

Article

# Genealogy's Assumptions about Written Records and Originality

Stephen B. Hatton

Independent Researcher, Delaware, OH 43015, USA; StephenHatton@archeopath.info

**Abstract:** This article probes characteristics of writing relevant to assumptions genealogical practitioners make about written sources they use as evidence. Those infrequently examined assumptions include the assumption that writing represents past reality, that truth univocally denotes correspondence between writing's discourse and an event or act that occurred in the past, and that writing is transparent in its reference and, therefore, not in need of critical interpretation relating to such things as reflecting political power and cultural and social perspectives. Many genealogical records are produced by bureaucratic organizations that follow practices and processes related to writing that are not aligned with the uncritical use of those records by genealogists. There is a gap between writing and what it signifies. Writing is unstable, and its evolving material technologies make it susceptible to loss and damage. The article also overviews some potential issues with assuming that the originality of records implies greater reliability.

**Keywords:** originality; record; reliability; representation; source; writing



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Writing's Content

This article is about theoretical assumptions family genealogists make about writing as such; it is not about writing's content. However, before turning attention to theoretical concerns, a brief discussion of some content issues is in order.

Serious genealogists—well-trained and experienced practitioners—are aware that there are degrees of reliability among record sources and also levels of certitude in their conclusions. Unlike many amateur genealogists, they use indexes, transcripts, abstracts, and secondary (authored) sources not as evidence or to draw conclusions but as finding aids for the base, or original, records from which they are derived. During the process of indexing, transcribing, abstracting, and copying, errors are often introduced and facts are transformed and sometimes distorted. Experienced genealogists are also cognizant of common kinds of errors, such as spellings of surnames, incorrect dates, omission of critical data, and other kinds of factual misstatements that may exist even in original or near-original records. If not recognized, these errors can lead to incorrect personal identities, false lineages, and erroneous familial relations. Experienced genealogists learn from experts who present relevant topics at conferences, publish case studies in peer-reviewed journals, and write books. Whether they are interested in doing research in the United Kingdom (see, for example, (Hey 1993; Rowlands and Rowlands 1999; Durie 2017; Osborn 2012; Evans 2015)), Mexico (see, for example, (Ryskamp 1984; Ryskamp and Ryskamp 2007; Garza 2014)), or other countries and regions, they learn from those with research knowledge and experience in those places.

Surnames were frequently spelled phonetically based upon the recorder's native language, dialect, local pronunciation practices, and education. A German example of surname spelling variation appears in one Merchingen, Baden volume of church records. The variants are Kilgen (Merchingen 1647–1963), Kilgens (Merchingen 1647–1963), Kilgin (Merchingen 1647–1963), and Kiligin (Merchingen 1647–1963). A Mexican example is

Francisco Antonio Ladron de Guevara ([San Gerónimo 1779–1786](#)). He appeared later in life as Francisco Guevara ([San Gerónimo 1779–1925](#)). Even greater differences in name spellings emerge during research, and some have been documented in journals and elsewhere (for example, [Findlen 2017](#)). Serious genealogists also take the time to learn handwriting used in the records of interest and realize that some recorders had almost illegible handwriting.

These and similar issues are matters related to the content of written records. They have been addressed in introductory books about genealogy and at genealogy conferences and will not be further discussed.

This article explores unexamined assumptions serious genealogists make as they do genealogical research. Although the theoretical aspects of writing discussed herein are well known to scholars involved in other disciplines of historical investigation, there is a need to raise awareness of them with genealogical practitioners so that they may more thoughtfully and accurately evaluate evidence and more knowledgeably propose conclusions. Examples of specific instances related to original records appear later in this article.

### *1.2. Theoretical Consideration of Writing*

Genealogists use written records because they describe, document, and note actions and events of interest to them. Genealogical proof statements, summaries, and arguments rely upon written source documents. However, although much has been written about how to use written records and especially original written records ([Mills 2007](#), pp. 21–33; [Osborn 2012](#); [Jones 2012](#); [Anderson 2014](#); [BCG 2019](#), pp. 23–24), there has been little or no examination by genealogical practitioners of the nature of written sources as such. This article examines some assumptions about writing and originality made by genealogy as its practitioners consult and build proofs based on written sources. While drawing at times from the writings of thinkers who contrast literacy and orality, and engaging in dialogue with those threads of thought, it problematizes those genealogical assumptions neither to denigrate writing nor to elevate alternative kinds of sources, such as oral narratives. The purpose is to advance thinking about and solidifying this crucial foundation of modern genealogy. Though very few genealogists are aware of or interested in their discipline's theoretical underpinnings, their practice nevertheless rests upon them. What follows brackets discussion of such practical guidelines as the use of multiple sources to corroborate and build or defend a proof statement or argument.

The practice of genealogy makes unexamined assumptions about consulted writings, whether these sources are preferred or not. These writings are assumed to consist of marks representative of past reality. Writing is viewed as fixed, or unchangeable. For genealogy, writing freezes accurate memory in ink and paper. As currently practiced, original sources are viewed as less likely to contain textual errors, and information in them is less exposed to errors of memory and copying. They enable genealogists to avoid the pitfalls of using error-prone copies and increase the likelihood of utilizing primary information that is provided by eye and ear witnesses to the events documented. Examples abound of errors arising in the process of copying, abstracting, extracting, and rewriting. Texts created near in time to the activities they relate are given preference in genealogical research.

