Elusive Ancestor Website
by Thornton and Marty Gale

> Note – For a complete explanation of how to design and build genealogy websites, see the book "Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website" available from the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website.

We have created three sample genealogy websites at *www.genealogyhosting.com* which can be used as examples or as idea generators. These are working genealogy websites which we have created in the course of our own personal genealogy work. There is an article describing each of them available on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website. The three sample websites are:

- Surname website: *www.mannigel.org*

- Genealogy Workbench: *www.martygale.name*

- Elusive Ancestor Website (the subject of this article): *www.poill27.info*

An Elusive Ancestor Website: *www.poill27.info*

Our example of an elusive ancestor website is *www.poill27.info*. The purpose of an elusive ancestor website is to present and prove the identity of an ancestor whose genealogy is extremely difficult. Also, the purpose of the elusive website is to foster communication with fellow genealogists who are interested in the elusive ancestor and who may have scraps of information about that ancestor.

Our sample elusive ancestor website *www.poill27.info* presents our theory of our Great-grandfather John J. Poill (1837 – 1928), a colorful character who had, according to our theory, committed murder in California in 1870, fled to Oregon, changing his name, and hiding his identity for the remainder of his life to avoid being arrested and prosecuted by the authorities. Once in Oregon, he married our Great-Grandmother Mila Ann Eaton (1857 – 1937). It is our theory that John J. Poill was actually John H. Pyle, son of Mary Ann Westbrook (1809 - 1896) and Nicholas E. Pyle (1803 – 1867).

Proving the Elusive Ancestor

The most common type of elusive ancestor found in genealogical research is the situation in which the genealogist must prove that two people in two different places and points in time are in fact the same person. Actually, this is the basic format of much genealogy research anyway - in many ways, most ancestors start out in genealogy research as "elusive" using this definition. For example, the corruption in the spelling of the name can make an ancestor into an elusive ancestor at least for a while at the start of the research into that ancestor. Also, many of our female ancestors enter our research as

elusive ancestors because of the name change at marriage. In each of these cases, the genealogist is trying to prove that two people in the genealogical record are the same person. However, for a genuine "elusive" ancestor, the conclusion is permanently obscured or even impossible and is always based on very tenuous circumstantial evidence that is carefully pieced together.

The most difficult case of the elusive ancestor is when the ancestor has purposely changed his or her identity. This is the case with our example elusive ancestor John J. Poill. This situation of an ancestor hiding his or her identity arises from time to time in genealogy research especially for family desertion (a surprisingly common phenomenon – the patriarch gets the bug to move West sans family).

It's a Matter of Circumstantial Evidence

So how does the genealogist actually prove his or her theory of an elusive ancestor? Let's take a look at the structure of a proof of an elusive ancestor. Let's start out with an easy case. Let's say we have uncovered two ancestors (e.g., ancestor "X", first and later, ancestor "Y") in the genealogical record. We are trying to prove that these two are the same person. Let's say the facts we have are from different points in time decades apart.

- In our example, ancestor "X" discovered first in our research is named "Carl Schmidt" aged 72, married to a "Elizabeth Schmidt," aged 71 living on a farm just outside of Springville in the 1900 census.

- Let's say ancestor "Y" discovered later in our research is named "Karl Schmit" aged 23 , married to a "Betsy Schmit," aged 21, living in Springville in the 1850 census. Notice that this will usually be the order the ancestors are discovered since the genealogist usually works backwards in history going from the known more recent ancestor to the unknown earlier ancestor, in this case from the known ancestor "X" to the suspected ancestor "Y".

In this example, we have 1) equivalent surname, 2) equivalent given names for both husband and wife pairs, 3) same specific locality, and 4) compatible ages for both husband and wife pairs. In this example, we would accept these facts as proof that these two people, "Carl Schmidt" and "Karl Schmit" are one and the same (and also that "Elizabeth Schmidt" and "Betsy Schmit" are too).

So this is hardly an example of a genuine elusive ancestor but notice that it is based on circumstantial evidence! That is, we don't have direct proof of it such as an independent document stating or implying that the Schmidts have lived in Springville from 1850 to 1900!

Elusive Ancestor Proof Framework

For an elusive ancestor, it is important that genealogists take a very disciplined approach to their proofs and in particular to develop their own standard of proof for the use of circumstantial evidence then apply it consistently and objectively.

