Best Practices for Genealogy in a Legal Setting



Laurie Hermance-Moore, MLS, AG®
Laurie@HeritageBridge.com

About Me

- Accredited Genealogist®
- Advanced training in forensic genealogy and genealogical research
- Forensic researcher for five years
- 20 years in corporate marketing research
- 10 years as a business librarian
- Owner of Heritage Bridge Genealogy, Columbus, Ohio, www.heritagebridge.com



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Goals for Today

1. Understand what professional forensic genealogy is, and how it can help to resolve cases
2. Understand standards of professional genealogy
3. Understand the skill set, experience, and credentialing necessary for a genealogist doing legal work
4. Recognize the two core goals of genealogy: 1) resolving issues of identity and 2) accurately connecting generations
5. Learn to identify situations where a genealogist is needed in probate, real estate, or mineral rights cases
6. Learn what to expect from a professional forensic genealogist working on a case

The answers to these questions comprise the best practices for genealogy in a legal setting.

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

An Overview of Professional Genealogy

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Genealogy is a popular hobby

The plus side:

- Millions of people trace their families and take DNA tests, providing new connections and an interest in family history
- Databases have made family history more accessible

The downside:

- Hints are often wrong—but people click and add them to their trees
- Misinformation is rampant with online trees and it multiplies rapidly

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Professional vs. hobbyist



A professional genealogist:

- Produces an academic product: it includes analysis, evidence, proof, quality sources, and is well-cited
- Knows about and uses less-common record types
- Questions what they are seeing

Genealogy is like an iceberg—lots of people only see what's on the surface.

A skilled professional has realized that most of what you need to know isn't immediately obvious!

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

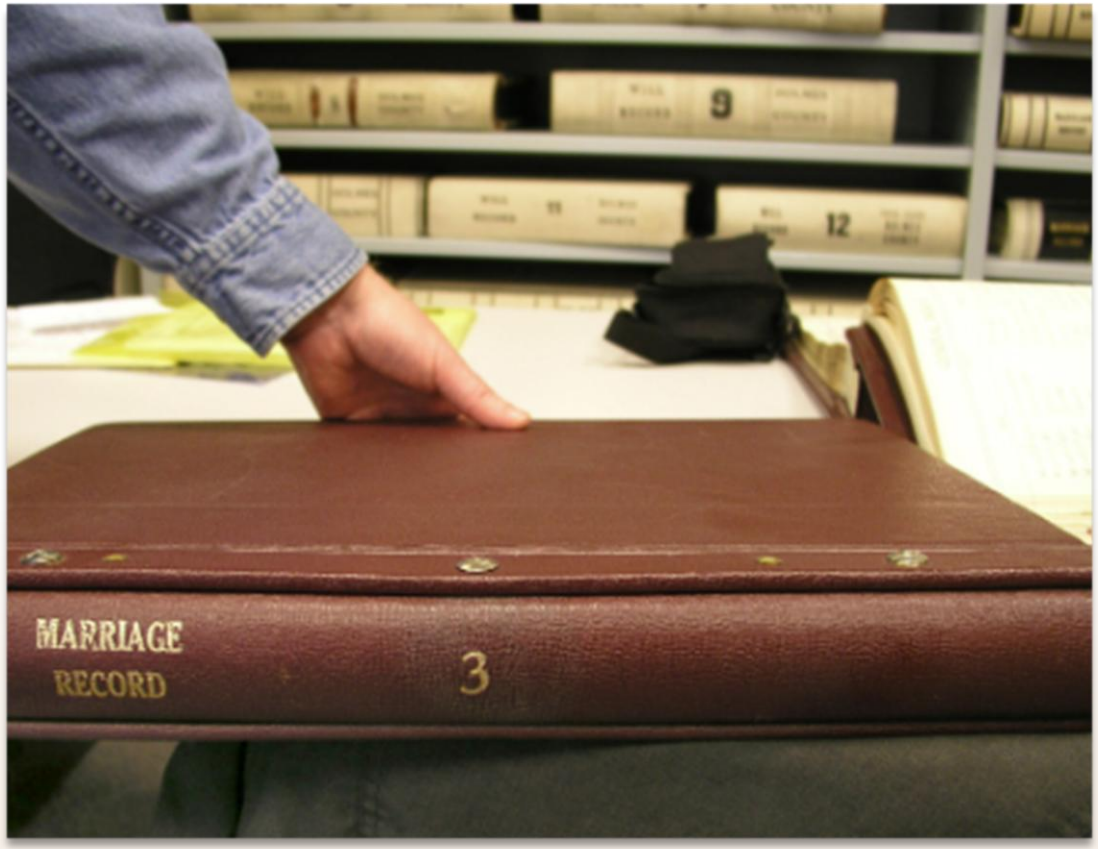
A professional genealogist resolves issues of identity and makes accurate connections between generations



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Professional Genealogists Tend To Specialize

