



# Brick Wall Strategies for Elusive Ancestors

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When facing a brick wall, there are several strategies you can try to overcome a roadblock. This presentation will discuss them for Hispanic ancestors but many of the principles apply to ancestors from anywhere.

## RESEARCH STRATEGIES

### Start with the basics

If your ancestor lived in the United States, find them in every census record. Locate their death certificate, if available. Identify their immediate and extended family members. Try a variety of search techniques. If you haven't tried four or five variations on search terms, you haven't tried hard enough.

### Spelling variations

Consider all spelling variations for first and last names. The double Hispanic surname system used today, changes when an immigrant enters the United States. While some immigrants may have changed their names upon arrival, they are not in the majority.

### Identifying the location

Many places share similar names. Do you have the right locality? Gazetteers and other research aids can help confirm you have found the right place.

### Pedigree analysis

Examine the information/documentation for each member of the family. Are there gaps or unsourced information? What about the validity of the sources? Establish a good foundation from which to begin.

### Full family research

Often searching for all the records of every member of the family will lead to clues that might help break down the brick wall.

### FAN club approach

The FAN club refers to Friends, Associates, and Neighbors. When trying to sort out couples with similar names, the names of godparents and witnesses could prove helpful. Does one couple use the same people as godparents or witnesses to life events? If a family is migratory, try researching any families known to be associated with the family. Consider the possibility that families and neighbors moved around together.

### **Create a timeline**

Organize all events in the life of your ancestor and his or her family in a timeline. Are there gaps between dates and/or places? Are there big gaps between children or siblings? For locations, consider migration paths. Map out the locations where your ancestor lived.

### **Exhaust all possible records (all life events)**

Have you found every record for everyone in the family? Locate all birth/baptism, marriage, and death records for the entire family and read them carefully looking for clues to origin and possible associates.

## **LOCATING RECORDS**

### **Where are the records?**

Are there other records in larger or smaller jurisdictions that would help identify the family more fully? Be sure to check the FamilySearch catalog for all jurisdictions to which a locality belongs.

### **Archives**

Many, many records are not freely accessible online. You may need to contact an archive to determine what is available. A Google search, the Censo-Guia, and other online inventories may help. When searching an archive's website, look for the words *fondos* or *guía* to locate a possible online inventory.

### **Consider all possible entities and jurisdictions**

Just like records, archives are found at all jurisdictional levels. Their holdings usually correspond to their purpose.

- Municipal archives usually contain records used by the municipal government in its day to day.
- Provincial archives house records generated by the provincial government. In Spain this is most likely where you would find notarial records.
- Diocesan archives usually house records from each of the parishes under its domain as well as records generated by the diocese. Many areas require copies of parish books be sent to the diocesan archive after a certain length of time has passed. In Spain this is 100 years. Keep in mind however, that not all parishes comply.
- Parish archives contain the records made by the parish priest. This would include sacramental rites as well as any charitable organizations run by the parish.
- Military archives house personnel files, marriage petitions (expediente matrimonial) for officers, pension files which can all offer some valuable genealogical information.
- National archives often house information regarding immigrants who have taken up residence in a country.

### **Writing to an archive**

This is a good way to learn more about their holdings, how to visit, and what requirements must be met. Most archives in Latin America will not conduct research. You may want to ask if they have a list of researchers they can recommend. Write your letter or email in Spanish. Do not send money but offer to pay any necessary fees. For more information on writing to an archive or parish, see the FamilySearch Wiki article "Spanish Letter Writing Guide."

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Spanish Letter Writing Guide](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Spanish_Letter_Writing_Guide)

## OVERCOMING RECORD LOSS

There are ways to overcome record loss through other record sources. The following record types may prove useful in some areas.

### Dispensations

When a couple has an impediment to their marriage as described by canon law, a dispensation from the Bishop was needed. These records are generated in the diocese and therefore, should be found in a diocesan archive, if they survive. The dispensation will contain all the usual information about a bride and groom as a marriage but possible additional information may be found related to the impediment. If the impediment was for consanguinity or affinity, there will be information, and perhaps a graphic, showing how the couple was related to their common ancestor.

### Notarial records

These records created by a notary are often kept in a provincial, district or municipal archives. They deal with important transactions involving land ownership, contracts, probate, guardianship, etc. Because these records often carry details about families, they can also help fill gaps in other lost records.

### Municipal records

Municipalities generate records such as voters' lists, tax records, draft registrations, hidalguías, among others that may fill gaps in parish records.

### Military records

If you have evidence the ancestor was a soldier, a military service record or pension record may indicate his place of birth and the names of his parents. Presidios often had their own parish church and kept sacramental records. Consider searching for these if applicable.

### Confirmations

Confirmations can often serve as a parish census listing the children of each family who are confirmed. They can be used to help determine if a child may have died young, as there are parishes where the priest did not note the deaths of young children.

## ONLINE SOURCES FOR HELP

We've all heard the saying "two heads are better than one." Consider reaching out on social media or to online groups for more research suggestions. Here are just a few you might consider.

**FamilySearch Community** requires a free FamilySearch account. This a forum where individuals help each other find answers to research questions, help translate records, and offer research and resource suggestions. There are communities for Hispanic research in both English and Spanish. <https://community.familysearch.org/en>

**Online consultations** are offered by Family History Library staff and qualified volunteers. They are 20-minute Zoom visits designed to help analyze a problem and offer research suggestions. Users are allowed to make one consultation appointment per week. Sign up through the Family History Library website. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/family-history-library/online-consultations>

**Facebook groups** from around the world can be very helpful to give guidance and suggestions on local research and researchers. By doing a search for genealogy or *genealogía* and the name of country, state, province, or region, will help you locate them. Some groups have been particularly helpful in understanding local resources and even conducting lookups in local repositories.

**Other online groups** such as Google groups are also forum-like groups where you can ask questions. It is always better to post in the language of the group. You can find a list of groups for Spain here: <https://www.genealogiahispana.com/redes-sociales/listas-de-correo-genealogicas-en-espana/> See also [https://www.familysearch.org/es/wiki/Grupos\\_y\\_foros\\_de\\_genealogía\\_en\\_el\\_Internet](https://www.familysearch.org/es/wiki/Grupos_y_foros_de_genealogía_en_el_Internet)

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