What's the Plan?

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   You're ready to research! Do you have a research plan? When you sit down at your computer do you just open up a database (Ancestry, FamilySearch, FindMyPast, American Ancestors, etc.) and type in a name? If so, you're probably just surfing rather than researching.

All research begins with a question.

   It's important to have a goal when you research. A goal can be general but the objectives (the questions) you set to meet that goal need to be specific and measurable. Once you have a question in mind, write it down at the top of your research plan. (You can find a research plan document in either PDF or docx format on my website under Links>Getting Started.) Next, write down everything you know about the individual that might help you define the problem. This is where you should re-read everything you have in your files about the individual. If you've been researching for a while, and this is a brick wall situation, you may find that the answer to your question is already in your files. It may be something you didn't recognize when you began your research, but with additional information it becomes the missing piece of your puzzle. When developing your plan, keep in mind the following questions:

- Who are you looking for?
- What type of event?
- When did they live?
- Where did they live?
- What else do you know about them? What differentiates them from someone of the same name.

   Do you have a hypothesis…write that down, too.   Now list the types of records that might answer the research question.   (You need an "exhaustive search." Rule #1 of the Genealogical Proof Standard.) At this point, your research relates to identifying sources and the repositories (both on and offline) where the records reside. If the objective (question) is "Who are the parents of Roger Sherman Vail born about 1883 in Chicago, Illinois," what sources are available to answer that question? You may need to research what records were kept in Illinois during that time the person lived…births, deaths, marriages, church, probate, land, newspapers.   Jurisdictions (county and state borders) change over time and records typically remain in the jurisdiction where they were created. Is the county the same at the time of the event as it is today? What offline repositories might hold records? You'll also want to check census records to identify Roger beginning with the most recent and working back to find him in the household of his parents. Are there any state censuses available? Each of these items is a task in your research plan. A good starting point for this research in the US is The Red Book. You can likely find this book in your

library or on the [Ancestry Wiki](#). Also check the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) for a list of records as well as the [FamilySearch Catalog](#) for records that might have been digitized but not yet indexed.

   Once your plan is complete, begin your research. Don't stop with the first source that provides an answer, but continue to all sources that might provide evidence relating to your research question. If conflicts result, document and resolve them. Some conflicts may be minor, a difference in the middle initial, which can be explained as a transcription error. But, are there other individuals in the same area with the same name? Can they be ruled out? Your research may turn up unexpected results, introduce new questions or point to other resources. Add these items to your plan. As you complete each task, write an analysis of the results, identifying any conflicts, their resolution and your conclusion, including complete source citations. If no direct evidence provides an answer, your analysis should include a proof argument derived from the sources that potentially answer the question. This "proof" is based on the best sources available at the time and always open to change should new evidence arise. Repeat! This is an iterative process which will assist you in all of your research.

A word about searching in online databases

   When you come to the main page of a genealogical database, stop and think about your research plan. Unless you have a very unusual name, I don't recommend searching from the main page. You may end up with thousands of results, most of which will not relate to your research question. Go back and look at your research question. Select the state where the event occurred and see if there is a database that will answer the question. In Ancestry, use the [card catalog](#); in [FamilySearch](#) select the location from the map; in FindMyPast, look at [A-Z of record sets](#) under Search and then search on the state. Ancestry, for example, has "Cook County, Illinois, Birth Certificates Index, 1871-1922" which meets the criteria for the search for Robert Sherman Vail born in Chicago (Cook County) in 1873. This is a much more efficient method of searching and will provide a focused list of results.

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