- Forensic genealogist
- Early ancestors (1600s-1800s)
- Geographical focus
- Record types (example: military)
- Personal historian
- Lineage specialist
- Educator; speaker
- DNA specialist



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

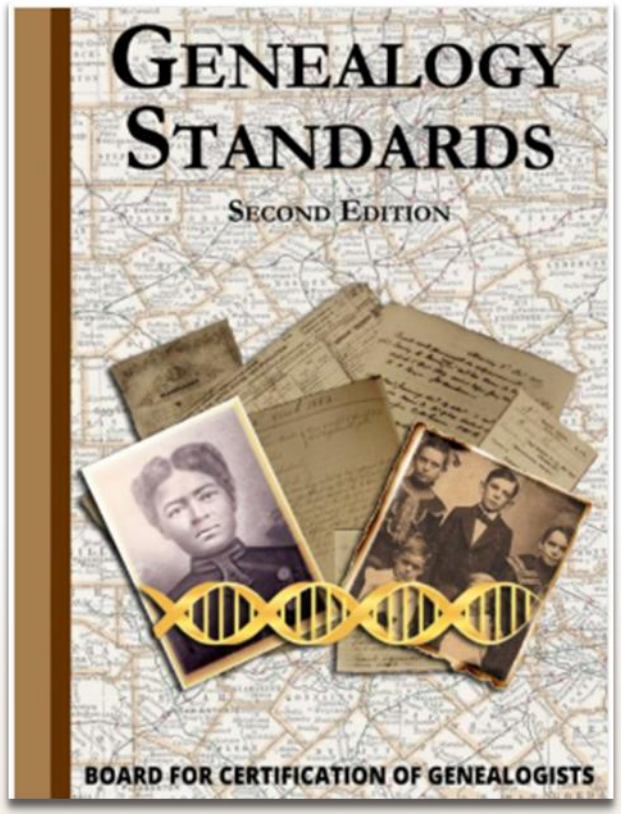
Professional Genealogist vs. Online Trees

A professional genealogist:

- Builds the evidence through quality sources: doesn't rely on unsourced/unverified trees
- Knows and uses multiple sources, both on and off-line
- Documents statements of relationships
- Presents and analyzes evidence
- Invests in education to build an advanced skill set
- Commits to ethical standards
- Works to the **Genealogical Proof Standard**

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)



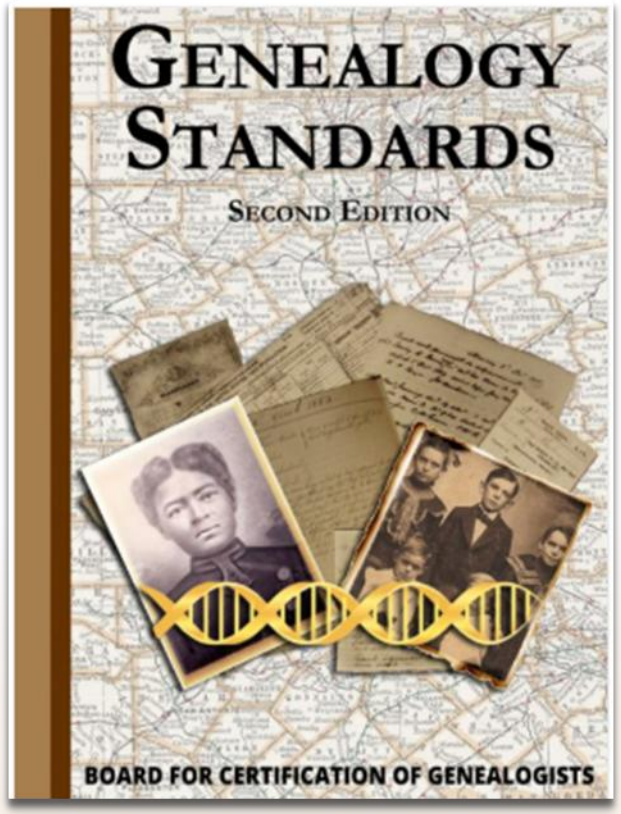
- The GPS measures the **credibility of conclusions** about identities, relationships, life events

- Builds reliability into our work
  - Exhaustive research
  - Evaluation of all the evidence
  - Analysis and resolution of conflicts in evidence
  - Documentation of sources used
  - Written conclusion

Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Ancestry.com):2019.

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)



- Following the GPS means:
  - We find the correct "John Smith"—not assuming the same name means the same person
  - We make sure we are connecting parents and children correctly and understanding their relationship
  - Accurate lists of next of kin for legal cases

Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Ancestry.com):2019.

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

What is a Forensic Genealogist?

Forensic genealogy is research, analysis, and reporting in cases with legal implications.

It uses ethics and methodology consistent with the highest standards in the profession.