In our own research, we have developed our own genealogy proof framework illustrated in Figure 1. Our proof framework isn't "rocket science" but it may be useful to other genealogists so we will share it in detail below. We have used our proof

framework as a basis for designing the *www.poill27.info* elusive ancestor website to prove our theory of John J. Poill.

In our proof framework of Figure 1, we are trying to prove that an ancestor we have recently encountered (ancestor "Y") is actually the same person as an ancestor we encountered previously (ancestor "X"). Much of the time devoted to genealogy is spent in constructing proofs that follow this basic pattern. Let's go through our genealogy proof framework.

- Ancestor "X" is proven by various facts in the genealogical record to exist at a specific place and time (labeled "B").

- Similarly, ancestor "Y" is proven by various facts in the genealogical record to exist at a specific place, probably different from "B," and at a specific time, probably years earlier from "B" (labeled "A").

- We suspect that ancestor "Y" is in fact ancestor "X" and want to prove it. But for non-trivial reasons we can't. For example, in our case, the two have completely different names (i.e., John J. Poill vs. John H. Pyle).

- We prove ancestor "Y" is ancestor "X" by proving a transition (labeled "T"). The transition accounts for how ancestor "Y" "emerged" into ancestor "X".
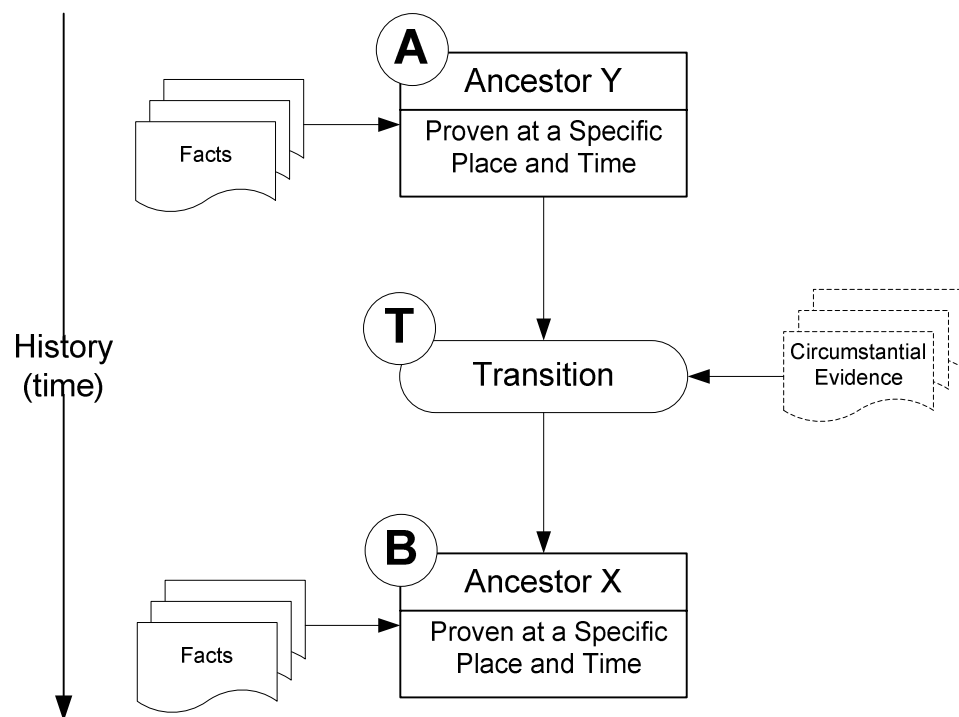

Figure 1 – Elusive Ancestor Proof Framework

For an elusive ancestor, the proof that a proposed transition "T" does in fact account for how ancestor "Y" emerged into ancestor "X" is always based on very tenuous

circumstantial evidence as shown in Figure 1. After all, if the transition weren't based on tenuous circumstantial evidence, then the ancestor wouldn't be considered elusive! Thus, while we can collect strong genealogy information associated with ancestor "Y" at the place/time labeled "A" and ancestor "X" at place/time "B," it is the transition "T" that connects them that is usually very difficult to prove. It is the veracity, integrity and believability of the transition "T" that will prove the case.

Transitions Must Reflect Human Nature

We have discovered in conversations with fellow genealogists that the critical aspect of any standard for the transition "T" is that the transition must be convincing in terms of the way human beings really are. In other words, transition "T" must reflect true human nature.

