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June 16, 2009

Lecture for the Cortland Genealogical Society at the  
Cortland Historical Society – 25 Homer Avenue – 7 pm.

## **Brick Wall Battering Rams**

**Weapons to use for the war against those elusive ancestors  
that are hiding behind a Brick Wall.**

I'm going to be telling you about some helpful Internet resources and also about some sources to check at the locality you are researching in and the last part is about a little known collection in Albany that just might help you pin down information on immigrant ancestors in New York State from 1825 to 1913. At the end of the lecture there will be a website where you may download this paper.

The goal is to provide you with some ideas on how and where to look for information that is “outside the box.”

If you have been a genealogist for more than a couple of weeks, and if you have access to a computer, it shall be presumed that you know about the following very useful websites”

[www.FamilySearch.org](http://www.FamilySearch.org)

[www.RootsWeb.com](http://www.RootsWeb.com)

[www.USGenWeb.com](http://www.USGenWeb.com)  
[www.Cyndislist.com](http://www.Cyndislist.com)  
[www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com)  
[www.Genealogy.com](http://www.Genealogy.com)  
[www.GenealogyBank.com](http://www.GenealogyBank.com)  
[www.WorldVitalRecords.com](http://www.WorldVitalRecords.com)  
[www.Google.com](http://www.Google.com)

and probably a couple of dozen more essential websites for genealogical research.

These weapons, (let's call them tools,) will be in one of two categories; **Internet Accessible**, and **Boots on the Ground**. (It's not ALL on the Internet, not yet.)

## **Internet Battering Rams:**

### **Maps:**

Just as the Real Estate salesperson will give the three best features of a piece of property. **“It is all about Location, Location, Location.”**

It is very important to know exactly where your ancestor resided at every point in their life. Think about the community that they lived in. Where did they go to church? Where did they work? Where would they have traded goods and services? Where did the kids go to school? The roads were horrible, so do you want to know who they married? My bet is they married the neighbor. I have seen it time and again. Once you know exactly where they lived you can better form a plan to gather data.

[www.ePodunk.com](http://www.ePodunk.com) - My first look at any location that I am not familiar with. This site is included under “maps” but it is general information about the local area and will assist you in locating maps. If you have just a name of a town or community and the state, ePodunk will give you the name of the county or a choice of counties if multiples exist, and it will even locate the place by an obsolete place name and take you to the modern equivalent. The left hand column will give much needed information such as governmental offices, libraries, churches, cemeteries, and a whole lot more. There is even a google map thumbnail.

[www.Maps.Google.com](http://www.Maps.Google.com) - Will give you a good look of the area in modern times, with road maps and aerial or satellite views. These are all scrollable and zoomable.

[www.Zillow.com](http://www.Zillow.com) - Will show you close up views of aerial photographs right down to some listings of the names of the owners and the value of the property. This site was designed for Real Estate people but works great for genealogy. If you locate an ancestral home you can see a pretty good aerial photograph of the actual house and even scroll 360 degrees all around it to look at it from different angles.

[www.HistoricMapWorks.com](http://www.HistoricMapWorks.com) – This commercial company started out with the intention of selling map reproductions, which they still do of course. This site has become a huge resource to view cadastral maps from all over the United States. These are Land Ownership Maps, the type like you will find in County Atlases and the large county wall maps that show the towns, villages, and hamlets of the early and mid 19th century up to the early 20th century. They are extremely valuable as you

will be able to locate your ancestors' house and compare the names around their home with the names reported on the census and these maps become extremely valuable.

<http://jdmcox.com/> - **USAPhotoMaps**. This is free software that you can download and install. It is absolutely safe to do so, and it is a very powerful presenter of the USGS / Tiger database. You will be able to build extremely high quality topographical and aerial photo databases of your ancestors' property and community. It is far superior in quality to any other method I have ever found on the Internet, and it is Free. Once you have captured these maps on your own computer they can be saved and you will not have to wait for them to load so long the next time. A high speed connection is mandatory.

## **Data Sites:**

**Footnote** - Footnote is about three years old and they are providing some totally unique databases and features. They first partnered with the National Archives to digitize and publish microfilm from NARA's vast holdings. Items that you used to have to spend many dollars for, and then wait a long time to receive, are instantly available on Footnote. Their Revolutionary War Service Records and Pension Files are easily downloaded and there is even a way for you to upload additional facts and data to share with others. The 1860 census and some of the other collections are now interactive. You may comment or add data and your contact information on your ancestor's census listing. The Civil War Pension Index cards of Union Veterans quite

often will give the death date and the name of the widow. Footnote is a fantastic resource of images of original documents. Go to [www.NARAgenealogy.com](http://www.NARAgenealogy.com) for a Free Trial of Footnote.