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC



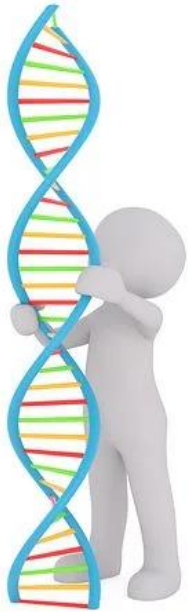
Types of Forensic Genealogy

- Identifying and locating heirs and beneficiaries
- DNA + traditional research to solve unknown parentage and adoption cases
  - Or solve crimes (TV show: *Genetic Detective*)
- "John Doe" cases; military repatriation

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

DNA: Do We Use It For Legal Work?

- How DNA can help in genealogical research
  - DNA is an additional “record” that can be used
    - Must be used with traditional research (building trees)
  - Individuals share centimorgans of DNA with their matches
    - The more distant the relationship, fewer centimorgans are shared
    - Doesn’t clearly identify the relationship
  - DNA alone isn’t an absolute guarantee of identifying a relationship unless it is parent/child
  - Not typically used in research in next of kin cases but may be changing



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Identifying Next of Kin

- Brings trees FORWARD in time rather than BACKWARD
- Uses slightly different records and techniques than traditional genealogy
- Resolves issues in complicated families
- Finds contact information
- Real estate and oil and gas cases are researched differently



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Forensic Genealogist vs. Heir Searcher

Forensic genealogist

- Serves attorneys, courts, administrators, investigators, oil and gas, financial services
- Well-qualified through education and experience
- Should hold a genealogical credential
- Committed to genealogical standards
- Works as a consultant on an hourly basis

Key distinction from an heir searcher: a professional forensic genealogist has no financial interest in the outcome of the case and does not work on a contingent basis

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Legal Case Examples

- Intestate when NOK are unknown and distant
  - States have different requirements for how far out we must research
- Testate when the will is no longer valid
- Testate for next of kin notification
- Large estates; contested estates
- Quiet title cases—abandoned property heirs or persons who may emerge with an interest
- Reverter clause deeds

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Establishing Identity

The core skills of a professional genealogist are to correctly **establish identity** and to accurately **connect generations**.





© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Identity

Sameness; the fact that a subject, person, or thing before a court is the same as it is represented, claimed, or charged to be. *–Black's Law Dictionary Free Online Legal Dictionary 2nd Ed.*

In genealogy:

Usually discussed as dealing with multiple people with the same name: e.g., separating identities.

The same name is not always the same person!

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Example: Ensuring We Have The Right Man



A man of the **correct name** was located by an attorney. **Was he the correct individual**?

Records used: auditor files, birth records, census, divorce records, marriage records, church baptismal record, people-finding databases

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Example: Ensuring We Have The Right Man



Yes, he was the correct man. How did we know?

- Date of birth and link to parents
- His prior home was owned by his grandmother
- Another prior home was owned by his father and his father's second wife
- The man's associates included his ex-wife, now listed under her new married name. Another associate was the third wife of his father.
- This illustrates a family network

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Facts That Make People Unique

- Birth date
- Addresses / Location
- Spouse or significant others
- Parents
- Siblings
- Children
- Military service
- Education
- Signature
- Hobbies



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Not Many People Repair Pipe Organs



A man's skill of working on pipe organs confirmed his identity

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Connecting Generations

Connecting Generations

- Whether we are moving backwards in time or forwards, accurately connecting generations is vital
- Each connection needs to **meet genealogical standards** before moving on



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

How Do We Meet The Genealogical Proof Standard?



