



THE VALUE OF TRANSCRIBING HISTORICAL RECORDS*

GENEALOGY FRIENDS OF PLANO LIBRARIES, INC.

20 April 2024

©2024 LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, JD, LLM, CG®, CGL^(SM), FASG

<https://www.labgarrettgenealogy.com>

Introduction

The widely used Genealogical Proof Standard requires the conduct of reasonably exhaustive research, “emphasizing original records.”¹ Typically, information in pre-twentieth century documents is handwritten, using letter forms and spelling practices that differ from conventions in use today. The ability to craft accurate transcriptions of such documents is an essential skill for genealogists.

Why Transcribe?

Transcribing a record facilitates a detailed analysis of the information it contains. Creating one’s own transcription avoids the risk of relying on errors that may appear in transcriptions prepared by others. In every case, it is useful to inform future researchers of how the transcriber interpreted writing that is difficult to read, and to make the information in a source more accessible to consumers who are unable to produce accurate copies. Finally, transcriptions serve the important purpose of enhancing the odds that some form of the record will be preserved.

Challenges Presented by Pre-Twentieth Century Records

Archaic Writing. Handwriting has evolved over the centuries, and letter forms that were different from those in use today were in common use well into the 1800s.

Abbreviations. Scribes may have used abbreviations personal to him or her. Given

* All websites were last viewed on 2 April 2024.

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2021) 1.

names were shortened with or without the use of superscripted letters, and there was not necessarily a pattern to how this was done. Scribes sometimes used contractions of their own making.

Numerals and Calendars. In addition to numbers that may have been written differently, transcribers must keep in mind that England and its colonies did not adopt the modern Gregorian calendar until September 1752. Because the first day of the old Julian calendar began on 25 March (not 1 January), scribes double dated pre-1752 dates between 1 January and March 24.² For example, 27 February 1690/91 would be considered 1690 following the old calendar and 1691 under the modern calendar.

Dated or Phonetic Spelling. Many records created before the early 1900s are characterized by a lack of standardized spelling and the use of phonetic spelling.³ Thus, researchers are likely to encounter variations on the spelling of a family's surname.

Unfamiliar Legal or other Jargon. Legal documents usually contain boilerplate or stock phrases. The transcriber's knowledge of the terms that are typically included in particular documents such as wills or deeds can help to interpret words that may be difficult to read. *Black's Law Dictionary* is the leading authority on legal terms and abbreviations in pre-twentieth century documents created in the United States.⁴

Genealogy Standards for Transcribing

Your primary point of reference for deciphering the writing in a document is the document itself, looking at things like how the particular scribe formed and connected letters. Guidance is provided by *Genealogy Standards*—the only comprehensive compilation of “best practices”—published by the Board for Certification of Genealogists for use by everyone.⁵ Standards 29 and 32 set forth

² Judy G. Russell, “Dating history,” *The Legal Genealogist*, Feb 18, 2020 (<https://www.legalgenealogist.com/author/judy-g-russell/>).

³ Val. D. Greenwood, “Language, Terminology, and Important Issues,” *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 4th edition (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2017), 29–56, 42.

⁴ Henry Campbell Black, *Black's Law Dictionary: Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*, revised fourth edition (St. Paul Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1968).

⁵ BCG, *Genealogy Standards*.

specific requirements applicable to transcribing.⁶ Other generally applicable standards also come into play:

- Standards 1–8 explain the uses, purposes, elements, and format of citations;
- Under Standard 23 requires genealogists to “correctly read all legible handwriting” in a source;
- Standard 24 directs that genealogists understand “the meaning for the source’s time and place; and
- Standard 26 tells us that transcribed source content should be distinguished from the transcriber’s personal “comments, descriptions, interpretations, paraphrases, and summaries.”⁷

Platforms for creating transcriptions using generative artificial intelligence produce products that are derivatives and thus must still be verified by reading the original sources (or as close to the original as possible).⁸

⁶ Ibid., Standard 29 (Transcriptions) and Standard 32 (Transcribing, abstracting and quoting principles).

⁷ *Genealogy Standards*, Standards 1–6 and 23–26.

⁸ See Carla S. Cegielski, “Tools to make Transcribing Easier,” *NGS Magazine* 49:1 (January–March 2023) 61. The author noted that “Most attempts for computer transcription ... have been unsuccessful” and that Transcribus— a new platform for AI-powered transcription— is merely “showing promise.” Based on the author’s recent test of this tool, that evaluation still holds true as of the writing of this article.