For example, if the proven location in 1860 of ancestor "Y" is Tarrant County, Texas and the proven location in 1910 of ancestor "X" is El Monte, California then there must be a reasonable human story, but based on circumstantial evidence of course, of how the ancestor got there and why. It's not enough to say, "it must have been a wagon train."

For starters, we would have to identify a specific wagon train that left from a specific place where ancestor "Y" was proven to be at that specific time. But if we can't prove the existence of a wagon train, then we have to prove some alternative behavior reflecting human nature.

For example, if 1) ancestor "X" is proven to be living in El Monte, CA in 1910 and 2) we can prove that several of ancestor "Y's" neighbors in Tarrant Co, TX in 1860 were also living in El Monte, CA in 1880 that would be convincing circumstantial evidence that ancestor "X" is "Y". In this case, it is reasonable human behavior to go out west with your neighbors.

Another example of proving reasonable human behavior would be that we have identified a neighbor and witness at ancestor "Y's" wedding in Texas in 1857 who is also living as a neighbor to ancestor "X" in El Monte, California in 1895. This is an example of the reasonable human behavior: ancestor "Y" would go out west with a close friend.

We have used our elusive ancestor proof framework described above to create our *www.poill27.info* website. However, before describing the website, it is necessary to define some terms.

Terms Used in Website Design

Most of the features to be implemented in any genealogy website such as an elusive ancestor website will require, produce, or be associated with information. At *www.genealogyhosting.com,* we have defined methodologies and terms for designing the information structure of a website. These terms will be used to describe the structure of the *www.poill27.info* website in the remainder of this article. Let's go through them briefly:

Note: We have explained these and many other topics of designing genealogy websites in the book "Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website" available from the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website.

Information Element

The design of any website is concerned with the placement of information on web pages. The packets of information of a topic that are placed on web pages, are given a special name at *www.genealogyhosting.com*: we call them "information elements." An information element is one or more pieces of information about a specific topic that can be thought of as a whole. For example, a family group sheet, a person on the family group sheet, a list of people buried in a cemetery, a description of the cemetery itself, a plat map of a county, a description of the county itself are all examples of information elements. Notice that information elements can always be decomposed into lower information elements. Structuring the information of a genealogy website comes down to the actual placement of the information elements on specific web pages of the website at a specific level of decomposition.

Hyperlink Model

In a website, not all the information for a topic is put together in one place on a web page as it is in a typical non-fiction book. Rather, the author can take advantage of the idea of hypermedia – the linking of web pages so readers are not limited to reading the material sequentially and can jump around using hyperlinks based on their needs. With hypermedia, the information elements of a topic are spread over more than one web page. Then the web pages are interlinked via hyperlinks so that visitors can access the information elements in a nonsequential and ad-hoc manner based on their needs.

So how does the author of a website know on which web page a particular information element goes? The placement of information elements is controlled by what we call "the hyperlink model." The hyperlink model is an abstraction mechanism and provides the view of the information – all the visitor sees is what is revealed by the hyperlink model. The hyperlink model is a logical structure which controls the presentation and linking of the information elements of the website. The hyperlink model is actually a separate literary work. In other words the hyperlink model is designed and thought of as a single entity by the author.

The hyperlink model is actually implemented by making use of hypermedia in which hyperlinks are placed in the information elements of the web pages of the website. Thus, the hyperlink model is distributed throughout the information elements on the various web pages of a website. However, the author designs the hyperlink model as a single whole even though it is implemented by distributing it in the content throughout the website.

This means the information elements of the web pages of a genealogy website have two duties: first the information elements carry the actual genealogy information of the website and second, the information elements have the hyperlinks of the hyperlink model embedded in them to implement the hyperlink model.

Multilayered Structure

We have explained multilayered structures as a design approach in much more detail in the article "Using the Multilayered Structure to Design a Genealogy Website" available on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website.

A multilayered structure is a theoretical construct to organize a body of information. In a multilayered structure, the author places the information elements in logical "layers." The multilayered structure is often used by authors to organize a non-fiction literary work such as a book, a chapter in a book, an article, or in our case, a genealogy website. In fact, the multilayered structure is a perfect way to organize a complex topic such as a genealogy website.