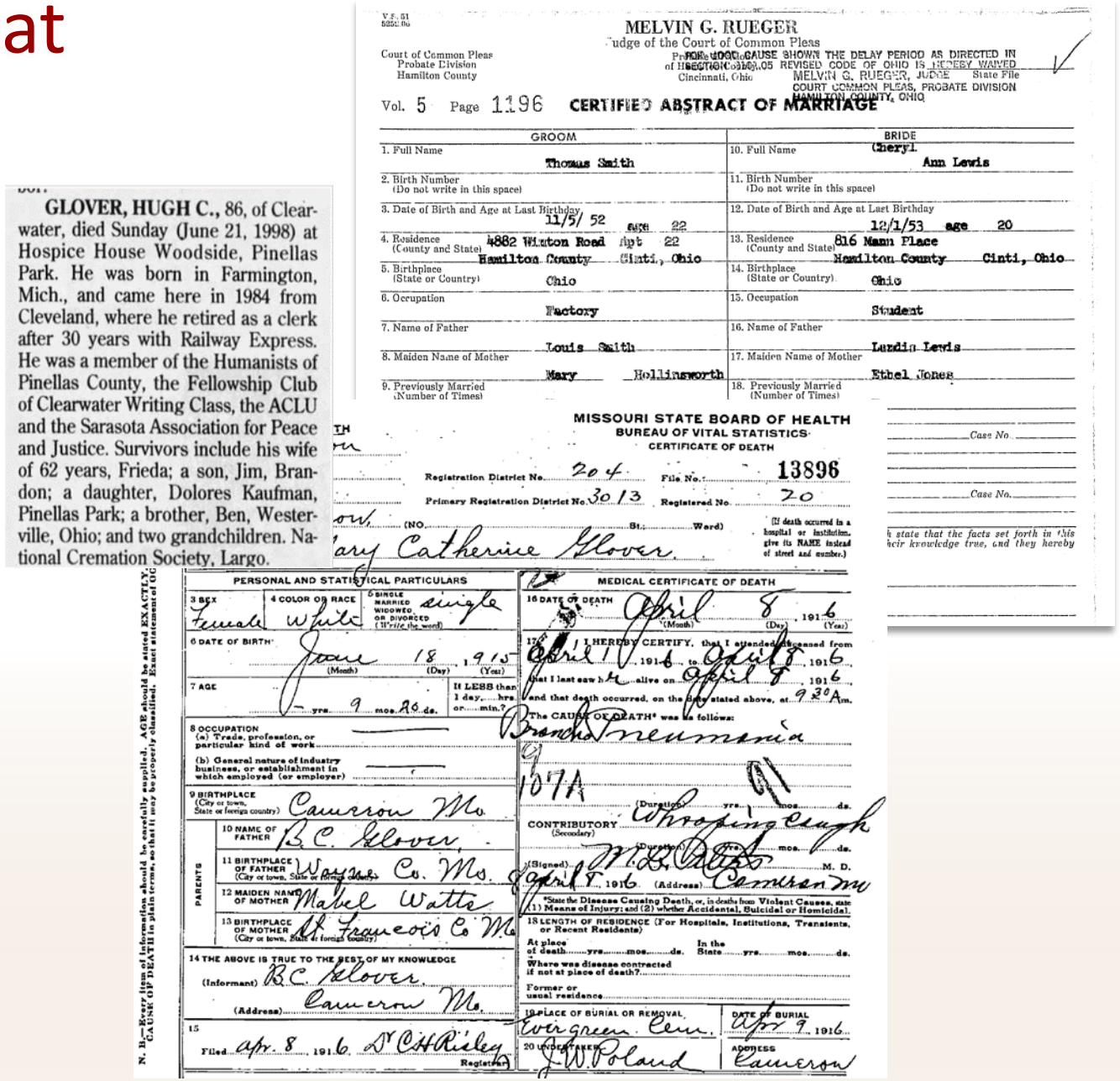
- Finding multiple sources of evidence, created at different points in time
- Documenting sources used
- Evaluating the quality of evidence
- Resolving conflicts
- Developing a proof summary
  - *"The child of John is Joe because of XYZ fact"*

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Records Have Information that Becomes Evidence

Records that state or suggest relationships:

- Vital records
- Probate
- Newspaper obituaries and marriages
- 1880-1950 US Federal Census
- Divorces
- Religious records (baptisms, marriages, deaths, confirmations)
- Military records
- Social media



GLOVER, HUGH C., 86, of Clearwater, died Sunday (June 21, 1998) at Hospice House Woodside, Pinellas Park. He was born in Farmington, Mich., and came here in 1984 from Cleveland, where he retired as a clerk after 30 years with Railway Express. He was a member of the Humanists of Pinellas County, the Fellowship Club of Clearwater Writing Class, the ACLU and the Sarasota Association for Peace and Justice. Survivors include his wife of 62 years, Frieda; a son, Jim, Brandon; a daughter, Dolores Kaufman, Pinellas Park; a brother, Ben, Westerville, Ohio; and two grandchildren. National Cremation Society, Largo.

MELVIN G. RUEGER
Judge of the Court of Common Pleas
Court of Common Pleas
Probate Division
Hamilton County
Cincinnati, Ohio
FOR GOOD CAUSE SHOWN THE DELAY PERIOD AS DIRECTED IN SECTION 3109.05 REVISED CODE OF OHIO IS HEREBY WAIVED
MELVIN G. RUEGER, JUDGE
COURT COMMON PLEAS, PROBATE DIVISION
HAMILTON COUNTY, OHIO
State File
Vol. 5 Page 1196 CERTIFIED ABSTRACT OF MARRIAGE

GROOM	BRIDE
1. Full Name: Thomas Smith	10. Full Name: (Cheryl) Ann Lewis
2. Birth Number (Do not write in this space)	11. Birth Number (Do not write in this space)
3. Date of Birth and Age at Last Birthday: 11/5/52 age 22	12. Date of Birth and Age at Last Birthday: 12/1/53 age 20
4. Residence (County and State): 4882 Winton Road Apt 22, Hamilton County Cinti, Ohio	13. Residence (County and State): 816 Mann Place, Hamilton County Cinti, Ohio
5. Birthplace (State or Country): Ohio	14. Birthplace (State or Country): Ohio
6. Occupation: Factory	15. Occupation: Student
7. Name of Father: Louis Smith	16. Name of Father: Lundin Lewis
8. Maiden Name of Mother: Mary Hollingsworth	17. Maiden Name of Mother: Ethel Jones
9. Previously Married (Number of Times)	18. Previously Married (Number of Times)

