some instances, researchers may question why the GPS must be met and why reasonably exhaustive research is necessary—especially in cases that appear to be easily solvable. For example, why is reasonably exhaustive research necessary when an original record provides direct evidence that answers a

research question? Why continue researching after this source has been found?

The case study, “Family Members Missing from Derbyshire Censuses Help Identify Edwin Thorpe’s Parents and Original Name,” by Allen Peterson, CG, which appeared in the June 2015 issue of the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly (NGSQ)*, demonstrates why reasonably exhaustive research is always important, and offers a valuable lesson to all genealogists. Peterson’s research subject, Edwin Thorpe of Hague Bar, Whitle Hamlet, Derbyshire, England, died 28 May 1897 at the age of fifty-two, indicating a birth year of 1844 or 1845. Census records identify Edwin’s birth location as Whitle, or New Mills, Derbyshire. A birth record for Edwin Thorpe, son of William and Sarah (Taylor) Thorpe, born near Hague Bar on 4 December 1844 seems

to fit—the correct name, the right date, and a likely birth location. However, by conducting reasonably exhaustive research and uncovering evidence from a variety of sources, Peterson eliminates William and Sarah’s son Edwin as a candidate for the man who died in 1897. He also identifies Edwin’s correct parentage and extended family.

Reasonably exhaustive research includes broadening the research scope beyond records relating to the person of interest. Research should extend to that person’s network—relatives, friends, neighbors, and associates. Research should also extend to the greater context of their lives—the time and place in which they lived, their socioeconomic status, religion, race, ethnicity, and other factors.

Peterson researched not just Edwin, but his entire family. He discovered a number of sources that allowed him to evaluate the relevance of the birth record that was discovered. Among those are Edwin’s marriage certificate, identifying him as Edward and his father as John, and a death certificate for William and Sarah’s son named Edwin. Peterson also uncovered other Thorpe families that Edwin’s children were associated with throughout their lifetimes. He discovered John Thorpe and Elizabeth Allen, who had a son named Edward and were candidates to be Edwin’s parents. Together, these and other pieces of evidence presented in the article cast doubt that Edwin was William and Sarah’s child, and also provide evidence of his correct parentage. Without reasonably exhaustive research, this evidence would not have been discovered.

The research that a genealogist undertakes to solve a problem does not have to be exhaustive—it has to be reasonably exhaustive. It isn’t possible to examine every source that might include information relevant to the research problem. However, as more sources are examined, the likelihood that a conclusion will be overturned is reduced. New evidence can always surface, but if the initial research was comprehensive, any newly discovered evidence is likely to support, and not contradict, the existing conclusion.

There are numerous reasons why genealogists should not draw conclusions based on one piece of information. This case study demonstrates just one of these reasons—we can’t be sure that the record we are relying on applies to our research subject unless we have a body of evidence to consider as a whole. Reasonably exhaustive research helps genealogists avoid many pitfalls. In this case, it helped prevent an inaccurate and hasty identification of Edwin Thorpe’s parentage and ancestry. Initially, the birth certificate for Edwin Thorpe may have appeared to be relevant. However, after further study and an in-depth examination into the Thorpe family, the birth certificate for Edward Thorpe—

with a different name and a later birth date than expected—proved to be the true record of Edwin Thorpe’s birth. Peterson’s article is a reminder of why the GPS—and in this case, especially the element requiring reasonably exhaustive research—is essential to drawing sound and accurate conclusions.

[1] *Genealogy Standards: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*, Kindle edition (New York, New York and Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com/Turner Publishing Company, 2014), 239.

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