

Researching family stories: seven tenets for genealogical sleuthing.

In March, 2023, sisters and co-authors Tracy Kasaboski and Kristen den Hartog presented *Digging Up Stories*, a genealogy workshop hosted by the Deep River Public Library as part of the project “Not Born From a Virgin Forest: Deep River & Area’s Earliest History.”



We are writers with a passion for history and matching, dog-with-a-bone attitudes to research. We'd like to share our seven tenets for genealogical sleuthing, and getting as much as you can out of the often murky waters of the past.

1. **Be Curious.** Ask questions, have conversations, listen. Ask relatives what they know about your family history, and if they have pictures, letters, stories to share. Talk to old neighbours and friends, if you have the chance. We heard a whole other perspective on a tragic event that happened to our family, and which we wrote about in *The Occupied Garden*, when we visited an old neighbour of our family in The Netherlands. Follow up on every clue, even if an anecdote seems unlikely to be accurate. Often there's a kernel of truth in the craziest story.
2. **Be Tenacious.** We lost track of the great-great aunt Ellen we were trying to write about in *The Cowkeeper's Wish*, somewhere in the murky 1890s. We'd seen her through childhood, marriage, and the births of many children, and then she disappeared from the census forms. Her husband didn't call himself a widower, but Ellen was gone. The search for her was fascinating — through workhouses, asylums, baby deaths and drunkenness — with much to be learned about our family's world along the way. So, look again in places you've looked before. And if that doesn't pan out, look again a while later. Especially with online research, record availability is constantly improving. And don't forget that not everything is online. If you can, visit local archives, libraries, family history and heritage centres. These places are a wealth of information that is most often not available with a computer search. Locally, check out The Schoolhouse Museum, the Nuclear Heritage Museum, the local history section of our three public libraries, as well as the Upper Ottawa Valley Genealogical Group's library in Pembroke.
3. **Be Methodical and Organized.** Keep track of where you look and what you find. Enthusiasm is a wonderful asset, but it can send you spinning. In searching for our elusive great-great aunt Ellen and other relatives through the various

workhouse ledgers, we retraced our steps more times than were necessary, only to trip over a familiar detail and realize “Oh, we’ve been here before.” It’s okay to retrace your steps if that’s your intention, of course, but it’s also frustrating to waste time if you thought you were onto something new! When we did pin down facts and information, we used a spreadsheet, colour-coded by family, type of record, and wider world events to help us understand context and perspective.

4. **Stay Open to Possibility.** Try various birth dates and name spellings when you’re searching for someone. Bizarre as it seems now, people’s names were not always spelled the same way each time they were recorded — even more often, names have been mis-transcribed in databases, and in these days of transcription by computers, interpretations can be quite haywire! In the case of our mysterious Ellen, when we finally found her, she was living with another man, and though they hadn’t married, she’d taken his last name. Ancestors can be maddeningly elusive, but they usually do leave bread crumbs. Think, too, about patterns of emigration. Here in the Ottawa Valley, many people came, and left, following logging industry jobs and opportunities. When researching the American Kidders, for example, who’d come to the Gatineau area around 1810 and drifted through the Ottawa Valley, we found that many of them and others like them had continued on to Michigan and points west when logging in the Valley began to dwindle.
5. **Be Meticulous.** One wrong assumption can change your lineage! Of course, it can be just as interesting to research someone else’s genealogical line, but you should always corroborate the evidence you find. When we found Ellen with a new man and a new name, we knew we had the right Ellen from an address given on multiple documents, and from details that surfaced in the casebook report when she was found “wandering insane.” Always be sure of your facts by checking original sources where possible, and don’t rely on someone else’s research. We’ve all seen those family trees posted online that record a person’s birth a mere three years after that same person’s mother’s. Hardly credible.
6. **Zoom In.** Once you find a person, dig deep. Where were they born, where have they lived, who lives near them, what is their job, what more can you find about that occupation or workplace, who did they marry, who witnessed the marriage, do they have children, have they lost children, how did their children die, and how did they themselves die, and was there an inquest, and where were they buried and in what kind of grave, and who else was buried there? Newspapers can yield great surprises, even if your family is full of ordinary Joes like ours. We found our cowkeeper Benjamin Jones getting bad press in the 1860s, charged with watering his milk and keeping filthy stables, and garnering the disapproval of the nuisance inspector. And, we found a bit more to the story of

Joseph Kidder in Clara Township, denigrated by The Pembroke Observer in 1875 for shooting a man and his son.

7. Zoom Out. Benjamin Jones's actions led us to investigate the grim world of cowkeeping in Victorian London, which in turn illuminated issues of poverty, class, health, crime, and philanthropy. By putting a family story in context, we learn not just about our own people, but also about how they lived in their particular environment — how it made them who they were, and how those realities informed whatever came next in the family tree. It isn't very satisfying to find out your ancestors were in workhouses without understanding what being in a workhouse meant, or why a workhouse existed in the first place. If your ancestors had cancer or went crazy or sank on a ship, find out what it was like to have cancer back then, or to be considered crazy, or to sink on a ship, or for that matter to be on a ship in a war with the enemy coming at you. Similarly, researching the Kidders of Clara Township here in the Ottawa Valley highlighted a time and place with few safety nets, no easily accessible law enforcement or medical attention, and the hardship and anguish of life and death in such a sparsely populated location.

Whether your research is in the slums of Victorian London, the bombed-out towns of World War II Europe, the remote 19th century Ottawa Valley, or someplace else altogether, enriching family stories with social history is an exhilarating, addictive task. And if history can enrich personal stories, then surely personal stories can enrich history. The big events of our world – poverty, war, immigration, social reform – take on new meaning when viewed through an intimate lens. Happy searching!



Ellen, discovered in the Stone Asylum casebook.
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