MISSOURI STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

Registration District No. 204 File No. 13896
Primary Registration District No. 3013 Registered No. 20

(If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)

ary Catherine Glover

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3 SEX: Female
4 COLOR OR RACE: White
5 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED (Write the word): single
6 DATE OF BIRTH: June 18 1915 (Month) (Day) (Year)
7 AGE: 9 mos. 20 ds. If LESS than 1 day, hrs. or min.?
8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work: (b) General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which employed (or employer):
9 BIRTHPLACE (City or town, State or foreign country): Cameron Mo.
PARENTS
10 NAME OF FATHER: B.C. Glover
11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (City or town, State or foreign country): Wayne Co. Mo.
12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER: Mabel Watts
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (City or town, State or foreign country): St Francois Co Mo
14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE
(Informant) B.C. Glover
(Address) Cameron Mo
15 Filed Apr. 8 1916 S C H Ridley Registrar

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

16 DATE OF DEATH: April 8 1916 (Month) (Day) (Year)
17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, that I attended deceased from April 1 1916 to April 8 1916, that I last saw h alive on April 8 1916, and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at 9.30 A.m.
The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows:
Broncho Pneumonia
107A
(Duration) yrs. mos. ds.
CONTRIBUTORY (Secondary): Whooping Cough
(Duration) mos. ds.
(Signed) M.D.
April 8 1916 (Address) Cameron Mo
*State the Disease Causing Death, or, in deaths from Violent Causes, state (1) Means of Injury; and (2) whether Accidental, Suicidal or Homicidal.
18 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (For Hospitals, Institutions, Transients, or Recent Residents)
At place of death yrs. mos. ds. In the State yrs. mos. ds.
Where was disease contracted if not at place of death?
Former or usual residence
19 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL: Evergreen Cem. DATE OF BURIAL: Apr 9 1916
20 UNDERTAKER: J.W. Poland ADDRESS: Cameron

N. B.—Every item of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of OC

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Quality of Evidence



Records are not equal in value.

- Was the record created in an official capacity?
  - Government, court, military, religious
- How close to the event was the record created?
  - A death certificate is usually accurate for the death information, but can be incorrect for birth / parents

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Quality of Evidence



Records are not equal in value.

- Who was the informant?
- Online trees, social media, and people-finding databases must be compared to other sources

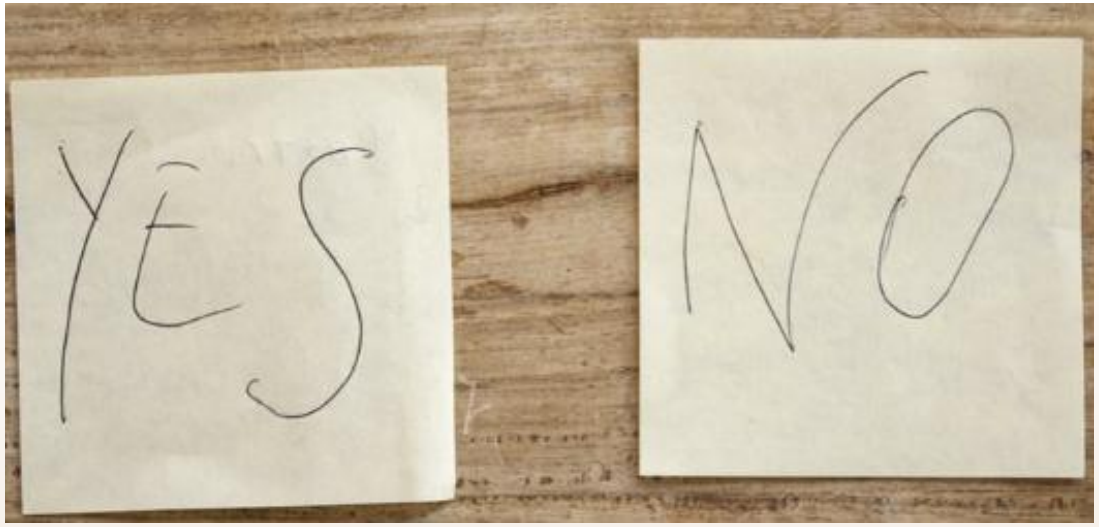
© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Resolving conflicts in evidence

What if the evidence doesn't agree?

Example: *multiple birth years for same individual*

- We look for patterns, and look at evidence over time
- What is the most reliable evidence?
- Was there a reason the birth year was changed?
- What makes sense?