However, it is questionable whether writing as such is fixed and has frozen accuracy. Original records are sometimes unreliable because they carry individual, organizational, and societal prejudices in their words, phrases, and tones. The goals and uses of organizations that create these documents depend upon processual efficiency and bureaucratic requirements that may work counter to the objectives of genealogists.

This article will step back from considering the immediately practical use of records. It will instead focus on some of the assumptions underlying practical guidelines by exploring questions and issues concerning the use of written sources as such and about the idea of preferring original written sources. It will do so largely from the perspectives of anthropology and archival studies. It discusses textual issues, memory, writing, and errors as they relate to literacy, originality, and genealogy. It rethinks the strength of written records and the preference for the use of original writings in genealogical research. While

problematizing the ontological realist view of history, it avoids historicist relativism, and instead highlights the importance of being aware of the sociology of reality construction.

## 2. Assumption That Writing Represents Past Reality

### 2.1. *The Enlightenment's Influence*

Perhaps the most basic question involving written records and their use in genealogical research is whether they represent past reality, or at least that idea requires thinking about in what way they do or do not represent past reality. Genealogists assume that they do because they use written documents as evidence to prove that things happened or that people stood in certain relations to others. Written evidence is used to prove or refute claims and hypotheses about real-world events in the past (Yeo 2007, p. 322). Archivists protect records and establish provenance to preserve their reliability and authenticity. All of these ideas assume a specific theoretical and philosophical viewpoint associated with our modern admiration for and thinking in terms of empirical science broadly conceived. The epistemological foundations of this worldview come from the thinking of English Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke (Locke [1690] 1959), and some of his fellow thinkers. They thought that empirical inquiry, experience, and observation of facts and phenomena are associated with and give evidence of truth and the knowledge of truth (Locke [1690] 1959; MacNeil 2001, pp. 37–39). Locke's thinking was influenced by the earlier philosophical thoughts of English philosopher Francis Bacon, who based his system of knowledge on the experimental method (Bacon [1620] 1960), and of French philosopher René Descartes, who argued that a method should be founded in the order of knowing rather than being (Descartes [1637] 1969).

According to this view, inquiry establishes both truth and knowledge. Observation makes truth. In this context, genealogists assume that knowledge about genealogical reality is obtained by examining written records which therefore are treated as documentary windows onto real events. However, documents are traces that need to be understood as such and only then used to interpret the past (Derrida 1978, p. 230; Ricoeur 1988, pp. 116–20; Ginzburg 1989, pp. 101–104; Kleinberg 2017, p. 128). Genealogical documents are discourses about the past, and there is a need to unpack what is meant by “about” in that phrase. It is also fitting to reflect on the present reality of discourse before drawing conclusions about the past reality of that about which the discourse refers (Foucault 2010, p. 14). At times source writings are the objects of focus beyond their referential role vis à vis past events (Vismann 2008, p. 10; Smith 1990, pp. 120–23).

One places unfounded trust in written language when one views it as representative of reality or as authoritatively determining what reality is (Barad 2003, pp. 801–803). For myriad reasons, one cannot know what reality is, as represented independent of the representation and representor. The past is beyond the reach of observation and empirical research—one cannot test it in a laboratory. How representation is conceived has undergone a genealogy (Foucault 1970). What knowledge is, and what and how one knows the past have evolved over time.

Genealogy, as practiced in the early twenty-first century, has not assimilated important developments regarding historical and theoretical truth. It has largely ignored thinking about history from nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel onward, and most notably the study of historiography in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Philosophers have illustrated that correspondence to observable phenomena is just one among several ways of viewing truth. How one assesses truth value, in this case, evidence found in written records, is rooted in how one views the world, and whether or not records bear testimony to happenings in the real world. Some oral cultures regard truth differently and do not view written documents as evidence of historical truth (McKenzie 1999, pp. 124–25).

The truth that genealogy is concerned with is not (just) about determining what “really” happened in the past but about uncovering appearance, of making (but not “making up”) in the sense of bringing forth to presence. It is concerned with historical, cultural, material, and emotional context, and about motivation, beliefs, and the thoughts of those in the

past. It is about the meaning and effect of the past on some person or group in the present. This approach requires an alternate view of history. Truth is a process, not an end state; or, more precisely, it is the whole, including the process and the substance. Hegel wrote “the true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development” (Hegel [1807] 1977, p. 11). Moreover, there is truth in writing that does not make direct assertions about the real world. Truth exists in poetry (Aristotle 1984; Heidegger 1971, pp. 91–142; Rapaport 1997, pp. 110–43) and fiction (Riffaterre 1990; Gibson 2007), for example.

## 2.2. Historical Vantage Point

History and views of history change. Cultures and societies at different times and in various places viewed the world differently. One’s view of truth, of history, and of knowledge depends on when and where one lived or lives, and on what one’s upbringing, education, experience, occupation, inheritance, etc. were or are. That is one reason why every reading of a given written record may result in a different interpretation (Monteith 2010, p. 126). A genealogist necessarily views history from the vantage point of her culture. Yet although the genealogist is part of the historical process she is trying to understand, she also must be concerned with the historical situation of the period being researched and of the relevant evidence (Momigliano 1977, pp. 367, 371).