[www.WorldCat.org](http://www.WorldCat.org) - Just about every book known to man is being cataloged with full citation of title, author, publisher, editions, and there is even a way to put your Zip Code in and they will give you a list of libraries that have a copy of the book and how many miles it is from you.

[www.USGenWeb.com](http://www.USGenWeb.com) - Though mentioned above and you probably already know about it, visit the county GenWeb sites for every area that you are interested in. The data is provided by volunteers and keeps changing all the time. Each of the New York state counties GenWeb sites may be linked to from my main website for Upstate New York Genealogy at [www.unyg.com](http://www.unyg.com) and go to the page titled “**NY COUNTIES & CENSUS.**” A bonus here is that you will also find a list of all of the known NYS Census that area available for each county. Many individual counties changed their web addresses after Google took control of the USGenWeb project, so you may have to search around a little to find them, but a GenWeb site exists for each county in the United States.

[www.Books.Google.com](http://www.Books.Google.com) – Many of the early books on history and genealogy that are out of copyright may be searched and read online and even downloaded to your own computer. Newer books are still able to be searched by keywords to find out if it would be helpful to purchase a copy or to look at a copy in a library. You will want to use the “Advanced Search”.

## **Newspapers:**

There are many good places to locate newspaper databases online. One of the best subscription based newspaper sites is **newspaperarchive**. There are many millions of digitized newspapers online here that you may search by keyword and then download snap shots of articles.

Go to [www.old-newspaper-articles.com](http://www.old-newspaper-articles.com) for a Free Trial of newspaperarchive.

A fabulous site right nearby that is totally free is [www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com) which is operated by Mr. Tom Tryniski and there are now millions of newspaper page images available from all over New York State, and growing all the time.

HeritageQuest, Ancestry, several universities, LDS, and many other newspaper sites are available online. Do a Google search for the area you are interested in.

Many times, especially in New York State these old newspapers are about the only place you will find an announcement of a marriage or death before the time of the NYS Vital Records Law of 1880.

Some vital records have been extracted from old newspapers and published in book form by Fred Q. Bowman. Any of Fred's books are excellent for early Vital records.

## **Boots on the Ground Battering Rams:**

For 40 or so years it has been a pleasure to take off on a whim and drive, or fly and rent a car, to any place in the country that a clue has led me to believe I might locate information on an ancestor. I'm a nut I know, but I'll bet some of you have done this also. One Christmas Eve I located a gravestone listing of a 4th great grandmother on the Columbia County, NY GenWeb site. Guess where I was on Christmas Day?

I will not be doing that quite as much with the price of travel now, but I will be making lists of things to do, whenever I have another reason for being in any given territory.

There is one thing that is for sure. **You WILL have to travel to distant locations to obtain facts that are not, and will not, ever be on the Internet.** From ancient wars to modern times, it does not matter how many catapult rocks were thrown, nor how many aerial assaults were launched, it still takes Boots on the Ground to do the serious work.

**State Censuses** - Find out if the state you are interested in ever had their own State Census, as many did. Refer to above on county Genweb sites listed on **www.unyg.com** for information on the New York State censuses available. Very few of these are online yet. Ancestry is starting to put some up and some are done by various historical groups,

**Libraries, genealogical societies, LDS,** and so on. Many have been filmed by LDS so you should look at those films as you will learn many new things that are not on the Federal Census.

## **Probate Records:**

**Estate Courts** - These are the courts that handled the estates of deceased persons, sometime know as the Probate Court, Surrogate's Court, and others. You have no doubt been given these instructions before or have read about them, but not everyone takes advantage of what is available. **You HAVE to go there!** Boots on the Ground! Every court is different, even within the same state. They all have different rules, regulations and price structures. One court that I deal with will give me information over the phone, while another charges \$35 just to look up on the computer terminal on the clerks' desk to even see if there is an estate file in the index! **You HAVE to go there!** Much of the information in the estate files will be found nowhere else, not ever. Death dates, survivors' names, addresses of heirs, and on and on. **Don't just make a note to remind yourself to go and look. Do it!**

## **DAR:**

**Daughters of the American Revolution, the DAR** - You likely know that they are based in Washington, DC, and that they have a great library and study center. Each state has one location that holds the collections of all of chapters of that particular state. The individual chapters have been compiling hundreds of thousands of collections of Bible Records, and Cemetery Listings. These wonderful ladies have been trampling on snakes since the 1800's, long before acid rain obliterated gravestone inscriptions and vandals tipped stones over. The cemetery listings that they have collected are all in bound volumes some

where. Your mission is to locate the state chapter holdings. For instance, the New York State collection is at the NYS Library in Albany. There are hundreds of volumes of typescript records that have never been published any where. The records are not just for Revolutionary War veterans, they list everyone. One of CNYGS's former members, Mrs. Jean Worden, now deceased, published a two volume index to the NYS State collection. You are able to search by name or community location. The Vermont DAR master collection is at the Bennington Museum Library. You should be able to locate any state collection of interest by doing a search on Google. It might just save you a trip to Washington, DC.