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

To Sum Up: Establishing Identity and Connecting Generations

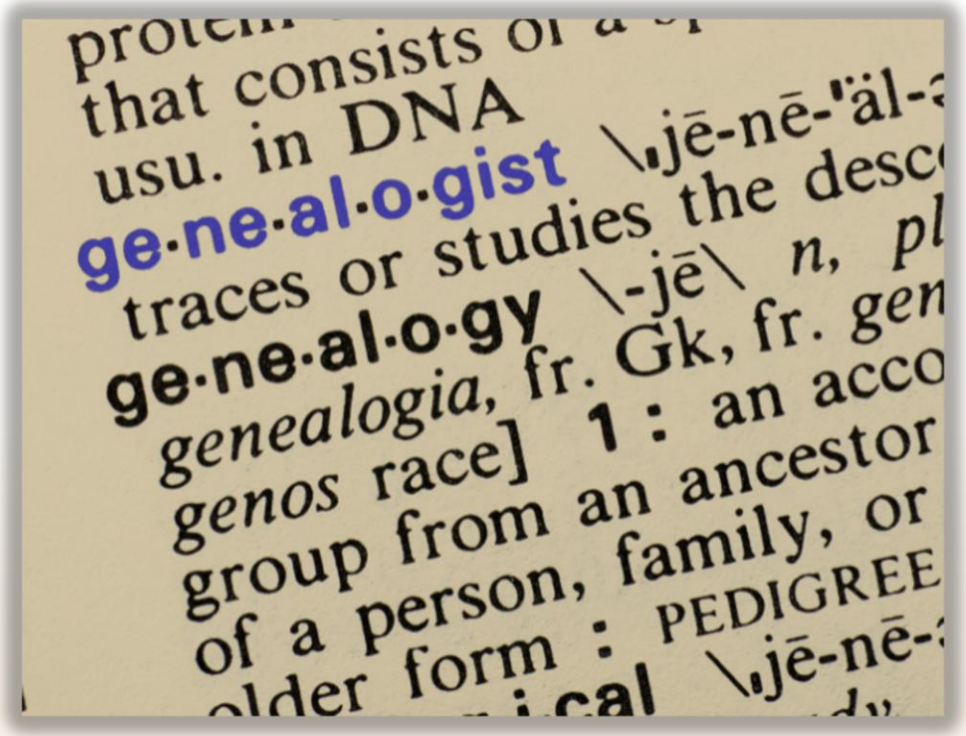
- A person's **identity is formed from various factors**, both about themselves and the persons they associate with
- **Generations must be connected accurately**, with **multiple pieces of quality evidence**, ideally from different informants at different points in time
- Professional-level work requires diligence, multiple record types, and a healthy level of skepticism!

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

A Typical Legal Genealogy Project

When Should You Consult a Professional Genealogist?

- **When the next-of-kin aren't obvious**
- **When someone can't be located or identity is in question**
- **When difficult situations exist**
  - Multiple marriages / blended families
  - Need impartial documentation of relationships
- **When you have doubt about what you are being told**



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Steps To Project Success



1. **Initial meeting** to determine the research question(s) and project parameters
2. **Review** of existing research and knowledge
3. **Research** and documentation
4. **Check-ins** on any issues uncovered
5. **Delivery** of report, documents, research log, family tree(s)
6. **Attorney must provide direction** on whom we should research

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

How We Work On Your Project

Establish The Research Goal:

Establish, document, and provide contact information for living lineal descendants



Frame The Family

Decedent and their spouse, children, parents, siblings

Example: establishing that decedent had no children, then researching siblings and their potential children before moving up to grandparents/aunts/uncles/cousins

“Go/No Go” Points receive particular attention

Key points in the project that send us to the next group of people if no living heir is located

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Areas Investigated for Every Individual



- Connection to parents
- Marriages—yes, all five of them!
- Locating **all** their children
  - Stepchildren
  - Adoptions
- Divorces—were children born during an intact marriage?
- Proving an individual is deceased before moving on to their children

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Report Content

- Detailed findings, including evidence analysis and conclusions
- Contact information for living next-of-kin
- Family tree
- Exhibits of key documents
- Often 100 to 200+ pages with exhibits



B.1 William Boltz was born 21 October 1889 in Auglaize County, Ohio, to Charles Boltz and Virginia Comer. He married **Gertrude Gable** on 18 June 1912 in Clark County, Ohio. William died 30 January 1937 in Springfield, Clark County, Ohio. William had the following known children:

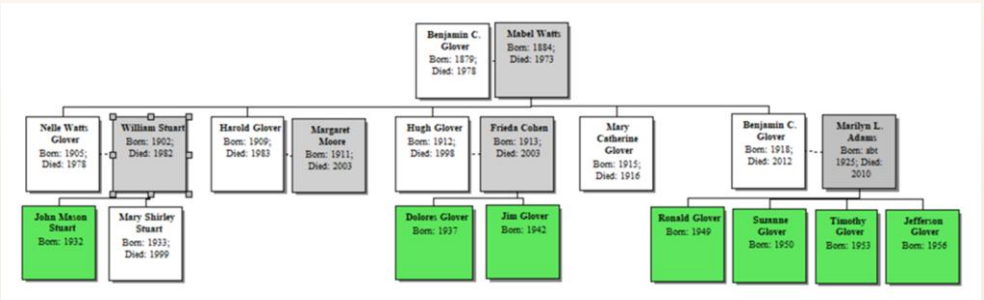
B.1.1 Charles Boltz was born 17 July 1914, died 28 July 1914 (age 10 days).