Writings occur in history, in a spatial location and at a historical time, and are born out of that history—its language, culture, beliefs, and practices (Barber 2007, pp. 4, 29, 92). The original social entity that creates a record has an impact not only on the physical nature of the record (Trace 2002, p. 147) but also on the social manner in which it works at the time it is created. The reality referenced by the document and the reality of the interpreting genealogist are largely socially constructed (Marx [1932] 1964; Dilthey [1910] 2002; Scheler [1926] 1980; Berger and Luckmann 1966). Records are created, maintained, and used in socially organized ways. Most are created by and for organizations (Trace 2002, pp. 152–53, 155). Very few are created for genealogists. As history progresses, the ideas, beliefs, principles, and practices develop to the extent that they change how one reads and interprets those writings. What a record meant or was intended to mean, and how the record was used may differ from the meaning and use at the time and in the place occupied by the genealogist consulting it. Moreover, as discussed above, understanding, taking, and using information contained in a record source as evidence of something that occurred in the past is an act of interpretation, a hermeneutic creation of a past from a present which, as such, is historically conditioned (Partner 1986, p. 108).

## 2.3. Power’s Effect on Writing

One’s situation in history affects not only how one interprets a written record’s meaning, but also its fundamental relation to and with reality. Genealogists view a written record as reflecting truth unless it can be shown to reflect falsity or ambiguity. In great contrast, the Nambikwara of Brazil and others associated writing with falsehood or suspicion (Lévi-Strauss 1961, p. 293). That may be because writing is frequently used to exert control over someone, to exercise power, to alter reality, and to enslave (Lévi-Strauss 1961, p. 292; Derrida 1976, p. 101; McKenzie 1999, p. 128; McKemmish 2005, p. 19).

“And when we consider the first uses to which writing was put, it would seem quite clear that it was connected first and foremost with power: it was used for inventories, catalogues, censuses, laws and instructions; in all instances, whether the aim was to keep a check on material possessions or on human beings, it is evidence of the power exercised by some men over other men and over worldly possessions” (Charbonnier and Lévi-Strauss 1969, p. 30; see also (Goody 1986, p. 63)).

One is advised to carefully study not only the author’s intent and potential prejudices and reasons for under- or over-stating the truth, but also what the views and practices of truth, knowledge, and power were at the time, and what the political and religious, etc. milieu was that might condition or influence how or whether the record was intended to

convey facts. One must also be aware of what truth is as twenty-first century genealogists conceive it, and the differences between that and truth as it was conceived by the author or recorder of the record. These could change how one views writing, records, knowledge, and truth itself. The hermeneutic of genealogy, just as much as of history, involves, among other things, conceptually moving from fugitive fragments of records that exist in the present to an intelligible account of a much larger past through an imaginative refiguration (Partner 1986, p. 110).

Documents in archives, courthouses, churches, and other places do not primarily report facts or what “really” happened in the sense of an empirical correspondence to “reality,” an indefensible position in light of the intellectual history of historiography in the last century and more. Written texts create a narrative to persuade people to a certain set of beliefs that pronounce a cultural practice. They promulgate a political agenda (Trouillot 1995). In this sense, written texts are dissociated from genealogists’ views of what is accurate or reliable and instead articulate a perspective in which otherwise nameless people came face to face with a power structure designed to sustain a system of subjection and control. Writing accommodates a power structure just as much as it describes events (Farge 2013, p. 25; McKemmish 2005, pp. 18–19). An archival document proclaims a punctum in which a common individual collided with political and legal authority (Farge 2013, p. 30). Historian Carlo Ginzburg writes that “in any society the conditions of access to the production of documentation are tied to a situation of power and thus create an inherent imbalance” (Ginzburg 2012, p. 202). This is why French philosopher Jacques Derrida could declare that archivization “produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1996, p. 17). An event occurs in writing just as much as or perhaps more so than in an action or previous temporal happening described in writing. This is independent of the performativity of such documents as contracts whose words enact the agreement or action described in the document. Even the selection, management, and institutionalization of archives involve execution of power (Schwartz and Cook 2002).

#### 2.4. Recorder’s Influence on Writing

Moreover, a recorder’s training and belief will shape written records irrespective of the above discussion. They will determine content, phrasing, degree of completeness (for example, too much detail, omitting things), and accuracy. Though important, establishing motive and honesty does not suffice. The recorder in most cases belonged to and was often remunerated by an organization that may have been a government, business, religious, military, or other social group. The recorder’s intentions may not coincide with what genealogists consider a requirement for an accurate description of what happened.

A document reflects what its recorder believed to be the truth (Ketelaar 2008, p. 10), although there are exceptions to this. A record-keeper’s goals (and her organization’s goals) and the organization’s planned future uses of the record mold that record (Trace 2002, pp. 144, 153). Records that genealogists use were produced and used for other socially organized purposes (Trace 2002, p. 152). Organizations design work processes and actions for their benefit, and these may present obstacles for the genealogist who uses the records produced by such organizations.

### 3. Plato on Writing

The usual reasons given for valuing written records highly are that some writings are often created soon after or at the same time as the activity or transaction they document, and that written records freeze memories because they do not change. They preserve and thus strengthen memories. Still another reason is that a written record can be authenticated, that is, proven to be what it says it is. However, there are a number of problems with that view of written records, and it overlooks important characteristics of writing that call into question those advantages.

