

Steps to Take when Encountering the Brick Walls of Family History Research by Darvin L. Martin, Willow Street Genealogy Club, February 18, 2025

Finding an obscure burial and a gravestone

- FindAGrave.com, but use the search feature through Ancestry.com
- Local Historical Societies often have cemetery records.
- Visit the cemetery, but do your research beforehand, don't neglect to research the location of the cemetery and the location of the gravestone in the cemetery but you visit.

Separating the misinformation from family tradition

- Always prioritize primary sources of information.
- Be skeptical, particularly when information is not documented.
- Know that when various pieces of information don't agree it signals an opportunity to find the truth.

Finding a wife's or mother's maiden name

- PA Death Certificates (1906-1971) now available on ancestry.com
- Church marriage and baptism records are increasingly digitized and available online.
- Look at land deeds and neighbors who maybe relatives through marriage.

To ascertain a death date

- Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885 now available on ancestry.com
- Is a wife (or a husband mentioned in a will or estate settlement?
- Is an elderly parent or in-law listed on the census?

Maybe the parents (or a parent) moved west, and child stayed local.

- Scan old newspaper records (www.newspapers.com)
- Migration often occurred in groups. Look for extended family and/or neighbors who also migrated.
- Migration followed patterns. People from Lancaster moved to specific regions to the west, south and to some extent to the northwest, but rarely to the east or northeast.
- www.lancasterdeeds.com. Sometimes deeds mention current residence of a couple or their children.

What's in a name?

- Look at spelling differences, particularly a name that has been Anglicized.
- Y-DNA can sometimes reveal surnames that are actually the same family.
- Look for "strange" and unexpected phonetic spellings.

An undocumented immigration

- The typical ports of arrival for colonial Pennsylvanians were 1) Philadelphia, 2) Baltimore, 3) New York, 4) Boston, 5) Charleston.
- None were registered before 1727.
- Some came in undetected after 1727. What is this first documentation? A Land warrant? A census record? A marriage or a child's baptism?
- Study original warrants for the area of your interest.

Do you have ancestry truncation?

- Do you have places on your tree where the same ancestors appear twice or multiple times? IF so, it is worth investigating why, and that could give you clues to

unknown branches.

The brick walls of Europe

- Try to pinpoint to a specific town or region, through a surname, a close relative's surname, or through DNA.
- Study how wars and changing political boundaries impacted migration.
- Many records were destroyed due to war, but those that exist are now largely digitized and available online.
- Digitized German church records www.archion.de
- Historical Register of Swiss Surnames: <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/famn/?lg=e>
- State Archives of various Cantons of Switzerland
<https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/usa/en/home/services/genealogy/research-switzerland/staatsarchive.html>

How is the origin of your surname tied to the beginning of a certain lineage?

- If you can trace to a particular village or region in Europe, find the very first recorded mention of your surname.
- Try to tie your earliest ancestor to that “first” ancestor.
- If your ancestor is tied to European royalty, you may be able to trace back certain lineages more than a thousand years.

Investigate the DNA connected to a particular lineage.

- Use autosomal DNA to parse any unknown lineage within the most recent 6-8 generations.
- Use Y-DNA to trace ethnic and migratory patterns of a particular paternal lineage—a lineage connected to a surname.