B.1.2 Lillian Boltz was born 15 July 1915 in Springfield, Clark County, Ohio, to William Boltz and Gertrude Gable. She married **Anthony Barone** on 6 May 1935 in Clark County, Ohio. Lillian died on 20 December 1963 in Springfield, Clark County, Ohio. Lillian had the following known children:

B.1.2.1 Robert Barone was born 19 September 1936 in Springfield, Clark County, Ohio, to Anthony Barone and Lillian Boltz. He married **Reba Quesinberry** on 31 August 1957 in Liberty, Union County, Indiana. Second, he married **Barbara Domigan** on 27 July 1963 in Clark County, Ohio. Robert died 23 April 2000 in Springfield, Clark County, Ohio. Robert had the following known children:

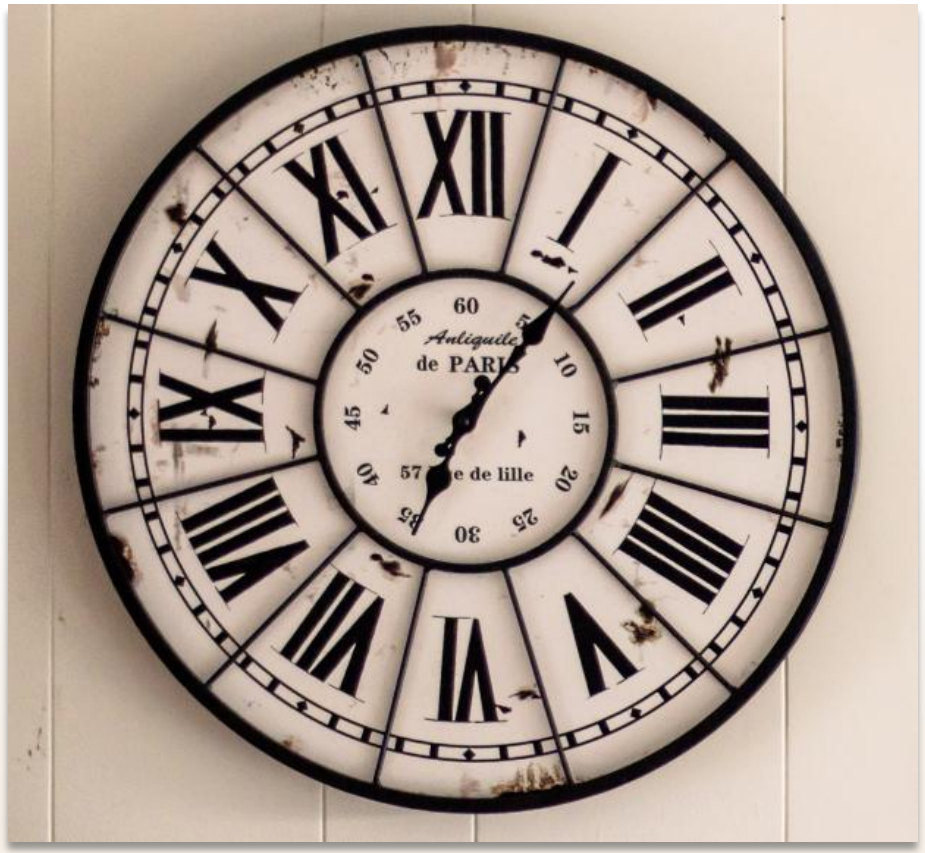
Living Descendants Contact Information

Name	Relationship Information	Contact Info
John Mason Stuart, age approx. 87	Grandson of Benjamin C. Glover Sr. and wife Mabel Watts, through daughter Nelle	13125 Linden Church Road, Clarksville, MD 21029. Phone 410-531-7502. Email: johnstuart@cox.net
Jim Glover, age approx. 77	Grandson of Benjamin C. Glover Sr. and wife Mabel Watts, through son Hugh	3411 Maze Ln, Brandon, FL 33511. Phone 813-685-8890.
Dolores Glover Kaufman, age approx. 83	Granddaughter of Benjamin C. Glover Sr. and wife Mabel Watts, through son Hugh	1205 Castleworks Ln., Tarpon Springs FL 34689. Phone (727) 943-2348. Email dgk@tampabay.rr.com
Ronald A. Glover, age approx. 71	Grandson of Benjamin C. Glover Sr. and wife Mabel Watts, through son Benjamin Jr.	32331 NW Awbrey Rd., Bend, OR 97703-5462. Phone 541-388-1512.