Multilayered structures are created by the author by classifying the information elements which will be used to create the work and placing them in categories. It is always possible to perform this categorization of the information elements because the body of related information in question comes from an underlying discipline (field of study, business, avocation) which has methodologies, theories, and practices. We call it a body of "related" information because the information is coherent, interrelated, and logical. In our case, the author is a genealogist and the discipline is genealogy. Also, whenever a practitioner of the discipline reads a non-fiction literary work which draws on the body of related information and which is organized as a multilayered structure, he or she would quickly understand the categories and would thus instantly understand the organization of the work.

Once the information elements have been classified into categories, then the categories can be manipulated to organize the information. This is done by focusing on the categories just defined. The categories are arranged into layers, stacked like bricks by the author, in which the order of a category in the stack is important. The layers will be carefully arranged by the author so that practitioners of the body of related information can understand it and navigate it (get from one place in the body of related information to another).

The order of the stacking of the categories into proper layers is based on the internal relations between the information elements from one layer to another (not necessarily adjacent). A "relation" is a logical connection between two information elements. The practitioners of the discipline would naturally associate those information elements together.

So how does the author actually create a multilayered structure? The reader is encouraged to read the article "Using the Multilayered Structure to Design a Genealogy Website" available on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website. For now here's a summary (refer to Figure 2) of the work process the author will use to create a multilayered structure:

- The author starts with a body of related information for example specific genealogy information (Figure 2, 1) which will be used to create a non-fiction literary work (e.g., a genealogy website)

- The information elements are classified into categories (Figure 2, 2).

- Then the categories are arranged into layers (Figure 2, 3).

- Once the layers are defined then, the author inserts navigational links between the information elements (Figure 2, 4) which will allow the reader to move efficiently within the literary work.
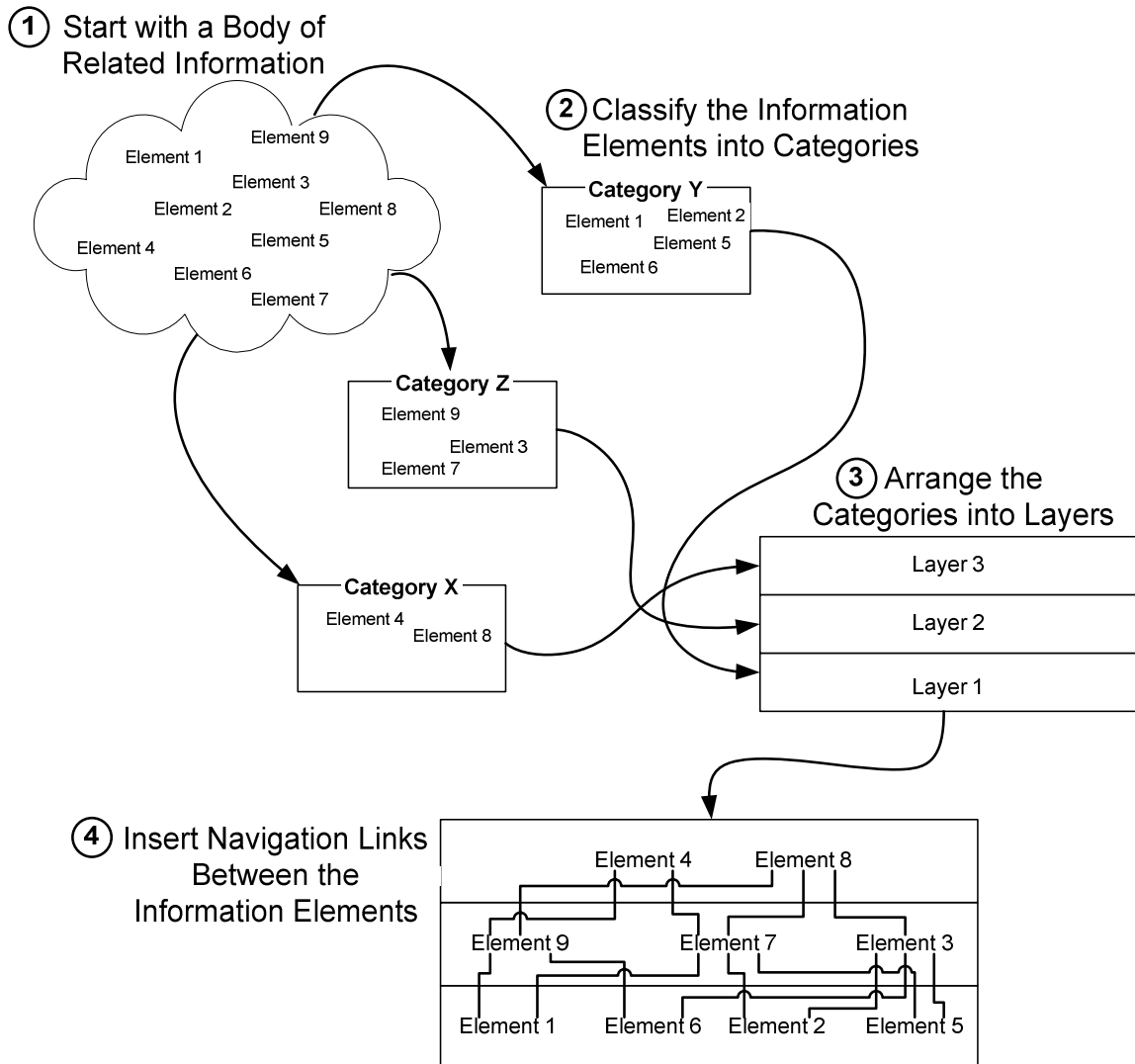
① Start with a Body of Related Information

