

Overview:

This class explains how family historians can accurately deduce ancestors' identities and many aspects of their lives by digging below "surface information" in genealogical records and combining information from several sources. Useful in many situations, inferential methodology is especially helpful where records do not state relationships.

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Terms and Definitions

Inferential Genealogy

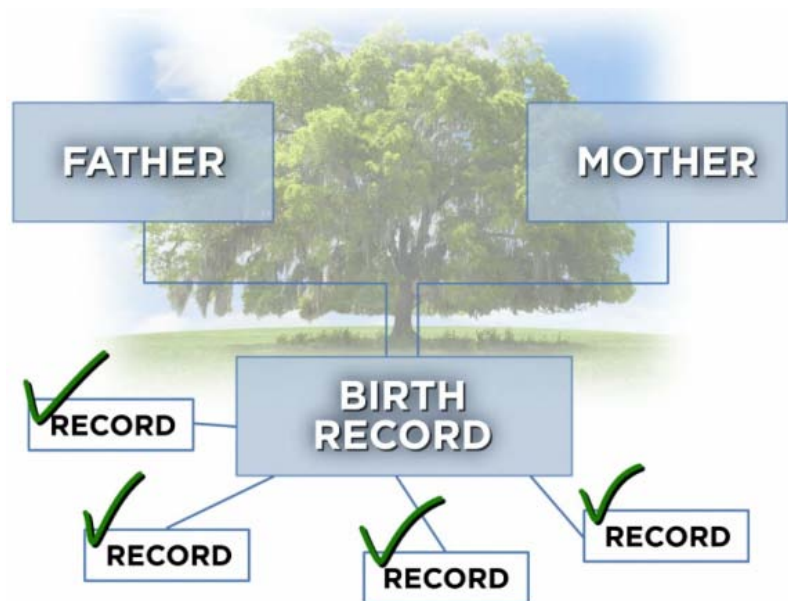
The process of piecing together documents to make conclusions about relationships and identities that no record tells you all by itself.

Kinship Acceptance

The uncritical use of kinships determined or accepted by others.

Kinship Determination

The opposite of kinship acceptance. It is the process of figuring out the identity of an ancestor's parent, spouse, or child. Inferential genealogy is one method of kinship determination.



Reasoning

Kinship acceptance is a convenient method of doing genealogy. Relationships stated in records or published in family histories are easy to accept, but are often wrong. Even records created in the moment can contain misinformation if the informant was misinformed or purposely provided false information. Instead of blindly accepting a stated relationship, a genealogist should use kinship determination to establish familial relationships; inferential genealogy is one method of kinship determination.

The Inferential Genealogy Process

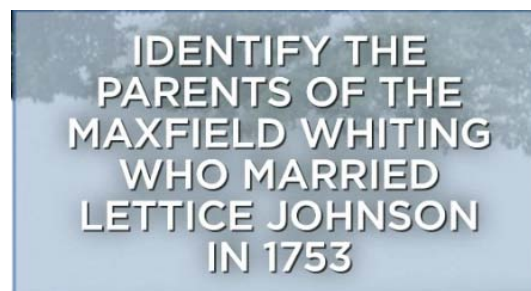
Step 1: Start with a Focused Goal

Without a focused goal, your research can become scattered and disorganized.

Genealogical research goals are typically of two varieties:

1. Identity—the research is trying to determine who, among several candidates, was your known ancestor.
2. Relationship—who was the parent, wife, child, etc., of your known ancestor.

Be specific in identifying the ancestor you seek. For example, searching for Maxfield Whiting is not specific enough. I need to state that I am searching for: Identify the parents of the Maxfield Whiting who married Lettice Johnson in 1753.



Step 2: Search Broadly

Performing a broad search for records of your ancestor is critical to the process of inferential genealogy. A broad search includes searching broadly in time, location, and associates.

- **Time**—you may have to search a century or more of records. When you have identified a target ancestor, you should research him or her from birth to death, and then at least a decade before and after to make sure you do not miss some pertinent information.
- **Location**—If you focus on one location, you may miss records in others. Ancestors often had records created in neighboring towns or counties. Searching around the known location of your ancestor becomes even more important when records have been destroyed or are not readily available.
- **Associates**—The key information about an ancestor can appear on a record that is primarily about someone else. You have to assume everyone listed in a record could be a relative. Your search should extend beyond your surname of interest; you need to look at all the neighbors and associates for clues.



Step 3: Understand the Records

If we don't understand the records, we won't get all the information from them that we need to answer our research goal.

- Know why a document was created.
- Follow document creation processes from beginning to end.

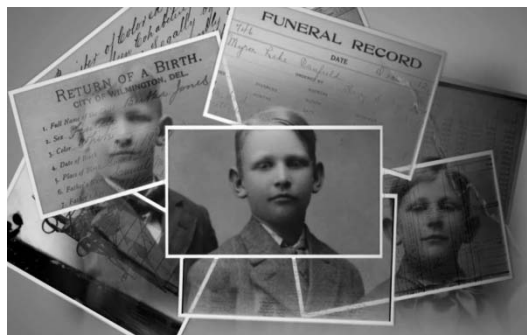
Proprietor's name	No. of acres	File #	date when or when	Days
George Mason	100	3/11	18-20-4	3-1
Lettice	100	6/2	18-20-4	-
Jacob Mason	80	1/8	11-13-4	- 8
Thomas Mason & Geo. Mason	57	1/7	18-20-4	- 3
Ben. Haffey & Lettice	80	1/7	18-20-4	- 4
	200	1/8	18-20-4	

- Note differences in records. Is there something that appears in your ancestor's record that is different than the records of others?

Step 4: Correlate the Evidence

See what the similarities and differences are. Those similarities and differences can be very informative to tell you about who your ancestors are.

- Look for underlying information like proximity, naming patterns, and chronology.
- Look for patterns and parallels across records pertaining to the same person, event, or property:
 - Arrange records concerning a person, event, or property in a time line.
 - Use a matrix, spreadsheet, or table to compare sources, people, dates, places, and property.
 - Plat land to reveal neighbors and coheirs.
- Consider both indirect and direct evidence, including negative and circumstantial evidence.
- Consider provenance, diplomatics, and the possibility any record has been altered.
- Resolve conflicting information.



Step 5: Write Down Results

In this process, we have discovered information that no other living person knows. We have an obligation to our family and other researchers to share that knowledge.

In recording your research, there are two standards to keep in mind:

1. Your conclusions should be sufficiently documented so that another researcher in a future generation will not have to redo your work.
2. You do not add someone to your family tree who should not be there.



Conclusion

As you follow this process, you will be able to find even more of your ancestors and be sure that the people in your family tree actually belong there. You will also save the time of future researchers who, because of your well-documented research, will be able to focus on building on the foundation you have created.