

# How to Reopen and Work a Genealogical Cold Case

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## Step 1: Get Prepared and Organized

The old school approach: Three ring binders and file folders

New approach: Cloud notetaking software/app. Example: *Evernote* available free at [www.Evernote.com](http://www.Evernote.com). (Software, website and app) Evernote synchronizes all of your notes between all of your computing and mobile devices. Create a Cold Case Notebook.

**Learn more:** Watch Elevenses with Lisa episode 70 at the Genealogy Gems YouTube channel or at <https://lisalouisecooke.com/elevenses/>

## Step 2: Retrieve all Pertinent Case Information

You probably already have this available if you use a genealogy database software program.

Pull together family documents. Here's a checklist:

- Family Group Sheets
- Individual Summary
- Pedigree Chart
- Descendant Chart

## Step 3: Fully Reacquaint Yourself with the Case

This is what detectives do! Carefully comb through everything that currently exists in the file.

### *Re-interviewing Witnesses*

In genealogical terms this means we may be re-interviewing folks that are still living, or we may be going back and reading the autobiography of someone that is long gone.

### *Re-Examining the Record Evidence*

Go back and look at your records - don't make assumptions. Re-examine everything!

### *Physical Evidence*

Examples of physical evidence are photographs, books, heirlooms, or any other physical item that pertains to the brick wall. Look over them and make notes about things you notice that you might have questions about.

## Step 4: Create a Timeline

Check out your genealogy software because it may include a timeline feature that you can print. There are also timeline tools available online:

- Timeline Maker (paid service and 30-day free trial) <https://www.timelinemaker.com>

- Timeline JS (Free, easy-to-make and you can add multi-media content)  
<https://timeline.knightlab.com>

Offline tools: Excel, your genealogy software

### **Step 5: Examine the Bigger Picture**

Learn more about the time, the place, and the people involved in the case with these tools:

*Google Books* – <https://books.google.com>

Old history books are often in the public domain if they were published prior to 1924. Many of them are fully digitized and searchable. Search within old county histories for keywords; anything to do with the location, people, the places, the businesses in your case.

#### *Boundaries*

Identify all boundary changes. Whether it is a country, a province, or county, boundaries change over time and unless you have the correct boundary lines for the time frame you are researching, you will not find success. Here are some resources that can help:

1) *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries (U.S.)* <http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/>

Here you will find an interactive map that will allow you select a location at a particular time. County boundaries changed regularly in the U.S. and this tool will prove invaluable.

2) *Google Earth Pro (International)*

If you want to see the bigger picture, as well as plot and analyze your evidence, Google Earth Pro is a powerful free tool. Download it for free:

<http://www.google.com/earth/download/gep/agree.html>

Use the “Historical Imagery” slider tool in the Google Earth toolbar to go back in time visually.

Plot important genealogical points on the map using the Placemark button in the toolbar.

Watch my free class on using Google Earth: <http://tinyurl.com/GoogleEarthFreeClass>

### **Step 6: Round Up the Suspects**

All good investigations start by looking at the family first, specifically the suspected relatives. Finding them in the census, and locating their vital records, etc. Ensure you have filled in all the record blanks.

*Cluster Research:* Move out from the immediate family into the ancestor’s circles of influence. Investigate the witnesses for events such as a baptism. Check the census for neighbors. Who is signing as a witness to citizenship? Who were their friends and associates? Who worked at the companies where they worked? Scout the newspaper social columns. These are all potential *suspects*, and in pursuing them you might find a newspaper article that lists your ancestor and their relationship.

### **Step 7: Formulate Your Questions**

Write down what you know in a narrative. By doing so, you will notice gaps that you didn't see before. Record your questions in your notebook and pursue them further. Blogging about your genealogy is a great way to write your narrative while connecting with other researchers and family members online. You can create a free blog at <https://www.blogger.com>. Learn how on the Genealogy Gems YouTube Channel (playlist <https://youtu.be/nE1oXYRLMIY>)

Write your research question and then try to break it down even further into smaller questions. Listen to Genealogy Gems Podcast [episode 242](#) on research questions.

### **Step 8: Develop a Hypothesis**

Even though you want the evidence to lead you, a hypothesis will give you focus. If a hypothesis turns out to be a dead end, it can be checked off the list with confidence.

### **Step 9: Look for New Evidence**

Checklists help ensure you don't miss a single record or look for the same record twice!

Family Tree Magazine: <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/freeforms/>

Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/charts-and-forms>

*Overlooked Records*: You can also get the evidence that some people forget. Examples include *Marriage Applications* and *Non-Population Census Schedules*.

### **Google Searches**

Expand your thinking in terms of *new* evidence. In your search for new evidence consider these specialized Google searches:

*Google Search: Mix and match Google search operators*

Example: "George \* Moore" OR "Moore, George" 1850..1920 "Latimer" Oklahoma

Quotation Marks (" ") = mandatory and exact

Asterisk (\*) = allows for an extra word or two or initials.

Numrange (..) = mandates that each result include a number that falls within the range.

### **Step 10 Call for Back-Up**

Sometimes a cold case detective involves the media to gain additional leads from the general public. Genealogists have their own media outlets:

- 1) *Social networking websites* like Facebook, media blogs, Twitter, and Pinterest. This is where you can go and ask for help!
- 2) *Hold a free Skype or Zoom meeting*. Pull together your genealogist friends and talk about your cases. These services even allow you collaborate by sharing your screen.

### **Step 11 Go on a Stakeout**

*Google Alerts* - <https://www.google.com/alerts>

Run a web search query and then save it as an Alert. Google will run your searches for you behind the scenes, 24/7. (Requires a free Google account.)

eBay - <https://www.ebay.com>

Sign up for a free account, and then run a search on keywords related to your family history. Save your search as a “Favorite Search” and eBay will search it for you, just like Google Alerts.

### Step 12 Posting Wanted Posters

*Your Own Genealogy Blog:* Start a blog for free at [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com). Put family history information out there and be found by other researchers.

*Online Family Trees:* There are lots of options for *free* online family trees: [www.WikiTree.com](http://www.WikiTree.com), [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com), [www.MyHeritage.com](http://www.MyHeritage.com)

*Get your DNA tested:* Getting tested can match you up with others who share your DNA. Identifying a shared common ancestor can help verify what’s already on your tree and/or fill in a gap. Available tests include:

- YDNA - provides a reasonable timeframe in which to find a shared paternal ancestor.
- Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) - passed from a mother to all of her children, regardless of gender. Only the females can pass it on to the next generation.
- Autosomal - received from both parents. Helps you trace both lines of inheritance.

## RESOURCES

### *The Genealogist’s Google Toolbox, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*

by Lisa Louise Cooke. Available exclusively at <https://www.shopgenealogygems.com>

### Premium Membership

Includes a full year’s exclusive access to all of Lisa’s video classes and downloadable handouts, premium podcast and more. Available at <https://lislouisecooke.com/premium-membership/>

**Genealogy Gems Store:** <https://www.shopgenealogygems.com>

Also available:

**Google Earth for Genealogy** (digital video series) by Lisa Louise Cooke

