

Understanding Evidence Evaluation and Genealogy Research

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Once I have gathered various bits of evidence for a proof point, such as the birth date for an ancestor, and I have entered the findings in my genealogy research log, the next task: evaluating the evidence to determine whether the birth date can be proven or not.

In the past my evaluation of evidence consisted of saying to myself, "Well, if it is in a book, then it must be true!" or "If it is on someone's tree, why would they lie?" Then I would enter the data in my genealogy database program and go on my merry way.

I use a process to look closely at the evidence I have found and to "rank" it based on certain elements. The evaluation elements that I use are from [QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map](#) at the Evidence Explained website. In addition, I use the Evidence Evaluation Factors information from an article entitled *Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Resources* by Linda Woodward Geiger. See the **Resource List** below for details and access.

I have included the basic evaluation information in a separate tab of my Genealogy Research Log so I can refer to it when evaluating a line entry in the research log. I also make notes in the Analysis column to support my theory of proof.

Evidence Evaluation Factors

- **Source Type:** 1) **Original:** A source is original if it is the first written statement, photograph, or recording of an event; 2) **Derivative:** Subsequent copies are derivatives and may be reproduced by hand, machine, camera, or scanner; they may be reproduced on paper, in microform, as photographs or digital images, or in any other medium that records the image whether transcribed by hand or technology.
- **Clarity:** 1) **Clear:** Information can easily be read; 2) **Marginal:** Information is not clear, is partially obscured and researcher must "guess" at words or letters.
- **Information:** 1) **Primary:** A piece of information is primary when it is recorded by a knowledgeable eyewitness or participant in that event, or by an official whose duties require him or her to make an accurate record of the event when it occurs; 2) **Secondary:** Secondary information is supplied by someone who was not at the event and may include errors caused by memory loss or influenced by other parties who may have a bias or be under emotional stress.
- **Evidence Type:** 1) **Direct:** Direct evidence is any fact that is explicitly stated; 2) **Indirect:** Indirect evidence is inferred from one or more pieces of evidence within the record. It isn't surprising, then, that some evidence within a record may be direct while other evidence is indirect.

Case Study: Proving the Birth Date for John Ralph Austin

I am trying to prove the birth date for my great-grandfather John Ralph Austin. Through family stories, he was born on 31 January 1896 at Lowville, New York. Using the “reasonably exhaustive search” component of the Genealogical Proof Standard (as put forth by the Board for Certification of Genealogists), I have located the following documents for John Ralph Austin that contain birth date evidence (displayed in ascending date order):

- [1900 United States Federal Census](#)
- 1905 New York State Census
- [1910 United States Federal Census](#)
- [New York City, Marriage License Indexes, 1908-1972](#)
- [New York City Marriage Index, 1866-1937](#)
- [U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918](#)
- [1920 United States Federal Census](#)
- 1925 New York State Census
- [1930 United States Federal Census](#)
- U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942
- [U.S., Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014](#)

So, using the Evidence Evaluation Factors above, which is the BEST record to prove the birth date of John Ralph Austin? My conclusion is the US World War I Draft Registration Card. And why? Here is my analysis:

The card is dated 6 June 1917 and is completed in John Ralph Austin’s own handwriting and signed by him. I rank it as:

- **Derivative:** I never touched the original document and worked with a microfilmed image by the National Archives and Records Administration.
- **Clear:** Although the surname is difficult to read, the majority of the text is clear and easy to read.
- **Primary Information:** John Ralph Austin provided the information in his own handwriting.
- **Direct Evidence:** The birth date 31 January 1896 is clearly stated.

In addition, it is the only document I have found so far that contains direct evidence that is closest to the event date ... meaning this document dated 1917 would outweigh other documents such as a World War II Draft Registration Card or a US Social Security Death Index listing.

And the other documents? Here is how I would note their Evidence Evaluation Factors:

- **1900 United States Federal Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **1905 New York State Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **1910 United States Federal Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **New York City, Marriage License Indexes, 1907-1995:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829-1940:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Direct
- **1920 United States Federal Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **1925 New York State Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **1930 United States Federal Census:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Indirect
- **U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Direct
- **U.S., Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014:** Derivative, Clear, Secondary, Direct

Conclusion

In order to build a strong family tree, use proven genealogy research methodology which includes evaluating the evidence each record presents, and then use the best record to prove specific facts such as a birth date.

Resource List

- **Ethics and Standards - Board for Certification of Genealogists**
<https://bcgcertification.org/ethics-standards/>
- **Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage** (website)
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/>
- ***Evidence Explained: History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace 3rd Edition Revised*** (book)
<https://amzn.to/3wy92rW>
- Geiger, Linda Woodward, "Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Resources," *OnBoard* 14 (May 2008): 14-15 via Skillbuilding: Guidelines for Evaluating Genealogical Resources, published by the Board for Certification of Genealogists.
- **QuickLesson 17: The Evidence Analysis Process Map**
<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-17-evidence-analysis-process-map>