The assumptions that writing recorded soon after the activity or transaction they document are preferred and that written records freeze memories because they do not

change have been called into question by numerous thinkers as early as classical Greek philosopher Plato. Plato pointed out problems with that way of thinking.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the character Socrates relates the story of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented writing as well as other things. Theuth told Thamus the king that writing would improve memory, but the king opined that writing would plant the seeds of forgetfulness and that people's memories would decline as a result. The king believed that writing would cause people to no longer remember by using their memories but by reading written marks (Plato 1961, 274c–275b). Socrates continued his dialogue with Phaedrus by stating that writing does not provide something reliable and permanent (Plato 1961, 275c–d). If the intent of writing is to preserve memory, it misses its mark because the more one relies on writing the less one relies on memory. One of the main reasons is that, in contrast to a person with whom one can converse to elicit more knowledge, writing repeats itself "telling you just the same thing forever" (Plato 1961, 275d). The more reliant one becomes on writing to remind one of what happened, the more likely one is to forget. Second, writing is dispersed in space and time and in that process gets misinterpreted because the author is not present to explain and answer questions about it (Plato 1961, 275e). Writing cannot speak in its own defense and cannot adequately present the truth. Writing does not respond to questions from its readers. These reasons imply that writing is separated from what it signifies, results in forgetfulness, and is unstable. However, Plato's discussion contrasts writing with spoken dialogue but does not oppose them (Foucault 2010, pp. 329–30; but see (Derrida 1981, pp. 143–45)).

### 3.1. Writing Is Separated from What It Signifies

Explaining her view that sexual difference is a matter of experience and not identity, Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero founds her claim on the uniqueness of voices—no two lives are the same; "they spring from different throats" (Cavarero and Bertolino 2008, p. 130). Cavarero explains that the voice as a phenomenon is corporeal and non-textual.

The speaking voice is immediately connected to what its speech signifies. The voice links to the mind that speaks as well as to the mind that listens and responds. One remembers the voice, the oral speech, and its significance.

In contrast, writing is more removed from what it signifies as is implied by Plato's dramatized arguments. It is disembodied, disembedded relative to the body and corporeal mind. Derrida explained that a written signifier is derivative from the voice and so is never original (Derrida 1976, p. 16.). In that sense there is no such thing as an original written record. It is always based on the oral spoken or a non-verbal act. Derrida also argued that writing is a forgetting of the self and voice, and is exteriorization (Derrida 1976, p. 24) in the sense that writing is in the world disconnected from the body that produced it and from the unique voice that expresses. That is quite different than the interiorization of memory. Thus, writing is more removed from the events it relates than oral speech, making it less amenable to soundness of genealogical proof all other things considered being equal.

### 3.2. Writing Results in Forgetfulness

Derrida's point that writing splits the self and the oral from significance relative to speech brings to mind Plato's suggestion that writing leads to forgetfulness. From that perspective, orality has benefits over literacy because it participates in dialogue, answering questions and explaining itself in dialogic interchange with others. Memories of experiences, activities, and transactions are formed without writing and prior to it. Writing follows oral speech (but is not recorded speech) (Boone 1984, p. 5) and physical or mental actions and objects (Rappaport 1984, pp. 271, 273; Rotman 2008, pp. 2, 15; Ostler 2005, p. 11). Derrida stated that "writing, a mnemotechnic means, supplanting good memory, signifies forgetfulness" (Derrida 1976, p. 37). While most believe that a written text serves to preserve memories communicated in oral speech, from this perspective, it is the opposite. Oral poetry, for example, can protect memories from the decay initiated by inscription in

writing (Saussy 2016, p. 6). Another example is that one remembers childhood rhymes not from reading them in a written text but because of the impression made by their sing-song rhythms, rhymes, dances, and gestures years prior. Illiterate societies preserved memories in oral narratives that retained essential points of past actions and details about genealogical lineage.

A written text escapes the control of the author once it gets read, used, and interpreted by others, as Plato observed. A recorder of a text often cannot or does not clarify what was meant after it is published. For these reasons and more, writing's meaning changes as people interpret it differently. Written texts change their meaning over time as texts are repeatedly read and interpreted. Interpretation of the same text evolves as understanding deepens, experiences are gained, and history progresses (Barber 2007, pp. 29, 67, 92, 145, 201, 218). Thus, it is questionable whether written records are fixed or guarantee stability (Barber 2007, pp. 68, 201).

An author writes for readers. A reader reads something written by an author who is absent. The writing then gets read by another reader whether during the lifetime of the first reader or not. In either case, the first reader is absent (independent from the second reader or dead) to the second reader. However, if one thinks back to the original writing, the reader is absent to the writer. Thus, writing is done in the context of absence, which highlights the significance of interpretation.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote about writing's dialectic of distancing (separation between us and the written text in time and space, and involving one's sense of cultural estrangement) and appropriation (Ricoeur 1977, p. 14). For him, appropriation occurs in reading. Reading is an attempt to rescue the written text from distancing. This dialectic suppresses yet preserves the distance from us of a written text.

### 3.3. *Writing Is Unstable*

Written texts also require effort to preserve them. They get lost, disintegrate, burn, and become altered, forgotten, and damaged. Often, the originals disappear and what survive are multiple versions (Barber 2007, pp. 68, 101, 218; MacNeil 2005, p. 270; McKenzie 1999, pp. 36–37).

