

DECODING THE DASH

Build the story of their lives

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Life happens in the dash that is between the birth date and death date – so do everything you can to fill in that dash. Look for all sorts of information about your people, and go beyond the basic genealogical details, which are usually the least interesting aspects of a person's life.

Your ancestors were affected by local events – they were not living in isolation. If you draw your information from only the usual sources – church registers, census returns, civil registration and so on – you will be missing much of the colour of your ancestors' lives. You will also fail to understand and appreciate what they went through.

The usual sources don't tell of major events in a community. They don't record that a factory has closed, that the farms have been hit by drought, or that an invasion has taken place. They won't help you to understand the many forces that had an impact on the history of your family. Your ancestors might have made life-changing decisions based on what was happening around them, and the official records won't tell you about those events.

A reminder of some basic strategies for quality research: Identify sources. Check them. Think of more sources. Check them. Fill in the gaps. Toss names into search boxes; see what happens. Stay skeptical. Stay curious. Don't assume anything. Keep an open mind. Check more sources. And a year or two after you have exhausted a source, check it again. There might be something new, or you might see something that is now relevant thanks to subsequent research.

Don't believe everything you read; question everything, and when other sources contradict the first ones, check the discrepancy rather than simply disregarding it. Really.

So how do we turn our research into rewarding, informative histories? How do we put the lives of our ancestors into context? Start with geography. Get current and old maps of the areas you are researching, because these will teach you about the places where your ancestors lived. Look at photographs, old and new; Google the name of the community and see what pops up.

Check local sources to find out more about what was happening in your communities of interest. These sources include local histories and newspapers – but remember that the newspapers do not always need to be local, since big events would have been covered in newspapers across the country and around the world. (I have found stories about small communities in Washington in Australia's Trove website).

Genealogical research should always start with your own family members. Gather what you can from your parents, aunts and uncles, cousins or anyone else who might be able to help.

Go beyond the basics of births, marriages and deaths; details add depth, make it easier for people to understand the family history, and help to bring raw facts to life.

Information on external forces, such as events in a community, will give you context. That places your family into the bigger picture. It's easier to understand the lives of ancestors when you know about their communities, and the changes taking place in the world at the time they lived. Context is looking out from the family, at the influences that affected it. Context will often help us determine why our ancestors might have made the decisions they made.

Look into local history books for information on a community such as: What kinds of crops were grown there? What was the climate? What was the environment like? What was the quality of the water supply? What was the crime rate? Always read the pages at the front of a local history book, which will provide general information about the community.

For national and international events, check timelines – chronological lists of events. These are easy to find on the Internet; search for one that is relevant to your geographical area of research.

As difficult as it is to admit these days, not everything is on the Internet. A wise researcher will use archives and libraries, at home and in other cities, and even go to ancestral areas for an on-the-ground experience.

Have you checked all of these sources?

- Immigration documents
- Local histories
- Newspapers
- Cemeteries and probate records
- Military records and diaries
- Directories and voters lists
- Fraternal organization records
- School records

Beware!

- Indexes are not source documents
- Spellings may vary
- Assumptions can waste years
- There are many possibilities to check and consider
- Quick answers can lead you astray
- It's not all on the Internet
- Not everything on the Internet has been indexed properly
- A lot has not been microfilmed
- Your records might have been misfiled in an archive somewhere