**Local, County and State Archives**, also Local, County and State Historical Societies and Libraries - Go there. Check the card catalogs or computer index, talk to people, and ask questions. Someone in the area is an expert and will help you. After you have visited these locations, go there again, and again. You get the idea. This is not exactly an easy battle, but the best clues are "Local."

Now comes the description of the rarely used collection that was mentioned at the start.

**New York State Archives, Albany** – There is a collection in Albany that gets very little use and might just have the exact piece of information you need on your **immigrant ancestors**. We always search for **Naturalizations** and **Declarations of Intent** at the county level where you suspect your ancestor might have resided at the time. The little known collection that I

speaking of is catalogued in a manner that **it is not found in the online index when you use those two search terms.**

There was a law in New York State starting in 1825 that said that if an alien person desired to own property in New York that they had to at least “Declare” their intention to naturalize. This law is what generated many of those county record books that you have all seen. Unfortunately the Declarations of Intent at the county level normally just say something like “Born in the Kingdom of Prussia,” or Bavaria, or England and Ireland, etc. This is not much help.

What very few people know is that in order for that entry to have been made in the county record book, that the alien person had to appear in court with a letter stating their information, and to have a person of reputable character appear in court with them to attest to the applicant’s character. The original document is what is most important! After the court clerk made the entry in the county book, the actual manuscript letter was forwarded to the NY State, Department of State, in Albany and then put in a pile until there were enough documents to bind up into a book.

These books are huge, thick books with all different sizes and various types of paper. Almost all are handwritten and “sometimes” include the exact details that we all wish for. Many of them say not too much more than what got entered into the county record book, but some give the applicants name, date and place of birth, the ship they came on, when they came, who came with them, and on and on. **Don’t get too excited, as these**

**detailed items are in the minority.** The fact remains that they “might” have just what you need!

Every time I have asked for these books the staff person explains that there is no genealogy information in that collection. Hmmm. The books are heavy and they have to drag them out on a cart, but I can't possibly believe that is the reason.

One of the very best reasons for checking these books is that you may not know just what county your ancestor resided in at the time of his declaration. These volumes will find that information out for you.

Here is the full catalog description:

Title: **Alien Depositions of Intent to Become U.S. Citizens, 1825-1913.**

Collection Series: A1869.

24.5 cu. ft. (92 volumes)

Arrangement: Roughly chronological.

Historical/biog note: Alien depositions were submitted to the Secretary of State's office in Albany pursuant to an act passed April 21, 1825 enabling resident aliens to acquire, own, and dispose of real property. The alien's right in regard to real property expired six years after filing the deposition. The 1825 law pertained only to individuals specified by name, but was amended in 1826 to provide for a more general application. After the mid-nineteenth century women made many of the alien depositions (up to one third of the total). Statutes passed

between 1848 and 1862 allowed married women in New York to own real property in their own names.

**Abstract:** This series consists of ninety two volumes of bound depositions of resident aliens affirming their intentions to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Arranged in a loose chronological order by the date on which they were received in the Dept. of State, they include following information: name of alien and place of residence (later years sometimes list address); alien's signature or mark; occasionally the country of origin and/or occupation of the resident alien appears. The format of the deposition varies, although printed forms were sometimes used. Depositions prior to 1850 are docketed on the verso with date of receipt and book and page number of the entry in Abstracts of Alien Depositions, 1825-1913 (series A1870). Depositions were apparently filed at the local level and transferred by the local official to the Office of the Secretary of State for registration and filing.

**Abstract:** This series is not indexed. The earlier depositions are calendered in: Kenneth Scott and Rosemary Conway, comps. *New York Alien Residents, 1825-1848.*

Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1978.

**Finding aids:** Volume list.

**Associated materials:** Series A1870-78, Abstracts of alien depositions, contains related records.

**Note:** though the catalog listing claims no index, there is a crude handwritten surname index in each of the volumes I have used.

Many of these tools and much more have been discussed on my website and Blogs. Please check them often and stay tuned for more Brick Wall Battering Rams to be announced.

Upstate New York Genealogy website: [www.unyg.com](http://www.unyg.com)  
And the associated Upstate New York Genealogy Blog.

A complete copy of this lecture may be downloaded at  
<http://BrickWallBatteringRams.com>.

We will be making this list of weapons a dynamic one that will be added to from time to time.

Dick Hillenbrand