There is a profound irony about writing. Insofar as its marks are set, it is defective. That is because a piece of writing is, at one level, equally accessible to anyone who can read whether they read carefully or not. The legible marks inscribed on a substrate present the same materiality to all who read them. On the other hand, regardless of the format and genre of the writing, it simultaneously says different things to different readers. Readers may understand what is said differently because (a) some people have read other texts that a specific text alludes to or assumes have previously been read (intertextuality) (Barthes 1986, pp. 60–61); (b) some have life experiences that open up shades of meaning and comprehension not available to those lacking those experiences; (c) some can recognize dissimulation and hints hidden in the text; (d) they possess knowledge gained through education or experience that enables them to extract meaning or relate information imparted by the writing to other information previously obtained. One person may declare that a written record supports a claim that a more experienced person declares does precisely the contrary. Thus, writing does and does not avail itself of equal accessibility—its physical marks are equally accessible to various people but its meaning gets interpreted and constructed differently by different readers (Strauss 1964, p. 52). In this sense, writing is unstable. Its meaning, or significance, changes and, therefore, its use may evolve in application as evidence. Writing requires readers to interpret it (Eco 1979; Tompkins 1980; Fowler 1991).

### 3.4. *Writing Is Language Made Material and Depends on Technology*

Writing is materialized language. That is an underlying reason why it is separated from what it signifies, results in forgetfulness, and is unstable. Once written, material inscriptions and the material substrate on which its marks are made can be erased, destroyed,

and lost. Writing is thus transient; yet its materiality also potentially makes the writing gain influence because it invades the time and space of the world in which one lives, moves, and works, and can be geographically distributed and spread across time by replication in libraries, bookstores, and on the Internet (Haas 1996, pp. 3, 5). Repositories and archives are collections and holdings of material documents, and part of their mission is to fight against the natural inclination to deteriorate their not-so-frozen physical fonds. Perhaps counterintuitively, that collection is not frozen because of its physical instability and its evolving signification.

In the Middle Ages and earlier, speech involved performance in the sense of interactions between voices and bodies. In that respect, the medieval culture had a corporeal conception of language and writing. Writing is materialized inscription with a stronger visual effect on the senses (Müller 1994, p. 38). It externalizes its communication by means of a voiceless materiality in contrast to orality's voiced corporality.

Writing's materiality is conditioned by technology. Different technologies have different constraints and possibilities related to the materiality of their writing. Technology is what makes writing material. The materiality applies to the substrate, the legible markings, and the tools used to prepare and shape both. One of the key contributors to the instability of writing is changing technology and its accompanying loss of knowledge, tools, markings, and substrates of replaced technologies.

Inscription formats vary depending on the technologies, materials, and methods they use. Wax, parchment, magnetic tape, various digital recordings, photographic film, stone, and papyrus determine the form that the material writing takes. Each uses different recording tools including stylus, chisel and hammer, pen, camera, tape recorder, and various write-devices used with computers. The substrata of written transmissions alter the functioning of their messages and their content (Debray 2000, p. 95).

Technologies evolve, sometimes quickly. Notation systems are forgotten, and this tendency contributes to forgetfulness. Today's scholars cannot read much of what was recorded in *quipu*, an ancient Inca empire notation system of knotted and colored strings. It appears that the ancient Incas were concerned about losing the meaning of the recorded *quipu*, and so expert *quipu* interpreters, or *quipucamayocs*, were employed to memorize and retell orally the meaning inscribed in the *quipu* (Mazzotti 2008, pp. 47–55). Some inks of handwriting fade over time, the ability to read some scripts deteriorates over time, and marks made on heat-sensitive paper from the 1970s are now sometimes almost illegible. Without a Rosetta stone, petroglyphs and other ancient notations are very difficult to decipher.

Additionally, important, but not to be further explored herein, is that writing itself is a technology. More than a medium, it is one of the more consequential technologies invented by humanity. It and machine and computer technologies shape culture and the constitution of human subjectivity (Guattari 1995, p. 2; Barthes 1986, pp. 18–19; Rotman 2008, pp. 81–82).

### 3.5. Writing Depends on Orality to Be Authenticated

In England before the thirteenth century, recording meant giving oral testimony to an event or phenomenon. That was before literacy was widespread and at a time when the spoken word was more trustworthy than a written document (Clanchy 1993, pp. 3, 77, 193, 295; McKenzie 1999, p. 125). In the Middle Ages, to pass information from a written record to the illiterate required a literate person to read the document aloud. In court, litigants were required to speak the truth about transactions and actions. This historical primacy of orality survives to this day. Witnesses to a will are asked to aver that they witnessed the will, and that the testator understood the meaning of the content of the last will and testament. Plaintiffs and defendants are asked to testify, and to authenticate their signatures and the documents they signed and wrote. This is a remnant from a world before Locke when truth had little to do with observation, and written sources were infrequently used in genealogical research. Some of these words are boilerplate reminders



of a time when business was conducted before most of its participants could read. These placekeepers have been repeated so often that their original meanings are often obscured, but some at one time helped to maintain the pace of a spoken narrative.

Some of the more influential written texts began with oral telling and retelling, repeatedly spoken before being committed to writing. Some biblical texts and the texts of Homer circulated first as oral narratives and sayings. Indeed, “texts” most likely to survive great lengths of time—myths—were orally created and transmitted (Barber 2007, p. 72).

