



Willow

Valley

GENEALOGY CLUB

THE BIGGEST MYTHS IN GENEALOGY

Let's Debunk the Junk

Genealogists: We do precision guesswork based on unreliable data provided by those of questionable knowledge.

Let's look into each myth and exam it for:

- **Valid points**
- **Assumptions**
- **Generalizations**
- **Misinformation**
- **Makes no sense (bogus!)**
- **Excuses for not doing any “homework” (research)**

**#1: My family's county courthouse burned;
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- Even if there was a fire or total destruction of the building, some records could have been in fireproof vaults, safes, or file cabinets.
- Early records could be in another county from which that county was erected.
- The county might have been required to make microfilm copies and keep them off-site at another location.
- The courthouse may have asked people to bring in documents so that they could record them again.
- Your ancestors records aren't only at the courthouse. B/M/D records could be in churches or historical or genealogical societies.
- Remember that records of your ancestors could be held on five different levels: by individual family members, local repositories, county repositories, state repositories, federal repositories.

#2: Three brothers came to America.

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- Possibly, but this is usually followed by an explanation about them going to three different states or locations.
- Usually this is an attempt to mash-up families from different places that have the same surname.
- If one of these families can trace their ancestors back to the “old country”, everyone jumps on that train rather than research their own “branch”.
- Can you prove that these men are indeed brothers?
- Most immigrants that came to America in a family group stayed relatively close in proximity to help each other make this transition in language and culture easier for them all--- starting out in a “foreign land”.
- Check obituaries and newspapers for relationships.

#3: We are descended from an Indian/Cherokee Princess.

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- Native Americans never used the title “Princess”, that is a European title.
- Did they mean “the daughter of a chief”? Then, why not say that, or even that they are descendants of her father, the Native American chief?
- Yes, there are descendants of Native Americans who intermarried with Europeans, but the proof would be in your DNA if you carry even a very small percentage.
- Native American DNA is easily recognizable through testing.
- Some blacks in the American South may have intermarried with Native Americans, too, but that has become a “standard myth”, usually unproven and untrue.

#4: Our name was changed at Ellis Island.

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- By 1820, all names were registered on a ship's manifest (passenger list) at the port of departure.
- Some ports/ships required "papers" of the persons buying tickets to board a ship.
- Some countries required "exit" or "emigration" permission to leave the country.
- The ship's staff or port staff spoke the language of that port of departure.
- If anyone changed your ancestor's name it was the ancestor himself/herself.
- If your ancestor was illiterate (couldn't read, or right, or spell), the clerk at the port of departure wrote down the name as best he could--- as given/spoken by your ancestor.
- No one at Ellis Island, or Boston, Baltimore, New Orleans, etc. wrote down names. They were given the ship's manifest, and they checked the people in, asked questions, gave them a health evaluation, etc. They were not there to "Anglicize" anyone.
- Most name changes came at a later date, when the immigrants found their name to be too cumbersome, or too identifiable as "foreign".
- Many surnames (as well as first names) were Anglicized, or translated, and many "spellings" evolved through time.

#5: We're not related to them—we've always spelled our name this way.

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- Really? Always? That spelling is the “one and only correct version”?
- Don't be lulled into thinking that your name “Kline” is the way your ancestors spelled it, and that there's no way you're related to people named “Cline”, “Klein”, or “Kleine”.
- Shows a lack of understanding of how surnames have changed, morphed, distorted over the generations--- sometimes children in the same family, wound up spelling their surnames differently.
- Keep an open mind. It's not likely that your “Kline” ancestors spelled it that way.
- Think about literal translations: Kleine means Small or Little in English!
- Weisenberger may have become Weisenberg, then Weisen, and ended up being Weis or even Wise!
- Need help? You can search the etymology and history of both surnames and first names at: BehindTheName.com

#6: The 1960 Census won't be available in 2032.

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- In truth, the 1960 Census was loaded and stored on Univac computers that were the “newest thing”. The raw data was stored there and used to tabulate government facts and figures.
- Today, only two Univac computers exist: one in the Smithsonian, and one in Japan. They became obsolete in the years after that census year.
- In 1960, the first mail-out census was born. Then, they were collected by an enumerator at each household. Those original census sheets were not discarded, they were photographed onto microfilm.
- The census was still micro-filmed, and the microfilms still exist! No worries!

#7: All records are online.

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- Ancestry.com estimates that roughly 5% of all records pertaining to our ancestors have been digitized or uploaded to the internet.
- Do the math--- you'll need to do more **on-site or on-line** research!

#8: Everyone has a birth, marriage, and death certificate.

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- Don't we wish! And, if they do, why haven't we been able to find them?
- Most states in the U.S. only required B/M/D certificates by the early 1900's. (i.e. PA began in 1906)
- Earlier B/M/D records are found in church records, along with burial records, too.

#9: All government records are correct.

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- Any record can be incorrect, or have some incorrect information.
- Always check multiple sources. Two sources are good; three sources are better!
- Anything “self-reported” could be off a little (or a lot)!

#10: All online family trees and printed genealogies are correct.

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- Check multiple sources to verify information.
- Any document, book, record, or even tombstone, can have incorrect information.
- Online family trees are only as good as the research done, or not done! They may contain clues, though, or information that you don't have.
- Many printed genealogies were published in the early 1900's, long before computers, and long before the communications of the 21st century. They are flawed, but can be helpful!
- It's up to you to prove or disprove the information provided.

**#11: My grandparents were born in Germany,
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- Everyone in your tree has German roots? Do you have the documentation to prove it?
- Don't forget that your grandmothers had "maiden names", and so did all the other females in your tree, and they may have had totally different nationalities, even if their husbands had "German" surnames and roots.
- German surnames are also prevalent in Switzerland, Austria, and the Alsace region of France, that's why it is usually labeled as "Germanic Ethnicity".
- A DNA test can confirm your ethnic heritage. Most people are not 100% of any one ethnic, geographic, or religious group.

#12: If I put my grandparents names into the Ancestry database, it will show me my family tree.

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- Not so fast! That's not how it works, although Ancestry's TV ads make it look that easy!
- You must create your family tree on Ancestry. It will give you hints, and may show you similar names, dates, etc. in other peoples' trees.
- You must add the records that you deem to be valid for each of your ancestors.
- Keep in mind that there are many, many people who have had the "same name", and possibly some of the "same dates".
- You must discern the "facts" for your ancestors.

#13: All Europeans are descendants of Charlemagne.

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- It appears that this might actually be the truth!
- Geneticists, mathematicians, and genealogists now agree that anyone with at least one European ancestor (most people in the Western World) is most likely related to European royalty, and ultimately to Charlemagne, who lived 747-814.
- Scholarly papers have been written about this theory.
- Check out: www.usefulcharts.com and click on their YouTube Channel where this is discussed using “The European Royalty Family Tree Chart” in a video called “Is Everyone a Descendant of Royalty?”.
- The hard part, of course, is getting a “paper trail” from you to ancestors that far back in time who are potentially descended from a royal line.
- It is absolutely possible, though.

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