

Finding Our Ancestors by Researching the Neighbors

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What is neighborhood research?

Neighborhood research, also known as cluster research or the FAN¹ (family, associates, and neighbors) principle, is a technique that allows researchers to think widely about records that may include information on ancestors who are the target individuals for a research project. Our ancestors created records, but the people around them also created records that our ancestors are mentioned in. Finding the neighbors' records can often give us information we can't find any other way. Neighborhood research can be a secret weapon for solving difficult problems.

Neighborhood research involves assembling information about the people surrounding an ancestor, especially those who would have been important to him or her.

- Family. Including siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws—any family members outside the person's direct line.
- Associates. Including members of the same church, area merchants, work colleagues, customers—anyone the person would have associated with regularly.
- Neighbors. Including those who live close by but aren't relatives.

This initial assembly populates our ancestor's neighborhood with candidates for research. We then research those people surrounding our ancestor to discover facts and background information about his or her life.

Why do neighborhood research?

As Elizabeth Shown Mills says, "Biographical research on people from the past is a gamble."² Our ancestors may have left many records or may have left very few. Especially—but not exclusively—for those ancestors who left few records, neighborhood research expands the scope of our research on that ancestor and gives us more opportunity to find important information on him or her. Neighborhood research increases the number of records in which we may find our ancestor.

Neighborhood research can help us flesh out the lives of any of our ancestors, but it can be especially helpful for research problems like these:

- Complex questions of identity and/or relationship
- Questions of identity and/or relationship concerning women ancestors
- Questions of identity and/or relationship concerning landless ancestors
- Questions about separating individuals of the same name
- Questions about ancestral migration

¹ Elizabeth Shown Mills, "QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle," *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*, (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle>).

² Ibid.

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- Questions requiring research in locations with record loss
- Reconstructing a rich history of an ancestor's life

Finding neighbors

For ease of reference, we're going to refer to family, associates, and neighbors simply as neighbors, so when we talk about finding neighbors, we're talking about all those folks our ancestors would have come into contact regularly.

Neighbors in the census

We can hypothesize neighbor relationships from the census, though there is no guarantee that families listed next to each other actually lived next to each other. It is often the case that they did, but sometimes the enumerator listed families as census neighbors who were not physical neighbors. In those censuses that indicate street addresses, it is easier to determine if families enumerated were actually neighbors. But the census is a place to start.

Map neighbors

Plat maps are a more reliable way to find physical neighbors, and plat maps and atlases are available online for many locations and times. Comparing the census to a plat map helps us see which families were indeed close neighbors.

Religious neighborhoods

Religious communities also created "neighborhoods" that can be useful for us. These neighborhoods are based less on physical proximity of residence, though the members of the community may be physical neighbors, as well. Church membership rosters, sacramental records, church histories, and the like can help us learn who were the members of our ancestor's religious neighborhood.

Tax neighbors

Neighbor relationships can also be discerned from real property tax rolls because they include the description of the property. Property descriptions in rural areas allow us to find neighbors. Property descriptions in towns and villages include the lot and block numbers, which can be used to plot land ownership on a map of the village. For small villages, though, we can assume that everyone knew each other and would be part of our neighborhood research.

Military neighborhoods

Military service creates associations that can be very close and long-lasting, so when we research an ancestor with military service, we should look at their military comrades as part of their neighborhood. Many records can reveal our ancestor's military neighborhood, including

- Militia lists
- Muster rolls
- Military transportation lists
- Military pension records
- Military unit histories
- County histories

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Fraternal neighborhoods

Many of our ancestors belonged to fraternal organizations, which existed for both men and women. We can learn about our ancestors' affiliations from many sources: local histories, artifacts we've inherited, obituaries, even tombstones. Local histories can be used to assemble fraternal neighborhoods by looking at biographies contained in them. City directories often list fraternal organizations in the front matter of the directory and include the officers of the organization. Newspapers can also help us assemble fraternal neighborhoods by reporting on organizational activities. An example of a record collection for a fraternal organization is Ancestry's "Massachusetts, U.S. Mason Membership Cards, 1733–1990":

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5061/>

Occupational neighborhoods

Those who work together form neighborhoods, as well. Censuses, city and county directories, employment records, and other resources can help us place ancestors in occupational neighborhoods. An example of occupational records is "Iowa, Muscatine, Pearl Button factory employee cards, 1930–1955," found on FamilySearch:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/4158721>

Commercial neighborhoods

People who did business with each other also formed neighborhoods. City and county directories can help us understand these interactions, as can newspaper ads.

Techniques for Neighborhood Research

Neighborhood research requires us to muster all our research skills in order to be successful. It requires patience, persistence, and an inquiring mind, but the results can really be worth it. All elements of the Genealogical Proof Standard come to bear on our efforts, as they always do, but in particular, reasonably exhaustive research and critical tests (analysis and correlation) of relevant evidence are a particular focus.

Reasonably exhaustive research

Reasonably exhaustive research ensures examination of all potentially relevant sources. It minimizes the risk that undiscovered evidence will overturn a conclusion.³

When we are researching a difficult problem or when we are trying to uncover all the rich detail we can about an ancestor, reasonably exhaustive research should include appropriate neighborhood research.

Reasonably exhaustive research involves finding "at least two independently- created evidence items [that are] in agreement."⁴ Independently-created means that the two items had different informants for the information they provide.

Critical tests of relevant evidence

Critical tests of relevant evidence through processes of analysis and correlation facilitate sound interpretation of information and evidence. They also ensure that the conclusion reflects all the

³ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2021), 2.

⁴ Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013), 23.

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evidence, including the best existing evidence.⁵

Analysis of sources, the information they contain, and the evidence they produce involves determining reliability and accuracy. Correlation involves looking at evidence from different sources to determine whether evidence is independent or not and to see what evidence means in relationship to other evidence.

Correlation and its management

In neighborhood research, we gather a lot of information that needs to be correlated and managed so we can use it effectively. Several tools can help us.

Timelines. Putting the information we gather into a timeline to show a chronology of events and activities is a powerful way to organize and correlate the information we find. Timelines can be brief, like the example in Table 2 of the Baty article (see Resources), or very, very long if we are following a neighborhood over time.

Tables. Tables can also be an important tool for organizing and comparing information. See the example on p. 30 of the Baty article. For neighborhood research, tables can help us see, for example, who appears most frequently in an ancestor's neighborhood, so we can determine who to research first.

Maps. Mapping out the residences of people can also be a powerful way to visualize our ancestor's neighborhood.

Lists. As we're researching, we may come across more neighbors, and making lists of these new people, along with what kind of relationship they have (or seem to have) to our ancestor can help us understand whether they need to be researched as well.

Resources

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⁵ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2021), 2.