Cluster, Huddle, or Flock: Strategies for Research Problems

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Everyone has brick walls in their genealogy research. People who appear to have been dropped out of the sky. Women whose maiden names seem to be unknowable. Cluster research will give you new avenues to break down those brick walls by researching their family members, their neighbors, and anyone and everyone they were associated with. We will explore methods that will help you uncover new information about your family.

What is Cluster Research?

We build trees that go back in time in straight lines. Everyone has two parents. But the clues to finding who the previous generation was is not always found in the documents of the person you are researching. Your ancestor's brothers and sisters may hold the key. Or cousins or aunts and uncles. Or maybe it is the next-door neighbor. And even if you can map the next generation, you may be missing part of the story.

Cluster research goes beyond researching one person and all of their ancestors and branches out, pardon the pun, to everyone around them.

Collateral Research

Unless you come from long lines of only children, you will find brothers and sisters in almost every generation. And half-siblings and stepsiblings as well. Do you know everything about them?

First step is to work the census. Find every brother and sister you can and map them in every census record that you can find. Note birth dates and locations. Use spreadsheets and maps to pinpoint where they were every 10 years. Look for unexpected surnames in the household. Do not ignore those people!

Look at everyone's vital records — birth, marriage, and death. What names and locations are consistent across the board? Who are the witnesses? What families did they marry into?

Did your family have a family cemetery? Which members of the family were buried there? Are there graves you can't locate? Have you found all of the probate records and obituaries for all of the siblings? Who were witnesses and executors and who was mentioned in the obituaries? Which families went to the same churches?

Descendancy Research

Pick a couple that you are researching and identify their descendants one generation at a time, working your way to the present, or at least as far forward as you can. Research each generation as you would your collateral ancestors. For every person in a generation identify:

• Spouses as well as descendants.
• Census records and where they lived.
• Vital records. Take note of locations and witnesses.
• Probate records. Take note of witnesses and who is mentioned as receiving property.
• Newspaper articles.
• Cemeteries. Record who is buried in the same cemeteries and where they are.
• Veterans. Track who fought in which wars and which units.

FAN Research: Friends, Associates, and Neighbors

It's not enough to track just the people you are related to. When you can't find what you are looking for, you must next branch out to the people around them. This concept has been made famous through the work of Elizabeth Shown Mills. You can find more about her research at https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle.

So who do you start looking at?

• Know everyone who lived in the households of your ancestor.
• Document the timelines of children and their spouses. They may have clues that you had not seen originally.
• Can you identify who everyone was around your family on a census record and did they have a relationship to the family?
• Witnesses on vital records and other legal documents — who were they and how are they related to the family.
• Land records — who are the neighbors and are they related.

Genetic Clusters: Using DNA to Identify Clusters

Distant Ancestry
• Very distant ancestry
• Represents populations formed in distant past over large geographic areas

Recent Ancestry
• More recent ancestry
• Represents more recently formed populations in smaller geographic areas
• Specific migration stories

Where did Michael Snavely come from and how did he get to Texas?

Michael Snavely

- Born Dec 1848 in Smyth County, Virginia, 4th of 5 children

- Moved from Virginia to Texas, most likely in 1855, age 7.

- Married in Colorado County, Texas, age 29

- Died in Texas, likely Caldwell County, age 63

Blanch Mary Secrest

- Born 25 Jan 1861, in Colorado County, Texas, 2nd of 10 children

- Always lived in Texas

- Married in Colorado County, Texas, age 18

- Died in San Marcos, Hays, Texas, age 99

Do your census work

11900 U.S. Census, Caldwell County, Texas, population schedule, Luling City, Precinct 2, ED 121, dwelling 268, family 271, Mike Snavely

Figure 2 Colorado County, Texas, population schedule, Weimar, ED 050, dwelling 053, family 053, Mike L Snavely

Figure 3 1870 U.S. Census, Colorado County, Virginia, population schedule, Columbus Precinct No. 1, dwelling 29, family 31, Jarkent Binkley

