

Cluster and Collateral Research for Genealogical Problem Solving

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Expanding research beyond our direct ancestors can be the key that opens doors to unknown family. Understanding the strategies for researching our ancestors' collateral relatives and community can help reconstruct families and solve genealogical problems.

FAN Principle

"To prove identity, origin, and parentage, study individuals in the context of their FAN Club: Family, Associates, Neighbors."¹

Other Names for a FAN Club

- Cluster Research
- Collateral Research
- Community Study
- Neighborhood Network
- Family or Surname Study
- Genetic Clusters

Why Research an Ancestor's Community?

- Go around brick walls!
- Overcome record loss
- Determine a maiden name or parentage
- Follow migration patterns
- Locate a town of origin
- Distinguish between same or similarly named people
- Create a biography or family history

Building an Ancestor's Community

- Begin with the ancestor's immediate family (parents, siblings, children)
- Expand research to extended family (aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)
- Study the surname in that community
- Determine and research the ancestor's friends, associates, and neighbors
- Extend to the associates of the associates if necessary

¹ Elizabeth Shown Mills, *QuickSheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (The FAN Principle)* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012), outside panel 1, "The Principle."

Who Comprises an Ancestor's Community?

- Children – adopted and stepchildren
- Spouses and in-laws
- Siblings – full, half, and step
- Friends
- Church Members – sponsors and witnesses
- Neighbors
- Merchants
- Witnesses – deeds, wills, marriages, court cases, affidavits
- Coworkers, business partners, and occupational community

Tips & Tools

- Don't overlook single ancestors
- Beware of relationship names – brother/sister, aunt/uncle, cousin, John 2nd
- Always verify and look for other records to confirm relationships
- Be curious about anyone who had multiple interactions with your family
- Problem-solve with indirect evidence
- Use maps to compile a neighborhood network
- Record FAN club in a research log, spreadsheet, notebook, or mind map

Compile Your Ancestor's Community

- Death record informant
- Marriage or baptism witnesses
- Census – neighbors, surnames, birthplaces
- Deed witnesses and adjoining property owners
- Executors and witnesses to a will
- Inventories and vendue lists
- Court records
- Guardianships
- Passenger lists
- Naturalization witnesses
- Military draft cards and muster rolls
- Pension records and affidavits
- Newspapers
- Cemetery records
- Religious community
- Ethnic and cultural community
- Letters, diaries and photos
- Fraternal, civic, and community organizations

Resources & Further Study

- Archivegrid – researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/
- Cook, Lisa Louise. “The Genealogy FAN Club Principle Overcomes Genealogy Brick Walls.” 29 October 2016. *Genealogy Gems* (blog)
<https://lisalouisecooke.com/2016/10/29/genealogy-fan-club/>.
- Cyndi’s List – cyndislist.com/research-methodology/fan-club/
- FamilySearch Wiki – [familysearch.org/en/wiki/Research a Family in Community Context](https://familysearch.org/en/wiki/Research_a_Family_in_Community_Context)
- Goodrum, Michelle. *Cluster Research Using the FAN Principle*. 2025. Webinar. Legacy Family Tree Webinars, <https://familytreewebinars.com>.
- Graham, Paul K. “A Family for Florence I. (Crouse) Nelson: Unraveling an Informal Adoption in Missouri or Indiana.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 101 (March 2013): 7–18.
- Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy*. Third edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2000.
- Jones, Thomas W. “Uncovering Ancestors by Deduction: The Husbands and Parents of Eleanor (née Medley) (Tureman) (Crow) Overton.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (December 2006): 287–304.
- Leitchman, William M. “Using Cluster Methodology to Backtrack an Ancestor: The Case of John Bradberry.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 95 (June 2007): 103–116.
- Lowe, J. Mark. *Why We Should Look at In-Laws When Doing Genealogical Research*. 2023. Webinar. Legacy Family Tree Webinars, <https://familytreewebinars.com>.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle.” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage*. <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle>.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Quick Sheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. “Testing the FAN principle against DNA: Zilphy (Watts) Price Cooksey Cooksey of Georgia and Mississippi.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 102 (June 2014): 129–152.
- Morgan, George G., and Drew Smith. *Advanced Genealogy Research Techniques*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014. (Chapter 3 “Go Around the Wall”)
- National Archives Form NATF 85 for copies of Federal Pension or Bounty Land Warrant Applications - <https://www.archives.gov/files/natf-85.pdf>
- National Archives Form NATF 86 for copies of Military Service records (pre-World War I) - <https://www.archives.gov/files/natf-86.pdf>

All website links current as of 3 August 2026.