

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

The Brick-Wall Breakthrough Kit

A Field Kit for When Your Ancestor Goes Silent

Field Kit & Workbook

Mission 20: Breaking Through Brick Walls — When the Trail Goes Cold

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

What this kit gives you:

- A one-page diagnostic to determine whether you truly have a brick wall (or an early-stage research problem)
- A ready-to-use research log template with an example row pre-filled
- A FAN-Club Cluster Worksheet for mapping the people who surrounded your stuck ancestor

When to use it: When you have searched two or more major sources for an ancestor and come up empty — and you need a structured plan for what to try next.

The core principle: Brick walls usually hide in assumptions, not in missing records. The diagnostic and log together force those assumptions into the open.

Part 1: Is It Actually a Brick Wall?

Before calling it a brick wall, run this diagnostic. Answer honestly — a "No" to any question means you have more direct searching to do first.

#	Diagnostic Question	Yes	No
1	Have I searched at least two major databases for this person? (Ancestry, FamilySearch, FindMyPast, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Have I looked at original document images — not just indexes or transcriptions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Have I searched for alternate spellings of the surname? (At least 3 variants)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Have I checked records for the 5–10 years before and after the gap?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Have I written down every source I have already searched, with the result?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Have I tried at least two different record types? (e.g., census + vital records + land records)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Have I checked whether county or jurisdiction boundaries changed during the period I am researching?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Scoring: If you answered "Yes" to all 7, you have a genuine brick wall. Proceed to Parts 2 and 3. If any answer is "No," work that item first — the answer may be hiding there.

GRANNY PRO TIP

The most valuable log entries are the ones that say "found nothing."

A negative result is not a failure — it is a fence that narrows the field. "Searched Ancestry 1860 Kentucky census for all households with the surname MOORE in Johnson County — no match" is worth more than a blank page, because the next researcher (including future-you) will not have to run that search again.

Part 2: The Research Log Template

Use one row per source searched. Fill in every column, even when the result is "nothing found." Print a fresh sheet for each ancestor who has hit a wall.

Ancestor name: _____

Life dates (approximate): _____

Last known location: _____

Date Searched	Source / Database	Search Terms Used	Date Range Searched	Result	Next Step
2026-03-15	Ancestry — 1860 U.S. Federal Census	MOORE, Albert; Johnson Co., KY	1855-1865	No match found. Checked alternate: MOOR — also no match.	Try 1850 census; check neighboring counties (Magoffin, Lawrence)

Part 3: The FAN-Club Cluster Worksheet

The FAN Club — Family, Associates, Neighbors — is the most powerful brick-wall technique available to a genealogist. When direct records about your ancestor are missing, indirect records from the people who surrounded them fill the gap.

Stuck ancestor: _____

Time period: _____

Last known location: _____

Ring 1 — Family (Siblings, Parents, In-Laws)

Name	Relationship	Dates	What I Know	Sources Checked	New Information Found

Ring 2 — Associates (Witnesses, Co-Signers, Church Members, Neighbors on Deeds)

Name	How Connected	Dates	What I Know	Sources Checked	New Information Found

Ring 3 — Neighbors (Census Neighbors, 5-10 Households Above and Below)

Name	Census Year / Location	Later Location Found	Same Cluster Later?
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

What to do with this worksheet: Once you have filled in Ring 1, search for each family member in the same records that have failed for your stuck ancestor. If a sibling turns up in a new location after your ancestor disappears, follow the sibling. People migrated in clusters, and the cluster will lead you where the direct line cannot.

GRANNY SAYS

The wall is not going anywhere. It has been standing since 1870 or 1923 or whenever your ancestor decided to be difficult. It can wait one more week while you do the work around it. And when it does come down — and it will — you will know exactly which brick you pulled.

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
