

Evidence Standards in Genealogical Research

An Introduction and Guide

By Janice Selberg

Genealogy, the study of family lines of descent or ancestry, has developed its current standards of practice over the past 90 years. Notwithstanding the current Ancestry.com television ad with the tagline, “You don’t have to know what you’re looking for; you just have to start looking,” professional genealogy has moved from strict *identification* of sources (names and dates) to evaluation and analysis of the record evidence presented.

In the book *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship, and Family History*,¹ lawyer and leading genealogist Neal C. Stevenson advocated a change in the standard from mere “proof”—any written contemporary genealogical record—to proof by “a preponderance” of the evidence. The genealogical community embraced the change, but the actual standard adopted more closely resembled “clear and convincing” evidence. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these guiding principles led to confusion by researchers between their genealogical and legal implications. In one attempt to clarify the situation,² lawyer and genealogist Donn Devine pointed out the need for a discrete genealogical standard in making deductions from indirect evidence.

In 1997, the Board for Certification of Genealogists announced the abandonment of the term “preponderance of the evidence” in genealogy. In 2000, the current Genealogical Proof Standards (GPS) were published. The credibility (evidence) standard is printed as a preamble to the research standards. It states:

Meeting the Genealogical Proof Standard is a five-step process:

- (a) We conduct a reasonably exhaustive search in reliable sources for all infor-

mation that is or may be pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question;

- (b) We collect and include in our compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source or sources of each item of information we use;
- (c) We analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence;
- (d) We resolve any conflicts caused by items of evidence that contradict each other or are contrary to a proposed (hypothetical) solution to the question; and
- (e) We arrive at a soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.

Meeting the GPS does not require—or ensure—proof beyond the shadow of a doubt, but an objection that “something else *could* have happened” is insufficient to discredit our own or another person’s conclusions. Genealogists recognize, however, that any statement about ancestors, even if it meets the GPS, is not absolute or everlasting. When new evidence surfaces or flaws in the conclusion are found, we re-examine the statement to determine if it remains valid.³

Forensic genealogy includes locating unknown or missing heirs, locating owners of unclaimed property, testifying as an expert witness, preparing due diligence affidavits, evaluating kinship evidence, researching direct and indirect family lines, and verifying relationships for DNA testing. When hiring the services of a forensic genealogist, one should become familiar with the endorsements indicated by the following initials:

AG	Accredited Genealogist
ASG	American Society of Genealogists
APG	Association of Professional Genealogists
CG	Certified Genealogist
CGI	Certified Genealogy Instructor
CGL	Certified Genealogy Lecturer
CGRS	Certified Genealogy Record Searcher
FASG	Fellow of American Society of Genealogists
FSG	Fellow of Society of Genealogists
NGS	National Genealogical Society

The following books are considered standard works in the field of genealogy:

- Board for Certification of Genealogists, *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual* (Millennium ed, Orem, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 2000)

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- Greenwood, *Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000)
- Jacobus, *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession* (2d ed revised, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1968)
- Merriman, *Genealogical Standards of Evidence: A Guide for Family Historians* (Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, 2010)
- Mills, *Evidence! Citation and Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1997)
- Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* (2d ed, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009)
- Mills, ed, *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001)
- Rose, *Genealogical Proof Standard: Building a Solid Case* (3d ed revised, San Jose, CA: CR Publications, 2009)
- Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship, and Family History* (Revised ed, Laguna Hills, CA: Aegean Park Press, 1989) ■

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FOOTNOTES

1. Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship, and Family History* (Revised ed, Laguna Hills, CA: Aegean Park Press, 1989).
2. Devine, *Do We Really Decide Relationships by a Preponderance of the Evidence?* 18 NGS Newsletter 131 (September–October 1992).
3. Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship, and Family History* (Laguna Hills, CA: Aegean Park Press, 1979).