Written texts are societal facts and acts. They act; they do something. Some texts are performative (Austin 1975, pp. 4–11), or dispositive (Yeo 2010, p. 96). Their writing enacts (does) what it is they write about—their writing is the act and the doing. Other written documents attest to an oral performative enactment. Often texts, including some frequently used in genealogical research, are this kind of writing. The execution of a written contract is an example of performativity in writing. A judge or minister declaring “I now pronounce you husband and wife” is an example of oral performativity that is implied in a written marriage return. To understand this kind of written document requires recognizing the intended performativity. In this role, such written documents do not just tell facts but also enact facts.

#### 4. Originality

Tom Jones (Jones 2012) and others (BCG 2019, pp. 23–24) have recognized that preferred sources may contain errors and that sources often ignored by genealogists contain accurate information. The following section discusses some reasons why original sources, frequently espoused as being preferred, may not be accurate in certain situations.

##### 4.1. Multiple Versions of a Record

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that the use of the word “fixed” in any conception of “written record” is tenuous and questionable. Writing’s substrates erode, break, tear, burn, and get misplaced. Its marks fade, wear away, and get erased. Its meaning gets interpreted differently (Plato 1961, 275d–e). In terms of originality, the earliest written account of an event is sometimes a translation of an oral account of the event.

Consider two versions of a written account of an event. Source version 1 is written first, and source version 2 is written second. There are number of possibilities with respect to originality, accuracy, and, therefore, reliability. Two will be discussed.

Scenario 1: Version 2 is a copy of version 1 and contains copying errors. In this case version 1 is more accurate and should be used by the genealogist, assuming it survives. However, something of value may be learned by determining how and why the errors occurred in version 2. Errors may yield information. If version 1 does not survive, there may be evidence that version 2 is a copy (for example, its event and creation dates compared to the normal span of time between that kind of event and the recording by the organization responsible for it).

Scenario 2: Version 2 is an edited revision of version 1 which may have been hurriedly made without checking spelling, grammar, and facts. If version 2 was created by the same author or organization as version 1, it may be a corrected revision and thus be more accurate than version 1. In this case, it is legitimate to consider both versions as original (McKenzie 1999, pp. 36–37). One may usefully compare the versions, assuming both survive. In some examples of this situation, version 2 may correct an error in version 1, and also introduce another error in the process. For example, a careful examination of two copies of the 1830 census for Manchester Township, Morgan County, Ohio, U. S. shows that the first copy is accurate with respect to the order in which the residents are listed, but the second copy is more accurate concerning name spellings (NARA 1830, pp. 28–33, 113–18; for a demonstration that these township data reflect geographic order, see Hatton 2015, pp. 50–56).

This raises a potential trade-off for the genealogist: favoring temporal originality to minimize errors of copying versus favoring a later version to maximize error correction.

This might also be considered a trade-off between errors in recording versus errors in both copying and corrections in editing. Regardless of these elements of accuracy, one must also consider errors of interpretation discussed in the earlier sections about writing in general. The genealogist is encouraged to check all versions to gain maximum value from them.

Two versions may have been independently produced by separate authors. Each version can relate the same event from different perspectives calling to mind the movie *Rashomon* that relates multiple witnesses' versions of a crime (Kurosawa 1950). In this scenario, version 2 is neither a copy of version 1 nor an edited version. Each is original. This is a common situation encountered in genealogical research in which there are multiple original sources pertaining to a single event. They may or may not involve factual conflict. When they do, it is not necessarily the case that one must choose between them. That is because both may be accurate once perspective is considered, and because truth is not always a unitary value proposition.

#### 4.2. Primary Information

Another key consideration is the distinction between an original source and primary information. Primary information is contained in a source and is given by someone who participated in or observed an event or transaction (BCG 2019, p. 82). There is correlation between the two. However, it is possible for primary information to be contained in a derivative source for various reasons, and secondary information to be contained in an original source. One such situation is when an eyewitness informant reports a transaction to the recorder of an authored source written long after the event, whereas the recorder of an original source relies on a hearsay account. An ex-soldier who applied for a military pension long after serving might have required witnesses with direct knowledge of his service. Someone who served with him may have provided primary information about the soldier's service many years later.

#### 4.3. Situations of Unreliable Original Records

There are numerous situations in which an original source may be unreliable. Some are:

- It may lack the perspective of time required to ascertain what happened, to locate a witness, or to digest the information in an objective manner.

Example: War of 1812 Captain John Roberts was presumed dead in 1814 according to a muster roll taken in August 1814 (Montgomery 1907, p. 31). In fact, he was taken prisoner by the British during the Battle of Bridgewater on 25 July 1814 as was documented in his insolvency petition filed during the Panic of 1819 (Cumberland Co. Pennsylvania Prothonotary 1819; Hatton 2012, p. 50). One might argue that both are original records because neither depends on the other, but the insolvency petition created five years after his presumed death was not derivative, and was correct.

- As a subset of the time-perspective reason, an original source might document a trauma experienced by the author or related to the recorder by the victim. That may decrease the likelihood of accuracy.

Example: Many harrowing, gruesome, and anguished first-hand accounts were written about Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps including those by Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Olga Lengyel, and others (Wiesel 1960; Levi 1993; Lengyel 1995; Nyiszli 1993; Müller 1979; Nomberg-Przytyk 1985). However, studies have shown that a trauma causes one's observation mechanisms to malfunction, and that victims of trauma are intent on survival more than noting empirical facts. Trauma is an experience beyond comprehension for the victim and witness (Felman and Laub 1992, pp. 57, 62, 78, 81, 205; LaCapra 2014, p. 186). Representations in writing of a trauma result in a rupture from the object represented rather than a harmony with a historical event (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2001, pp. 2, 4). Traumas are discontinuous with historical time. This is not to suggest that

any one or all of the aforementioned accounts are inaccurate, but that one must take into account the impact trauma may have had on historical accounts.