Element 9
Element 1
Element 3
Element 2   Element 8
Element 4   Element 5
Element 6
Element 7

② Classify the Information Elements into Categories

Category Y
Element 1   Element 2
             Element 5
Element 6

Category Z
Element 9
         Element 3
Element 7

③ Arrange the Categories into Layers

Layer 3
Layer 2
Layer 1

Category X
Element 4
    Element 8

④ Insert Navigation Links Between the Information Elements

Element 4   Element 8
Element 9   Element 7   Element 3
Element 1   Element 6   Element 2   Element 5

Figure 2 – Creating a Multilayered Structure

The Proof-Structure Metaphor

A good approach to designing the hyperlink model of a genealogy website is to plug in an organizational metaphor. An organizational metaphor is an analogy of a well-known information structure familiar to most people. For example, a website that contains web pages of information on each county in a state might use the metaphor of a map of the state showing each county and inviting the visitor to click on the county on the map to go to the web page about that county. In this way, any visitor will automatically know how to browse for a particular county.

Organizational metaphors go very well with multilayered structures (i.e., the organizational metaphor is best implemented as a multilayered structure). We have

described in detail the use of organizational metaphors in the book "Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website" available from the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website. While there are numerous organizational metaphors, the one that is most useful to creating an elusive ancestor web site is what we call at *www.genealogyhosting.com* the "proof-structure" metaphor.

Anyone who has ever taken a high school geometry course is familiar with the proof-structure metaphor. It is a way to organize a non-fiction literary work in order to prove something. This organizational metaphor is very effective in information-advocacy websites of which genealogy websites are good examples and the elusive ancestor website is the premier example!

The proof-structure metaphor consists of three parts: 1) the statement of a theory and its proof, 2) explanations, discussions, and synthesis of facts to explain the proof or consolidate the facts, and 3) facts which are relied on in the proof. The proof-structure metaphor is ideally implemented as a multilayered structure (Figure 3) previously discussed. As a multilayered structure, it will consists of three basic layers: 1) theory / proof, 2) synthesis, 3) fact. However, as we'll see below, these three basic layers are often sub-divided into additional layers to better present the information.
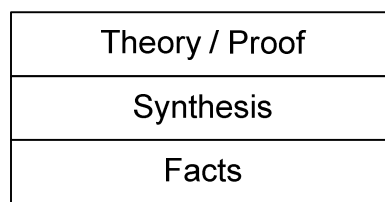
| Theory / Proof |
| Synthesis |
| Facts |

Figure 3 – The Proof-Structure Metaphor

Organization of www.poill27.info

This website uses the classic proof-structure metaphor. The *www.poill27.info* website has an expanded 5-layered structure (Figure 4) based on the three basic layers (Figure 3) of the classic proof-structure metaphor. Notice that two layers at the top are classified as "Theory" layers and the next two layers down are classified as synthesis layers. The division of basic layers into two or more specialized layers is a common strategy in designing multilayered structures. Here is how these five layers are implemented in our *www.poill27.info* elusive ancestor website to prove our theory that John H. Pyle and John J. Poill were the same person: Starting from the bottom and working up:

Documents *(facts layer):*

The documents layer (Figure 4) consists of web pages containing scanned images of primary documents or exact transcriptions of documents or document snippets. In an elusive ancestor website, total and complete documentation is required so that anybody viewing the website can be assured of its integrity – that nothing has been left out and that genealogists who view the website could analyze and make conclusions on the evidence on their own as independent genealogists.

