

Finding Important Clues

As family historians we use documents of all types and formats to inform our research. If we only look at what a document is ABOUT, then we are missing essential information. Analyzing documents and picking them apart is somewhat different than evidence analysis, although the two are related and should be used together.

Sometimes we limit our thinking about what a document is. In some instances, something that documents an event can be a physical object of some kind. Limiting our thinking to what a document is about can cost us dearly.

The definition of the noun document according to *Dictionary.com*:

“noun

a written or printed paper furnishing information or evidence, as a passport, deed, bill of sale, or bill of lading; a legal or official paper: You'll need documents from your employers and your bank to prepare your income tax return.

any written item, as a book, article, or letter, especially of a factual or informative nature: The leaked document proves that the management team knew about the safety issues before the product launch.

Digital Technology. a computer data file, especially one with formatted text: Luckily, I saved my document right before the power went out.

Archaic. evidence; proof.”

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/document>, accessed 21 February 2022.

On or in a document there can be both primary and secondary information and direct and indirect evidence. We need to carefully read every document and record we find and not skim or ignore it because we think it is not “about” what we are looking for. A critical piece in getting all we can from any document or artifact is thinking about what information is original and what is derivative, what is primary and what is secondary, and what is direct and what is indirect.

EVALUATING INFORMATION

Source is any means (person, document, book, artifact, or repository) through which we acquire information.

Evidence is the information provided by a source. It can work for or against our hypothesis.

Proof is “the thought process by which we reach a convincing conclusion (assertion of fact) based on the evidence (information statements) we gleaned from the sources (people, documents, books, artifacts, or repositories) we examined. “

(From Devine, Donn. "Evidence Analysis." Mills, Elizabeth Shown, ed. *Professional Genealogy: a Manual; for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001. p. 332)

The same evaluation standards apply to online information as to traditional resources. As with all sources of information, some are more reliable than others.

Modern genealogy has developed 3 sets of criteria for evaluating information:

The terms **original or derivative** are applied to **Sources**

The terms **primary or secondary** are used to determine **where the information came from**

And the terms **direct or indirect** are applied to evidence.

Information can be evaluated using the following standards:

- I. **Original vs. Derivative Sources.** *Original* indicates the information was created at the time of the event with first-hand knowledge, such as a death certificate.
- II. **Primary vs. Secondary Information.** *Primary* information comes from a participant or witness, such as the date of death given by the attending physician on a death certificate. *Secondary* information is a retelling of what was heard from a participant or witness, such as the age of death given in a newspaper obituary, or the names of parents of the deceased on a death certificate if the informant did not personally know them.
- III. **Direct vs. Indirect.** *Direct* indicates that a definitive answer is obtained, such as the date of death on a death certificate. *Indirect* indicates a possible definitive answer, but does not fully resolve the question, such as the date of birth on a death certificate that was provided by a close family member. (From Devine, Donn. "Evidence Analysis." Mills, Elizabeth Shown, ed. *Professional Genealogy: a Manual; for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001.)

Transcripts, abstracts, extracts, and such are NOT original records. These are derivatives containing information pulled from whatever original document or item was used. The indexes created by humans or machines to provide access in databases are derivative and often contain serious errors.

Original records with primary information and containing direct evidence can be wrong. This is one reason that when working on our family history we need to find multiple original sources with primary information that seem to be reliable and accurate to corroborate what we are finding. After collecting multiple pieces of information, we are in a position to evaluate the evidence and the credibility of the source material.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has worksheets to help us analyze and evaluate the information in primary documents in various formats.

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets>

Elizabeth Shown Mills is the current guru of citation and analysis in the genealogy world. To be able to evaluate and analyze your data, you need to know where it came from and think about how reliable and valid it might be. Complete citations help you evaluate the reliability and validity of sources, and make your research more valuable because folks can replicate what you found. Complete citations also enable you to backtrack what others have done to see how valid that work is.