- The recorder may have been emotionally involved in the event which could impact objectivity.

Example: James Gascoyne-Cecil, the second Marquis of Salisbury in the 1830s, was involved in the administration of the new poor law in his community and on his estates, as is evidenced by his establishing a workhouse in Hatfield. Original records such as private correspondence between Lord Salisbury and members of the Royal Commission, as well as reports from the commissioners about input from the Hatfield workhouse master, give evidence that Lord Salisbury favorably influenced the Poor Law Commission in formulating the poor law (Rothery 2020, pp. 2–3). This demonstrates that emotional involvement does not always degrade the reliability of the original document, but may have had a positive effect.

- The recorder may have had conscious or subconscious prejudices that influenced an account's objectivity.

Example: One of the more famous U. S. original documents contains prejudicial statements. The Declaration of Independence includes a complaint that "He [King George III] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions" (Declaration of Independence 1776). This prejudice against Native Americans continued in government-sanctioned massacres, required settlements on reservations, and forced harmful journeys. This is an example that does not lessen the original document's genuineness.

- The recorder may have had a personal motive such as standing to gain money, fame, or status.

Example: Based on original records including both his U.S. Civil War enlistment (McKinley et al. 1891, p. 686) and the 1870 U.S. census (NARA 1870, p. 44), Simon Fought, who died in Columbus, Ohio in 1874, was born in 1817–18. However, thorough research shows that he was born on 11 January 1809 (Hatton 2014, pp. 141–44; for a case study of someone whose age was overstated see Burroughs 2019, pp. 245–58). One possible motive for Simon Fought understating his age is that he was fifteen years older than his wife and was embarrassed about the age difference. Another possibility is that he was intent on participating in the Civil War and understated his age so that he qualified for service which had a maximum age for enlistment.

For a hypothetical case, one of several siblings to the estate of a father who left a will evenly dividing his possessions among the siblings produced a written will post-dating the former will. That latter will, dated the day before the father's death, left everything to the heir who witnessed the will. One may suspect the later will because the sole inheriting heir had a personal motive of gaining wealth.

- The earliest record might be fake, or intentionally inaccurate.

Example: One of the earlier and well-known forgeries was the Roman imperial decree in which Constantine donated authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to Pope Sylvester. This supposedly fourth-century decree was probably created in the eighth century. It was proven to be a forgery by fifteenth-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (Valla [1440] 2007). There are a number of other influences and circumstances that may make an original source suspect with respect to accuracy.

There is evidence that memory degrades over time, particularly in matters of detailed facts though perhaps not so much in matters related to moods, tones, associations with strong sensations, and muscle memory. However, it is also the case that in some circumstances long-term memory may be more accurate than short-term memory. Original accounts are most often based on short-term memory which may be faulty. Someone may better remember a transaction or action after some time has passed. Time gives perspective,

moderates biases, and allows one to compare memories with those of others (Halbwachs 1950). That is why some histories may be more accurate than contemporary accounts about the relation among events or even about what happened. This is an argument to consider using an original source for which the first recording was delayed or using a non-original source if it was carefully researched.

Literacy increased in the general population as writing became used more by religious organizations but especially by political and legal organizations. Legal documents affecting private citizens gave the latter an incentive to learn to read. However, some legal documents were weaponized politically to control citizens (McKenzie 1999, p. 124) and to limit their freedom. Such records enacted taxes, limited the use of commons, restricted trade and barter, and controlled behavior. Such documents also empowered states to rule over colonies. Legal written sources were sometimes designed to legitimize subjugation of enslaved populations or to oppress people based on race, gender, class, education, and occupation. In some cases, original sources inaccurately described events or misinterpreted events to support those in power. Contemporary alternate texts sometimes used hidden messages, satire, and comedy to voice opposition, to protest, and to try to correctly state or restate history (Strauss [1952] 1980; Ahl 1984, pp. 174–208; Lerner 2009; Melzer 2014).

A genealogist faces challenges when working with sources. Detecting subtle bias is a challenge unless the researcher takes the time to understand the undercurrents and context of society in the times and places being researched and of the researcher.

#### 4.4. Reliability

Experienced genealogists know that originality does not guarantee reliability. Learning about the society, its mores, morals, beliefs, and motives is essential in doing genealogical research. Becoming aware of the tools and methods of diplomatics (largely overlooked by genealogists), textual criticism, archival and organizational processes, and reasoning with textual variability and inconsistency are important in many research situations. The study of diplomatics arose as a result of forged religious and legal documents (Duranti 1998; Vismann 2008, pp. 74–75). It involves internal examination of physical characteristics, seals, signatures, phrases and word usage, and forensic techniques related to such things as ink, paper, and handwriting style. Textual criticism is used to reconstruct an original text in cases where the original is missing. It analyzes differences and resemblances among multiple versions to trace textual lineage. Both of these methods, as well as scholarly philology and meticulous historical knowledge, are critically essential to detect forgery (Grafton 1990).

