Dirt, Deeds, & DNA: An Overview of Forensic Genealogy

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Forensic genealogy is a field that blends traditional genealogical methodology with the demands of legal systems, governmental agencies, and modern identity questions. It expands the genealogist's role beyond historical reconstruction and into the realm of legal evidence, expert reporting, and real-world problem solving.

A Different Kind of Genealogy

> *Forensic genealogy applies genealogical knowledge, methods, and standards to legal problems and proceedings, requiring both technical skill and an understanding of the legal frameworks that shape each case.*

Unlike traditional genealogy—which often focuses on tracing ancestral lines as far back as possible— forensic genealogy is purpose-driven. It begins with a legal question and works backward as far as necessary before moving forward to living individuals. This shift in orientation fundamentally changes the scope, tools, and responsibilities of the genealogist.

Forensic Genealogy

- shaped by the laws of the jurisdiction involved, the nature of the legal question, and the requirements of courts, agencies, or attorneys
- involves living individuals, introducing ethical, legal, and privacy considerations
- involves legal and financial risks
- may be complicated by record restrictions
- more costly due to the complexity and requirements of cases, database and other fees, and insurance

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Forensic Genealogist

The forensic genealogist must be comfortable working with contemporary records, navigating confidentiality requirements, and producing work that can withstand legal scrutiny. Education and specialized training are essential.

Practice Areas in Forensic Genealogy

Forensic genealogy encompasses a wide range of practice areas, each with its own standards, expectations, and challenges. These areas generally fall into two broad categories: **ownership** and **identity**.

Ownership

Many forensic genealogists work on cases involving property rights, inheritance, or ownership disputes. These may include:

- Probate cases
- Missing or unknown heirs
- Real estate or other property claims
- Mineral rights and natural resource ownership

The genealogist's aim is to identify rightful heirs, establish lineage, or clarify ownership through documented evidence. The work may involve reconstructing family lines forward to present-day individuals, locating living heirs, or verifying claims for legal proceedings.

Identity

Other cases focus on questions of identity, citizenship, or personal status. These may include:

- Guardianship or conservatorship matters
- Dual citizenship or tribal membership applications
- Unclaimed human remains
- Adoption and unknown parentage
- Military repatriation
- Forensic investigative genetic genealogy (FGG / IGG)

These areas often intersect with DNA analysis, modern identity law, and sensitive personal histories. Each practice area demands not only genealogical skill but also an understanding of the legal frameworks that govern the work.

Special Considerations in Forensic Genealogy

Requires adherence to the **Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)**[1]

1. Reasonably exhaustive research
2. Complete and accurate source citations
3. Analysis and correlation of evidence
4. Resolution of conflicts
5. Coherent written conclusion

Work Products and Documentation

Work products may differ significantly from those used in traditional genealogy. Forensic work may involve reports, charts, affidavits, apostilles, and other formal materials intended for legal or governmental use. These must be clear, precise, and written with the expectation that they may be scrutinized by attorneys, judges, or government officials. Affidavits and apostilles may be required to authenticate findings or certify documents for international use.

Court Involvement and Expert Witnessing

Forensic genealogists may be called to testify as expert witnesses. This requires not only mastery of genealogical methods but also the ability to explain complex research clearly and confidently in a courtroom setting.

Credentials

Credentials, education, and experience play a significant role in establishing credibility. For some purposes, credentials are a requirement. Professional certification or accreditation demonstrates competency and adherence to standards.

The Expanding Role of DNA

DNA has become central to many forensic genealogy applications. Investigative genetic genealogy, repatriation work, and unknown parentage cases all rely on DNA evidence combined with traditional genealogical methods.

The forensic genealogist must understand:

- How to interpret DNA results
- How to integrate DNA evidence with documentary research

[1] Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, *Second Edition* (Nashville, Tennessee : Ancestry.com, 2019), 1–3.

- Ethical considerations surrounding consent and privacy
- The limitations of genetic evidence

DNA does not replace traditional genealogy; it enhances it. The genealogist's role is to contextualize DNA findings within a broader evidentiary framework.

Conclusion

Forensic genealogy is a dynamic and impactful field that extends genealogical practice into legal, governmental, and humanitarian domains. It requires rigorous methodology, specialized training, and a deep understanding of both historical and contemporary records. Whether identifying heirs, assisting with repatriation, supporting citizenship applications, or helping resolve questions of identity, forensic genealogists play a vital role in bridging the past with the present.

Resources:

Ramage & Desmarais, *Forensic Genealogy: Theory & Practice* (2025)	https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/forensic-genealogy/
Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG)	https://bcgcertification.org/
International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAPGen):	https://www.icapgen.org/
Council for the Advancement of Forensic Genealogy	https://www.forensicgenealogists.org/
Association of Professional Genealogists, Forensic Genealogy Special Interest Group	https://www.apgen.org/
NOKfinders Academy	https://nokfinders.com/academy/
Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)	https://www.dpaa.mil/
National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NAMUS)	https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/