Even though most genealogists seem to be primarily interested in their personal ancestry, the family is the basic unit of family history, and the careers of individuals can only be traced and understood within their social contexts, and their primary social contexts are the natal family they are born into, and the conjugal family they form.

Therefore, reconstructed nuclear families are the *sine qua non* of all genealogical enterprises, and their representations, whether in the single family sections of *Register*-style reports, in the generationally indented trees that I prefer, or in some other format, adequately grounded in the citeable documentary evidence and argument from which they are fabricated, represent also the culmination of one's research to date, and the necessary hypothetical springboard to further research.

I agree with the philosophy of premier New England genealogist, Robert Charles Anderson, FASG, on the desirability of reconstructing whole families no matter how scant the evidence, complete with at least a guesstimated marriage date and birth dates for each child.

Anderson's philosophy and advice in accomplishing this is laid out in pages xxiii-xxvi of the introductory matter to each of his *Great Migration* volumes, and I refer every serious genealogist to this material, and to the *Great Migration* volumes in general, because they are exemplary. However, what follows represents my own elaboration of the principles Anderson has therein set forth.

Reconstructing whole families in specific detail forces one to take into consideration everything that research has turned up about all the component individuals, as well as the detailed implications of that evidence—and this both highlights contradictions, and suggests additional research that might be taken to resolve them. A complete family reconstruction in hand, loaded with specific assertions, then serves as an ideal template for assessing the possible relevance and implications of new evidence, or of new ways of interpreting the existing evidence—once again, highlighting anomalies that prompt further research and/or the revision of the hypothetical family structure to accommodate them..

The whole process is exactly analogous to that recommended by premier philosopher of science, Karl Popper, in his highly influential, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), and subsequently. Not even scientific hypotheses (much less historical ones) can ever be proven in the absolute mathematical sense: they can only be tested against the data and falsified, either in whole or in part.

Furthermore, the bolder and more specific the hypothesis, provided always that it is consistent with **all** of the known evidence, the more exposed are any weaknesses, and the more readily those aspects of the original hypothesis can be falsified, then revised and retested, in an iterative process.

The pursuit of truths in history, no less than in science, is thus best understood as an iterative process, in which every phase of inquiry and research needs to be guided by a standing, falsifiable, revisable set of hypotheses, and the whole reconstructed family is the natural hypothetical unit for genealogical or family historical purposes.\

Some Techniques of Whole Family Reconstruction

Unless one is lucky enough to have found a private or complete public set of birth, marriage, and death records for a family, there are bound to be gaps in the evidence, and complete family reconstructions are going to require estimations of the dates of the key vital events, and inferences with respect to place. Fortunately, these vital events generally follow patterns typical of their time, place, and culture, and one can acquire a grasp of such patterns through extensive experience with the records of particular peoples, times, and places, or by paying attention to the writings of those who have developed this kind of expertise. There have even been a few systematic studies of such patterns, particularly in the area of onomastics, in the sense of child-naming patterns, and I shall expand on that topic below.

However, most fundamental to the constitution of any family are the typical ages at marriage of (separately) bride and groom, and the typical intervals between marriage and the birth of the first, and subsequent children, but these patterns can vary quite widely across American subcultures, immigration cohorts, and even from family to family.

David Hackett Fischer has proposed age at (first) marriage norms for four of the principal early American immigrant groups in his *Albion's Seed* (1989), and genealogists such as myself, who've acquired deep expertise in certain areas, have come up with their own refinements and modifications of these statistics.

As for birth intervals, at the broadest and most general level, the first child was typically born between 9-14 months after marriage, and the typical birth interval for subsequent children was between 18-24 months (and was almost never less than 14), except for the final children, who might be spaced as much as 3-5 years apart.

The most problematic area of whole family reconstruction lies in the inevitable gaps that occur in the birth order. In pre-modern times, with often unassisted births and little or no trained medical care, there were a fair number of miscarriages, stillborn children, and deaths in infancy or early childhood, so one expects such gaps, but they still need to be accounted for somehow.

In my whole family reconstructions, I've generally interpolated hypothetical children into birth order gaps that are too wide to be credible, even when there's little or no circumstantial evidence to support such children, such as supernumerary tallies in the early USCensuses. There can, however, be strong circumstantial support for interpolating children, even children of specific names, when the family appears to have followed certain standard onomastic patterns.

Birth Order and Onomastic (Child-naming) Patterns

One of the most valuable guides, not only to the reconstruction of families, but also to the identification of ancestors, is the strong tendency for parents in most American sub-cultures, to name children for themselves, their siblings, their parents, or other ancestors, often following a traditional pattern linked to the order of their children's birth.

The colonial Chesapeake Onomastic Pattern is an example of a strong and persistent pattern that was extremely widespread in the early American South, while the Scottish Onomastic Pattern is a specific and highly structured child-naming pattern that I've found invaluable in reconstructing American Scotch-Irish, or Scottish-origined families. There was some onomastic patterning in early New England as well, with about two thirds of the first children of each sex named for their same sex parent.

Even when they were influenced by these standard pattern, many family line evolved idiosyncratic additions or exceptions, and children not named according to the standard pattern often received names that were simply popular for their era and locale, much like today And immigrant families who brought no traditional pattern with them, often fell in to some degree with the prevalent patterns o their community.

All of these types of onomastic patterns, where they can be identified, can be valuable in sorting people with the same names into their respective families, and also in reconstructing those families. And, given a fully reconstructed family and an evident pattern, strong inferences about the names of the parents parents can sometimes be made. This is particularly true of the Scottish onomastic pattern.

Here's an Example of a set of whole family reconstructions, presented in my preferred multi-generation indented tree format, and here are the conventions I follow in constructing indented trees.