

1.3 Conclusions: Hypothesis, Theory & Proof

Each and every assertion we make as history researchers must be supported by *proof*. However, *proof* is not synonymous with a *source*. The most reliable proof is a composite of information drawn from multiple sources—all being quality materials, *independently created*, and accurately representing the original circumstances.

For history researchers, there is no such thing as proof that can never be rebutted. We were not there when history happened, and the eyewitness accounts of those who were—if and when those accounts exist—may not be reliable. Every conclusion we reach about circumstances, events, identities, or kinships is simply a decision we base upon the weight of the evidence we have assembled. Our challenge is to accumulate the best information possible and to train ourselves to skillfully analyze and interpret what it has to say.

In this process, we typically reach conclusions of three types, each of which carries a different weight:

Hypothesis—a proposition based upon an analysis of evidence at hand; used to define a focus for additional research. In testing any hypothesis, we must labor to *disprove* it as diligently as we labor to prove it. Our role is not just that of judge and jury, but also that of devil's advocate.

Theory—a tentative conclusion reached after a hypothesis has been extensively researched but the evidence still seems short of proof. A theory should never be presented as a *fact*. Any theory we propose should carry qualifiers. *Perhaps, possibly, likely*, and similar terms can express our degree of confidence in a theory, but we are still obliged to explain our reasoning.

Proof—a conclusion based upon the sum of the evidence that supports a valid assertion or deduction (i.e., a conclusion drawn from aggregated clues). Proof must be backed by thorough research and documentation, by reliable information that is correctly interpreted and carefully correlated, and by a well-reasoned and written analysis of the problem and the evidence.

A conclusion cannot always be reached. When the accumulated materials are appropriately appraised, the evidence may or may not support a decision. If it does not, then the question remains open—the fact of the situation remains unknown—until sufficient evidence is developed. If extenuating circumstances pressure for a decision (as