Peeling Back the Layers:  
Citing Sources From Online Materials

“Citation is an art, not a science.”  
Elizabeth Shown Mills

The Genealogy Research Process
1. Create an objective  
2. Analyze the existing sources  
3. Learn about the locality  
4. Make a research plan  
5. **Create source citations**  
6. Track searches with a research log  
7. Write conclusions

Why Cite your Sources?  
- To evaluate and analyze each source you find  
- Prove your research findings  
- To find your sources again  
- Enable anyone else to locate the source  
- Show that you've done reasonably exhaustive research

Where to Use Source Citations  
- Research log: create the first time a source is searched  
- Personal Database: PAF, Ancestral Quest, RootsMagic, Family Tree Maker, Legacy  
- FamilySearch Family Tree: when creating a new source  
- Online Trees: when uploading or attaching a new source  
- Documents: when sharing with another researcher  
- Written works documenting each fact stated: research reports, proof arguments, family histories, genealogies, books

**SOURCE:** A document, book, article, microfilm, photograph, website, etc. that gives you information, which becomes evidence in proving a conclusion.  
**CITATION:** A statement identifying the specific location of a source and details about that source.
Steps to Citing a Source

A good source citation will include details that allow you or anyone else to locate the source.

- **Step One: Understand the source**
  - Closely examine the source
  - Note all the information included in the source
  - Discover who created the source - you may need to do some investigating if this is a website or a photocopy of a document.

- **Step Two: Create Your Citation by answering 5 questions**, the format taught by Thomas W. Jones in *Mastering Genealogical Proof*, Chapter 4.
  - **Who** created the source?
    - This refers to either the author of the source, the creator (often a religious or government entity), or the informant.
  - **What** is the source?
    - If this is a published work such as a book, include the full title in italics. If it is not published, such as a personal history, use quotes around the title. If there is no title, describe the record.
  - **When** was the source created or when did the event happen?
    - Typically cite the year a book or microfilm was published; for a journal or magazine, add the month or season.
    - For a website, add the access date. Because URL’s change, the date could help to relocate the source.
    - If the source is unpublished, use the date it was created or the date of the event it reports. In some cases, it might be necessary to include both.
  - **Where** is the source located?
    - For a website list the URL. Use a complete URL if the website might disappear or be unstable. Using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, the source be relocated using the URL and the access date.
    - If the source is published, such as a book, this would be the publication location.
    - If an unpublished source, such as a manuscript, letter, or document, name the location where the event took place and where the source is held.
  - **Wherein** the book, film, magazine, database, etc. is the source located?
    - In a published source, this could be a volume or page number.
    - In an online database, cite the image number, or any other way to explain to others how to find the source again.
    - For a government certificate, this would be the document number.
    - If a source is not published, such as an unbound collection of documents, try to identify an order and describe it: “folio 3, page 25.”
Layered Citations
What about a source that is now digitized and accessed through a website such as FamilySearch or Ancestry? Include both the physical source citation, then all the digital source citation information, separating the two sections with a semicolon. A third section might be necessary if referencing the original microfilm reproduction of the source. Keep the digital information together and the physical information together.

Use the following template to aid in creating a layered citation.

Step 1 Understand the source
View all information provided by the website: the image, transcription, about the source, etc.

Step 2 Determine each citation element

What is the source?
Physical Layer –
Digital Layer –

When is the source?
Physical Layer –
Digital Layer –

Where is the source?
Physical Layer –
Digital Layer –

Wherein is the source?
Physical Layer –
Digital Layer –

Step 3 Assemble the citation
Depending on the source, you can lead with either the physical or digital information. Keep the physical parts together and the digital parts together, separating each with a semicolon. Remember the key principle to create a citation that is clear and will enable yourself or another researcher to relocate the record!
For Further Study


