JUDGING A GENEALOGICAL WEBSITE

Are the sources of the information on the website cited? If you do not know the source of a particular fact, you have no way of knowing whether or not it is reliable.

How recently was it updated? In genealogy, new sources are discovered that can prove assumptions made from previous information false. For this reason, it is best for a site to be updated frequently. Sometimes you have to hunt to find a date. At other times there is none. If there is no date you may have no idea how long the information has been there.

Who is responsible for the site? Both for its set-up and the information it contains? Is it a well known individual like Cyndi Howells (Cyndi’s List) or someone you've never heard of. Is it a reputable society such as the New England Historic Genealogical Society? Is it a commercial firm which provides some of its information from uncited sources? Or Ancestry which provides actual images of original manuscript records, but also can have dicey information provided by individuals in its family tree section.

How well is the homepage laid out? Is it neat, coherent, easy to skim? Is it set up to make the website easy to navigate? Does it quickly let you see what the site covers and how to find specific information?

Does the homepage have a link to a site map? This is an alternative, and often the best, way to navigate a large website. If you see a site map link, click on it. You'll see what I mean. You do not want “site search” where you just plug in a keyword. You want a site map, which is an outline of the entire site. I've noticed these are becoming less and less frequent on websites.

Is the spelling and grammar correct? Are there a number of mistakes? If the person in charge of the site is sloppy about this, he or she is probably sloppy about the factual content as well.

Is it easy to copy information and sources? Does it allow you to cut and paste? download? print? Note: *When you do this, don't forget to include a citation for the website in your own computer program or notes. Always give credit where credit is due.*

Does the website provide a contact person or technical support if you need help? Do they make them easy to find? on the homepage? Check for "Help" or "Contacts" or "About."
Is an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) provided? If there is, take a look at it. It should save you time.

Can the site be easily searched? by keyword? by "find in page" (under the edit drop down menu), by the site's own search function? Is an index or contents list provided?

Does it rely solely on other sources or offer new or unique information? One is not necessarily better than the other. Some websites may only offer information from other sources but be absolutely indispensable, like Cyndi's List. Others might offer unique information, but that information might be questionable. As in all things, it is a matter of judgement.

Does the site contain digital images of original records (like Ancestry)? Or does the site offer only transcriptions? When you see a copy of an original record, whether hand written or printed, there is a good chance something has been copied incorrectly. The more often a document has been transcribed, the more chances there are for mistakes.

Does your website or database contain digital images of previously published material (books, articles, etc.) like Heritage Quest or Internet Archives? If these books or articles include printed transcriptions of original records see above. Just because it's printed does not mean it is correct.

Does an unknown site want you to pay up front for its services? As with any website, be very careful which ones you allow to access your credit card information. When in doubt, don't.

The final and most important question is does it meet your needs?

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