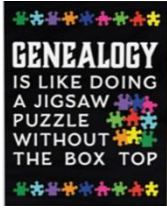


Genealogy: When is enough, enough?

Submitted by Larry Noedel



I think that this great graphic that someone made is an apt description of what genealogy is like. But not only do we not know what the finished product will look like, we can also be assured that we'll never find every one of our missing pieces. But I fear that we often act like we can.

Most amateur genealogists would agree that the ultimate goal of our work is to write it up. To produce a narrative that would interest and inform whomever we are writing it for about what we have discovered. That is by far the most likely way that all that work that we did will survive.

Believing that myself, I have set out on such a mission more than once, only to put it aside because I discovered that there was some gap in my story that should be researched further. The result, I'm sorry to say, is that I haven't written my story AND I haven't done that research.

Makes me think that the often quoted, "Perfection is the enemy of the good," could be applied here. This seems to me to be especially true for our "brick walls." I have watched many of our members agonize over the roadblocks that seem to halt their progress. I have certainly done so myself.

So, here's my message: Relax a bit. You don't have to crack every brick wall to have a good story. In fact, that brick wall may be one of the most interesting parts of your story. It might even interest and involve your audience more as a mystery than it would of have had you known the facts.

Here's an example from my own research. I'm most interested in my maternal 2x great grandparents who immigrated from Virginia to Missouri in the early 1830's, John (William?) Barley, b. 1805 and his wife Elizabeth "Molly" Barksdale, b. 1815. "Molly" had 6 or possibly a 7th child and died sometime after she gave birth to my great-grandfather in 1845 and when the 1850 federal census was conducted in November of that year. I can find no record of her death. She is simply missing in the 1850 census and all of her younger children are reported living in several other mostly unrelated households in the area.

Now, when I say "possibly" a 7th child, an infant named Elizabeth M. Barley, 1 year old, is reported in the unrelated household of Soloman and Mary Crow in 1850. She's there in the 1860 census as well, aged 12, and then disappears.

1816	Soloman	Crow	M	m
	Mary	A	S	f
	Elizabeth	M Barley	1	f

The Crow's went on to live long lives and never had any other children. Did Elizabeth die an early death? Did she marry and settle in some other area? Was Elizabeth M. Barley, b. 1849, the daughter of Elizabeth "Molly" Barley, b. 1815? Did the elder Elizabeth Barley die in the younger Elizabeth's birth? My great-grandfather's obituary in 1933 says that "his mother died when he was 4 years old" which would have been 1849. Seems quite likely to me, but all is only circumstantial evidence.

Now, ask yourself this. Suppose that on some future trip to Missouri I was able find hard evidence that answered these questions and solved this mystery. I could then report on Molly's life and death in a rather

straightforward way. Would my audience be more interested in that story than the one I can tell right now? I think they might feel more involved if I left the mystery unsolved and suggested that perhaps someone in the future will be able to discover the truth.

The point in all this is that, in my opinion, we shouldn't wait until we have absolutely everything figured out to write our story. If we take that approach we are likely to never write it. We just can't solve every mystery in our family histories. However, as technology continues to develop, people in the future may well be able to figure these things out more easily than we can. They will have the great advantage of much, much larger DNA databases, much better technology, and many billions and billions of more bits of information digitized and indexed. But they may not even know about our genealogy or be interested in furthering our research unless we write up our story.

When is enough, enough? Only you can be the judge of that. But I can say when it's not: It's not when you have figured it all out. That's a deadline that you'll never make. And, I can say when you should start: It's when you have a story of at least one of your ancestors that you'd like to tell. In other words, most all of us should be writing right now.