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Typical Cost and Timing



- Documenting cousins as next-of-kin typically runs 40-75 hours but has been as high as 150 hours.
- Delays may happen when it's difficult to obtain a record
  - Vital records are restricted in some states
  - We need a local subcontractor to obtain a record
  - It takes time to obtain divorces or probate files
- Most legal genealogists charge $100 to $150 per hour
- Expect about three to four months for completion (more for large, complicated cases)

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Did you know?

It often only takes a genealogist a few hours to determine an unknown heir might exist and more work is needed.

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Challenging Situations

Challenging Situations

Red flags need extra attention

- Blended families
- Missing children
- Extra children
- Children born outside normal ages for the birth mother
- No children
- Individuals who cannot be located



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Blended and Complex Families

- Multiple marriages; children born outside marriage
- Which children are on the direct line?
  - Did their stepparent adopt them?
- Name changes (or not) are a red flag
- Adoption and birth records are usually restricted
  - Often need to ask the potential heir to verify



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Missing Children / Extra Children



- Not every obituary names all the children
  - We cross-compare with birth records and other family obituaries
  - We attempt to determine every child ever born, and what happened to them
- Named as a child, but they weren't
- Children outside the normal age for childbearing

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

People Who Are Hard To Locate

- It's often easier to prove someone is dead than alive
- Are they institutionalized?
- Must search their family network for connections
  - People-finding databases (*tough if you don't have a location or unique name*)
  - Social media
  - Comparing addresses over time
- Challenging due to availability of more recent records
- Sometimes must consult with family; sometimes you might need a private investigator



© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Identifying a Qualified Genealogist

Caution: Not Every Genealogist Is Qualified for Legal Work

- Lots of hobbyist crossover
- Few academic programs exist for genealogists
- Nearly all of us came from other professions
- It takes self-study, attendance at institutes, and pursuit of an independently-evaluated credential to become a high-level professional—and that is what you want for legal work

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

What Professional Genealogy Organizations Do

- Develop a code of ethics
- Create and uphold standards of genealogy
- Provide protection for the public
- Create systems of credentialing
- Create directories of member profiles
- Sponsor or create continuing education

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Professional Genealogy Organizations

- Association of Professional Genealogists
  - www.apgen.org
- International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAPGen)
  - www.icapgen.org
- Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG)
  - www.bcgcertifcation.org

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Ideal Qualifications of a Forensic Genealogist

- A credential: Accredited Genealogist (AG), Certified Genealogist (CG)
- Membership in APG; in the APG Forensic Special Interest Group
- Specific training and experience in forensic genealogy
  - Attended forensic genealogy institutes
- Commitment to working to genealogical standards
- Commitment to continuing education
- Carries E&O insurance
- Experience working with businesses

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

What To Expect From a Professional Forensic Genealogist



- Follows the Genealogical Proof Standard
- Research in multiple sources to confirm and verify
- Source-cited reports with a discussion of evidence and conclusions
- Exhibits of key documents
- A reporting of all information and next-of-kin found, even if someone doesn't want them to be found
- Ability to present findings in court if required
  - Can be established as an expert witness with advanced credentials, experience, and involvement in teaching others in our field

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

What To Expect From a Professional Forensic Genealogist*



Sticks with it: Follows up on loose ends and doesn't make assumptions or give up too easily

Creative in their approach—uses records in new ways; correlates information from different records

Look for these skills as you interview professional genealogists for your project

*the part that isn't on their resume

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Wrap-Up

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Situations Where We Can Assist



- When someone was unmarried and childless and next of kin are distant
- If someone can’t be located
- If there could be confusion over names
- If the family is complex

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

Situations Where We Can Assist



- If you suspect there may be more people in a family than you were told about
- When you want to present an expert, documented report in court
- When you want your team focused on other work
- When you don’t want to take a risk (large estate, complex family, etc.)

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

What We Discussed Today : Best Practices for Genealogy in a Legal Setting

1. Standards of professional genealogy
2. What professional forensic genealogy is, and is not
3. The skill set, experience, and credentialing necessary for a genealogist doing legal work
4. The two core goals of genealogy: 1) issues of identity and 2) accurately connecting generations
5. Situations where a genealogist is needed
6. What to expect from a professional forensic genealogist

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC

How to reach me or connect

www.heritagebridge.com

laurie@heritagebridge.com

Connect with me on LinkedIn:
https://www.linkedin.com/in/laurie-hermance-moore/

Laurie Hermance-Moore, MLS, AG®
Laurie@HeritageBridge.com

Thank You!

© 2025 Heritage Bridge LLC