



Unit 1 - Lesson 7 - Searching by Place

You are hot on the trail of your ancestors when...POOF! They are gone, vanished and you don't know where to look for them.

This can be a very puzzling and frustrating thing to encounter, but with a little bit of knowledge, it does not have to become a brick wall. The question here is why they disappeared, why can't you find them?

Welcome to Genealogy Beginner Lesson Seven. In this lesson you will be moving into new territory, learning the ins-and-outs of researching the places your ancestors were born, where they died and all of the locations in between. You will extend your knowledge to include an awareness of the geography of genealogy. In short, you will understand what to do if all of a sudden your ancestors have disappeared from the record.

There can be a number of answers to the question above, and one of the big ones involves place names. They may have moved and you may need to search by place in order to find them, on the other hand, they may not have moved at all...but their borders did.

As you go further back, you may discover that your people travelled in groups, perhaps not on the same ships at exactly the same time, but to the same places. One member of a family may have made the initial journey and then were joined at a later date by other family members and even friends. Keep this in mind during your research. Knowing where some of them went may lead you to the one individual you are looking for.

Let's get started!

What should you do if suddenly your ancestors have vanished?

What does that mean?

Through the years the names of towns and borders sometimes change. Towns can vanish and there can be several towns and/or districts with the same name. Sometimes the wrong town is listed on a document. How that can happen and what are your resources when it does?

When you are faced with these situations your first step should be to look at a death certificate or obituary. Starting at the conclusion of your ancestor's life could reveal important clues, as death certificates usually include the place of birth and obituaries often mention the places they lived.

Other documents to look for when you begin this type of search are Estate and Probate Records. Within the existing affidavits, you may find information on the towns or parishes they have lived in. Land records; including deeds, grants, and mortgages, will often mention the residences they may have had. Lastly, if your ancestor were to have appeared in court, the court records will often give a place of residence.

As is the case with most beginning genealogists, at some point you will have to do research in other countries. In many instances you will find that a town associated with your immigrant ancestor is not actually their hometown but rather a geographical term or place name that may have been altered due to a language barrier or clerical error. You should still record this information as it could provide a needed clue.

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Common Problems with Place Names

Disappearing Villages and Changing Place Names

Eventually you will end up looking for a place that does not exist anymore. As time passed, borders changed; this is true for countries as well as counties. It is especially true if your ancestors came from Europe, but is not all that uncommon in the British Isles.

The next obstacle lies in towns that have undergone a name change. There are several reasons why a name change may occur. This happens sometimes when there is a border change when a government has taken over new territory, as is frequently the case during a war.

Wars can also be the reason for a name change, even if it does not involve any border changes. For example, the town of Kitchener, Ontario in Canada was once called Berlin. At the advent of WWI the town changed its name because it was also the name of the capital city of the country with which Canada was at war.

Although place name changes are a fairly common occurrence and can present a special challenge for you as a genealogist, these problems are not insurmountable. The good news is that someplace there is a map or other type of reference material that can inform you as to where that place was.

Multiple Places with the Same Name

It is a strong possibility that you will also encounter towns and villages that have the same name, (remember the story of the woman who visited the wrong town in Scotland?) This can make it very difficult to resolve which is the correct town for your purposes. A good example of this is a town named Riverside. Did you know that you can find a "Riverside" in every US state except Hawaii, Alaska, Louisiana, and Oklahoma? A good strategy for dealing with this is to learn as much as you can about neighboring towns in order to make a distinction among several towns with the same name.

Geographic Names that are not Towns

It is far less common, but it does happen that the place name you are looking for does not exist as a town. Take as example Appalachia; you will not find it on a map as its boundaries are not clearly defined.

Cities, Provinces, States and Counties that Share the Same Name

Yet another dilemma for the genealogist is the situation where the city you are looking for, or think you are looking for, has the same name as the County, State or Province in which it is located. Such is the case with County Cork, Ireland and the city of Cork; it can be difficult to distinguish what is meant and easily mistake one for the other.

Port Cities

Another thing that you may come across is that the city that your ancestor is listed as coming from is actually the port city from which they departed. American Naturalization and Port of Arrival Records tend to only record the Port of Departure and not the town from which your ancestor hails. When looking at these records you should regard any references to a place you find with skepticism.

Large Cities

Exercise caution when your ancestor is listed as coming from a large city. Just like we do today, our ancestors lived in suburbs of larger cities, yet referenced their place of residence as the larger center. Although your ancestor may indeed have come from the big city, you should question this by doing some investigating into the suburbs and smaller surrounding villages. Keep in mind that at the time your ancestor lived there, the area may have been on the outskirts and the city has grown around it.

Place Name Search Sources

In addition to the regular sources you use to research your family tree, there are some further sources you can use when you need help locating the places of residence for your ancestors. Sometimes state and national indexes can be of help in locating lost ancestors, although this is of greater use if your ancestor has an uncommon surname.

Another wonderful resource to search is old postal records and railway line listings. Quite often your ancestors will keep mementos such as tickets from trips. Letters from family and friends may also contain postmarks that can help you to nail down their real location.

Among the best resources you can use are maps/atlas and gazetteers. Gazetteers can be thought of as dictionaries containing place names. They will often list the closest parish church, synagogue and civil registration office. As you are already aware of the importance of knowing where the parish is that baptized, married, and buried your ancestors; you will easily understand why gazetteers are an irreplaceable source of information to genealogists. Gazetteers can also provide descriptions of towns and give you the jurisdictions in which your ancestors lived; while atlases and maps will show you the borders and boundaries of those jurisdictions.

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containing place names.*

Practice

List your Immigrant Ancestors

For this week's practice exercise, list as many of your immigrant ancestors as you know and which country they immigrated from. We are going to use this information in future lessons.

Wrap-up

You are now ready to start a journey that will follow your past generations across borders and time. You have gained the awareness of changing borders, place names and misleading information on travel documents. With your newly gained knowledge, not even the most elusive magician in your family tree can pull off a successful disappearing act.

For more discussion, or if you have any questions about this lesson, go to Forums Genealogy Beginner: Lesson 7

Next week we will take a look at genealogy software, including types of programs offered and their features.

Happy hunting and I will see you in lesson 8!

Articles: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/category/lesson-7-articles>

Glossary: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/category/glossary>

Forum: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/community/where-did-they-go-where-is-that-searching-by-place-lesson-7/>