



The Kalamazoo Valley Heritage

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Practical Suggestions for Research

At the May 19 meeting of KVGS, speaker Jim Jackson tackled that genealogy bugaboo, the “brick wall.” Speaking from years of experience, Jim had many practical suggestions for finding that elusive ancestor. Some of his salient points were the following:

- As much as we love to “browse” in libraries, ALWAYS use the finding aids and catalogs, since references are often not filed where we would initially expect them to be.
 - Beware of indexes, especially in older books. Jim shared a family history published with no less than seventeen separate indexes! If we expect a book to have only one index, we may be missing a lot. Also, many indexes produced under older computer systems don’t have names in exact alphabetical order. Always check forward and backward beyond where you think a name should occur.
 - LISTEN to the names and terms you are researching to come up with spelling variations. Jim gave the example of 34 ways he found the name “Reynolds” spelled on the 1790 census, and the mistake of referring to “Penn County” Michigan, instead of “Pinconning.” Jim suggested that you ask a child to write out surnames to come up with new spellings.
 - Jim’s handout reminded us how handwritten records can be misinterpreted: always consider the similarity of letters such as “S” and “L,” and “W” and “H” in old documents.
 - Your ancestor may not be listed under their usual name. Try looking under their middle name, or variations of a name, such as “William” for “Wilber.”
 - There are errors in everything! For example, the name “Mzfgin” in an index is an obvious misplacement of someone’s left hand on the typewriter.
- Are you looking in the right place? Trace a county’s history to see what the parent county was to try a different location.
 - When reading tombstones, read not only the front of the stone, but the back and sides: you may be surprised at what you find!
 - Create a timeline for someone you’re stumped about to help you decide what additional records are needed.

Finally, Jim discussed several useful websites, including www.automatedgenealogy.com, which offers some neat features with the Canadian census. Jim also recommends the Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness site at www.raogk.com, and Find a Grave at www.findagrave.com. Jim’s own website, www.michlist.com, includes thousands of Michigan sources, including much information on Michigan Civil War service.