Additionally, some genealogists treat some sources as original when they are not. A deed in a deed book is often a copy of a separate previously produced deed document. A will in a county will book was likely copied from an original holographic will written in the hand of or typed or printed by an attorney or the testator and signed or marked by the testator. This applies to many records of genealogical interest.

## 5. Discussion

Some genealogists lack appreciation for the complexities and indirectness of writing. Being focused on praxis, some are uninterested in thinking about writing as such and also about historiography. Consequently, genealogy's research, reasoning, and writing lack theoretical self-awareness.

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's term "monologic," (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 269–74), Ginzburg has demonstrated that some documents such as the Inquisition trials of accused witches appear dialogic but are monologic because the respondents echoed their inquisitors' questions perhaps out of fear, intimidation, or to placate their accusers (Ginzburg 1989, pp. 158–60). Some genealogical documents that might be thought of as monologic (for examples, birth, marriage, death, tax, and census records) because they seemingly reflected the statements solely of informants (parents, grooms, residents, etc.), are dialogic because the answers were in response to questions posed by clerks, auditors, and tax collectors. However, they

were dialogic also in the sense in which recorders transformed some information for the sake of consistency with other documents or with the recorder's values, phonetics, and their bureaucracy's requirements. If genealogists pay close attention to the underlying dialogue, they may get close to the truth of the past (see (Bloch 1953, pp. 54–55, 58, 62, 65)).

Genealogical sources have filters that were consciously or unconsciously applied when they were recorded. While filters can enhance data and remove information not germane to bureaucratic processes, they can artificially color perceptions, remove data critical for genealogists, and introduce nuances that if not recognized by the researcher, may lead to inaccurate interpretation and invalid conclusions in regard to objects (including people), events, and relations represented in and by documents. Filters color truth so that the documents do not necessarily correspond to real past events and people (Marx [1843] 2010, pp. 343–46). Records are traces or, as Ginzburg argues, clues—indirect statements that give insight into the past, so long as one understands that these filters may have been used (Ginzburg 1989, pp. 101, 104).

Serious genealogists recognize the importance of determining and evaluating the informant of the information in a record, but do not consider the power relation between the informant and recorder. How an event is represented, and what the purpose of its recording is, affect its relation to actual occurrences. Written reality may differ from actual reality because of filters such as a recorder's perspectives, biases, motives, power, historical and cultural contexts, views of reality and knowledge, distance between the event and its recording, purpose and intended use of the document, language, materiality of the substrate and inscriptions, and relation of the writing to orality at the time and in the place of recording, etc. If the researcher looks for and recognizes the filters, and understands their roles, then the information contained in the records may be viewed as indirect clues to the past they represent. Far from taking these filters as reasons for positivist skepticism, Ginzburg has argued that at times, the indirect, involuntary, uncontrolled elements of a record (Ginzburg 2012, pp. 3–4) reveal what actually happened.

Ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues involved in record sources and genealogy's methods with respect to writing have not been critically examined at length. More deliberations on topics related to these issues will add value to the discipline of genealogy. They, along with such things as the ongoing elaboration of critical family studies, will result in a more thorough conceptual grounding of genealogy. Serious genealogists and scholars in other disciplines may work in partnership to achieve sound reasoning and understanding of the theoretical issues embedded in writings used in genealogy's practice, as well as complex methods for ascertaining genealogical relations among family members.

## 6. Concluding Thoughts

An event in the form of an act or agreement in which an ancestor or research subject participated occurred in the past. A writing witnessing or referring to the event enacts or represents the event. That writing is itself an event. The act/agreement event and the writing event are separate and different. They are separated not only in time, but in and through the representation that genealogical practitioners assume mirrors the original event. However, representation is a gap, a rupture between the writing event and the act/agreement event (Derrida 1978, pp. 237–39, 280, 295–97).

Writing and original event are split in representation by the unrecapturability of the past (Aron 1964, p. 118; Gadamer 1975, pp. 39, 49–50; Kleinberg 2017, pp. 1–2), and by distanciation in space and time (Ricoeur 1977, p. 14), interpretation and meaning, molding of narratives by those with power, organizational and personal perspectives, bureaucratic requirements and practices, intentional and accidental destruction or loss, technological disruption, cultural shifts, and linguistic evolution. Consulting multiple sources that refer or attest to an event should be done not just for the purpose of corroboration to build a proof, but also to attempt to compensate for the permanence of the *différance* between writing and its real-world referents.

Originality of writing does not in and of itself guarantee or indicate faithful recording of the event(s) to which it refers. In some cases, originality of sources may reflect the opposite. That depends on such things as perspective, involvement of trauma or other emotional connection to the event, biases and political reasons for recording or narrating an event, motive, and insufficient knowledge of or experience with the contextual issues surrounding the event.

Genealogical research may be strengthened, where possible, by using unwritten sources such as family heirlooms, houses, and land. Those can reveal how ancestors lived, where they resided and visited, and what their interests were (Boivin 2008). A historical presence that is embedded in and prompted by these and other objects may be a powerful genealogical source. Oral stories may bind together multiple generations through family myths and narratives (Green 2013, pp. 387–402; Nicolson 2017).

Some topics raised were beyond the scope of this article but are worthy of further exploration. Those include documents as traces, the relation between language, truth, and the past, events occurring in writing, representation as rupture, performativity of genealogical documents, source documents as end objects of genealogy (not just evidence for events) and writing as technology. Writing is such an important foundational element in evidence used by genealogy that it needs to be more thoroughly thought about.

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