Figure 4 1870 Manf Sch: Columbus, Colorado, Texas, J N Binkley

Figure 5 1860 Manf Sch: Precinct 1, Colorado, Texas, J N Binkley

Figure 6 Colorado County, Texas, population schedule, Columbus, dwelling 294, family 278, N A Snavely

Figure 7 1850 U.S. Census, Smyth County, Virginia, population schedule, District 60, dwelling 972, family 882, Nicholas Snavely

Follow the locations

				1850	1860	1870	1880	1900
Larkin Downs SECREST	1828	1904	76	Marshall, MI	Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX
Mary Jane DODSON	1840	1901	61	Unknown	Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX
Martha Eliza Mattie SECREST BISHOP	1857	1917	60		Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX
Blanch Mary SECREST SNAVELY LAWRENCE	1861	1960	99			Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Luling, Caldwell, TX
Ida Frances SECREST BARNETT	1864	1936	72			Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Galveston, Galveston, TX
Maude Della SECREST WHITE	1870	1901	31			Colorado, TX	Weimar, Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX
Larkie SECREST SANDERS SHERRILL	1873	1962	89				Weimar, Colorado, TX	San Marcos, Hays, TX
Flora Alice SECREST DUNLAVY	1875	1942	67				Weimar, Colorado, TX	Colorado, TX
John Dodson SECREST	1877	1932	55					Colorado, TX
Willia Myrtle SECREST MINTER	1881	1955	74					Colorado, TX
Clyle L SECREST	1884	1973	89					Colorado, TX

1c Jacob Scherer, born 2–7–1785. Guilford County, North Carolina; died 3–2–1860, near Columbus, Texas. Lutheran Minister, and farmer. Preached in both the German and English languages. Traveled extensively, on one trip making 1600 miles by horseback to Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee. Preached the first sermon in Dayton, Ohio, in the German language. Was minister of churches in Guilford, Orange, and Lincoln Counties, North Carolina, in Wythe County, Virginia, and near Columbus, Texas. His farm in Guilford County, North Carolina, was located south of Gibsonville. The Whitsett Institute is located on his home place. Married 1st Elizabeth Moser, 5–14–1810, Orange County, North Carolina. At her death, he married a widow, Mrs. Elizabeth Spoon, nee Grieson, or Greeson, a woman much younger than he. It is not known, except for the first two, which children were born to which wife. Three of his sons, Gideon, Simeon, and John Jacob, became ministers. In the publication, "Who's Who in America", 1930, it gives the genealogy of James Augustin Brown Sherer, a grandson, and here we learn that Simeon was born of Elizabeth Maser, which is evidence that at least four of the children were by her. Issue of Jacob is as follows. (Note facsimile of old letter)

Figure 8 http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=grantpinnix&id=I122611

SCHERER, GIDEON (1811–1861). Gideon Scherer, Lutheran minister and founder of Colorado College, was born near Rural Retreat, Wythe County, Virginia, the son of Jacob and Elizabeth (Spoon) Scherer, on December 2, 1811. He studied in a country school and probably received further formal training, for he was a practicing minister when, about 1852, he and his wife decided to come to Texas to minister to German Lutheran immigrants. The Scherers made their way by the Kanawha, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, then to Galveston, and finally to Columbus, where Scherer organized a church. He served as trustee for the congregation in the acquisition of a town lot and the construction of a church building, which was completed by 1854. In 1857 he and his brother, John Jacob Scherer, founded Colorado College in Columbus. Jacob Scherer, their father, who was also a minister and had come to Columbus in 1854 at the age of sixty-nine, taught in the college until his death. Gideon had three sons and two daughters. His wife died before 1860. In 1858 ill health compelled him to resign his ministry; he died in Columbus on June 2, 1861.

Figure 9 https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fsc06

Recommended Reading:

Communities of Kinship: Antebellum Families and the Settlement of the Cotton Frontier by Carolyn Earle Billingsley
https://books.google.com/books?id=3RxNKutfa0AC