Death certificate of Minnie Saffold Burson

1 PLACE OF DEATH COUNTY <u>Fulton</u>		GEORGIA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH		FILE NO. 17977	FOR STATE REGISTRAR	BOVS. FORM 11
MILITIA DISTRICT _____		TOWN OR CITY <u>Atlanta, Ga. No. 8 Carr St.</u>		ST. REG. DIST. NO. <u>1061</u>	REGISTERED NO. <u>3005</u>	
2 FULL NAME <u>Mrs. Minnie Saffold Burson</u>						
RESIDENCE, CITY <u>Atlanta, Ga. No. 8 Carr St.</u>						
3 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE IN CITY OR TOWN WHERE DEATH OCCURRED yrs. mos. dys. (IF NON-RESIDENT GIVE CITY OR TOWN AND STATE)						
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS.			MEDICAL PARTICULARS			
1 SEX <u>Female</u>	4 COLOR OR RACE <u>White</u>	5 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, DIVORCED <u>Married</u>	6 DATE OF DEATH <u>June 27</u>			
7a IF MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED HUSBAND OF (OR) WIFE OF <u>Thomas F. Burson</u>			7b I HEREBY CERTIFY, THAT I ATTENDED DECEASED FROM <u>Dead suddenly</u>			
8 DATE OF BIRTH, (MO. DY. YR.) <u>Aug. 19, 1888</u>			8 THAT I LAST SAW HIM ALIVE ON _____ AND THAT DEATH OCCURRED, ON THE DATE STATED ABOVE,			
9 AGE <u>35</u> yrs. <u>11</u> mos. <u>12</u> dys.			9 AT _____ M. THE CAUSE OF DEATH WAS AS FOLLOWS: <u>Bullet wounds (4) - in right breast. One wound in back one wound in right arm.</u>			
10 OCCUPATION (a) TRADE, PROFESSION OR PARTICULAR KIND OF WORK <u>Housewife</u>			10 (DURATION) <u>None</u> (YRS. MOS. DYS.)			
11 BIRTHPLACE (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Ga.</u>			11 CONTRIBUTORY (SECONDARY) _____ (DURATION) _____ YRS. _____ MOS. _____ DYS.			
12 NAME OF FATHER <u>T. F. Saffold</u>			12 WHERE WAS DISEASE CONTRACTED, IF NOT AT PLACE OF DEATH? _____			
13 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Ga.</u>			13 DID AN OPERATION PRECEDE DEATH? <u>no</u> DATE OF _____			
14 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER <u>Nettie Slaughter</u>			14 WAS THERE AN AUTOPSY? <u>no</u> WHAT TEST CONFIRMED DIAG. _____			
15 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (STATE OR COUNTRY) <u>Ga.</u>			15 NOBIST (Paul Donahoo, coroner)			
16 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE.			16 (SIGNED) <u>[Signature]</u> M. D.			
17 (INFORMANT) <u>Mrs. O. Heald</u>			17 (ADDRESS) <u>Flat Iron Bldg</u>			
18 (ADDRESS) <u>647 Capital Ave.</u>			18 PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION, OR REMOVAL DATE <u>Crest Lawn</u> <u>6/28/24</u>			
19 JUN 28 1924			20 <u>L. Horton</u> LEGAL REGISTRAR			
			21 <u>H. M. Patterson</u> UNDERTAKER			
			22 <u>Atlanta Ga</u> ADDRESS			

Source : Death Certificates, Vital Records, Public Health, RG 26-5-95, Georgia Archives, Virtual Vault, 004179283_00871.jpg, accessed 06 February 2022.

In looking at this death certificate, identify what is primary information and what is secondary.

What direct evidence is provided on this document?

Is there a guarantee that everything on here is correct?

Where can I as the researcher look to corroborate information on this document?

In addition to what this document is ABOUT, there are multiple other clues that can be followed.

List at least 10 questions or places to look for more information and clues.

This series of records were created by the British Army when operating in the colonies during the American Revolution. Let's look and see what clues people might get from these.

"Inspection rolls of Negroes" carried away by the British upon the evacuation of New York City, April 23–November 19, 1783 (66 frames). There are two volumes of lists, that usually include the name, age, description, destination, and "claimants" to the blacks as slaves, as well as the name of the ship on which they were to travel, its captain, and "remarks."

Above is the NARA description of these records. To understand what these really tell us, we will need to conduct some research to provide more accurate context. What do these records really tell us?

- Where were people carried to? Where did they end up?
- How did the Negroes listed get to New York in 1783?
- Were the people rescued/transported from elsewhere and brought to New York on these ships or on others?
- Is there a record of those other ships?
- Were the ships and captains/commanders of the ships British? or were these mercenaries?
- Why were these people part of the evacuation of New York?
- Is there a record that can follow up this record to help us follow these people?

Once we gather more context and understand some of these things, we can better trace these African Americans in the 1780s. Let's look at these following excerpts and find clues.

Vessels Named and their Commanders	Where bound	Negroes names	Ages	Description	Claimants		Names of the Negroes in whose possession they now are
					Names	Residence	
Brig Jenny Amesford	Port Maitland Chas. & Brindleton Abraham Bona Comfy & Muntz	Nancy Sally Tom Pamela Tom	32 12 2 24 23	free woman free girl do boy ordinary fellow free fellow			Capt. McCre do do Dan. King Do
		Paul Charles Abraham Bona Comfy & Muntz	50 57 10 17	ordinary free man do free boy likely woman			John Prache do do

Column headings for the image to the left are:

- Vessels Named and their Commanders
- Where Bound
- Negroes Names
- Ages
- Claimants – Names and Residence
- Names of the Person in whose Possession they now are

Source Citation: Inspection Roll of Negroes Book No. 2; 1783; Miscellaneous Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774 - 1789; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, Record Group 360; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/inspection-roll-of-negroes-book-no-2>, February 26, 2022]

(14)

Remarks

<p>to Henry Davis to Charles Davis to Carol D. D. D. D.</p>	<p>to John Lewis to Geo Lewis John's Island to Carol to Colo Lewis to the Island D.</p>	<p>left him August 1790 D. do in 1779 G.M.C. at beginning 1780 D.</p>
<p>to John Arthur Mill town to Carol to Arthur Middleton Ashley Quoi to Carol proved to be the property of John & Mark by Bill of Sale D. D.</p>	<p>to John Arthur Mill town to Carol to Arthur Middleton Ashley Quoi to Carol proved to be the property of John & Mark by Bill of Sale D. D.</p>	<p>left him early in 1780 G.M.C. D. in 1778 D.</p>

Basic Resources

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1997.

This book needs to be on every family historian's bookshelf and is now in its 20th printing.