Theory	Overview
	Theories
Synthesis	Consolidations
	People
Facts	Documents

Figure 4 - *www.poill27.info* Multilayered Structure

People *(synthesis layer):*

The People layer consists of web pages for each person identified in the proof that John J. Poill is John H. Pyle. We have identified not only the two incarnations of John J. Poill (a.k.a John H. Pyle) but also his father, mother, and wives. A person web page synthesizes the documents on the lower layers as well as presents a handy index to the documents of the respective person.

Consolidations *(synthesis layer):*

The consolidations layer is an aid to the visitor to the website and consolidates or integrates or simplifies the information of John J. Poill's primary documents as well as the other people to make them easier to understand. The web pages on the consolidation layer do not contain controversial information and are based directly on the documents and/or people of the bottom two layers. It could be argued, however, that the process of consolidation of facts or people is a subjective process in its own right. In other words, do we have an "agenda" when we consolidate specific facts and/or people together basically asserting that they belong together? While possibly subjective, the facts and/or people should be put together on web pages of the consolidation layer with the motivation of helping the visitor and not to spin the facts to shape the conclusions. The web pages of the consolidations layer are simply shortcuts so the visitor can be freed from the time-consuming process of integrating (i.e., synthesizing) the facts and people.

Theories *(theory layer)*:

The theories layer consists of web pages which present our theory that John J. Poill was actually John H. Pyle, son of Mary Ann Westbrook and Nicholas Pyle. We use our proof framework discussed above (see "Proving the Elusive Ancestor," page 1). We have subdivided our overall theory into six separate transitions in which each transition contributes to the whole but is individually presented and proven. The various transitions of the theory layer make frequent references via hyperlinks to the other layers to backup the proofs.

Overview of Theories *(theory layer)*:

We have written an overview of the life of John J. Poill and why we believe he is John H. Pyle. This overview presents a consolidated explanation of our theory making frequent hyperlink references to the web pages on the lower layers. For many visitors, it may be all that is needed from the *www.poill17.info* website.

www.poill27.info Hyperlink Model

The hyperlink model of *www.poill27.info* is shown in Figure 5 (note – see definition of the hyperlink model above at "Hyperlink Model," page 5).

- The five layers (see Figure 4) are each interlinked with layer hyperlinks (Figure 1, far left) in the side menu bars of each web page of the website pointing at the "General," "Theories," "Consolidations," "People," and "Documents" web pages. Each of these will be a "Home Page" in its own right and serve as the base for viewing the set of web pages on that layer. Thus, the visitor can easily navigate to the various layers of the website.

- The home page is the "General" web page. It has hyperlinks (G) to the various general web pages which are utilitarian in nature (contain practical information which is not part of the main genealogy content – such as the contact page or the links page with hyperlinks to various useful websites).

- The "Theories" web page is the "home page" for proving the theory that John H. Pyle and John J. Poill are the same person. As explained above, the proof consists of proving a series of transitions in which John H. Pyle became John J. Poill. The "Theories" web page has an index (TI) to the transitions web pages themselves. The transitions are a collection which can be browsed using previous – next hyperlinks (TPN) in time order.

- The "Consolidations" web page is the "home page" to the various consolidations. It has an index (CI) to the collection of consolidation web pages which can, in turn, be browsed using previous-next hyperlinks (CPN) in alpha order.

- The "People" web page is the "home page" for people that are important in the proof. It has an index (PI) to the collection of people web page. The people web pages can be browsed using previous – next hyperlinks (PPN) in alpha order.

- The bottom layer is the bulk of the *www.poill27.info* website. The "Documents" web page is the "home page" to the documents with an index (DI) to them. The documents themselves are a collection and can be browsed using previous – next hyperlinks (DPN) in date order.

- The information on the website is heavily interlinked. Thus the four bottom layers each have hyperlinks from the upper layers. We have shown these on Figure 5 as generic sets of hyperlinks. That is, each of these represent numerous hyperlinks but are shown on the figure as a single generic hyperlink. Thus, starting from the bottom, the various document web pages are interlinked from the layers above via the D1, D2, and D3 sets of generic hyperlinks; the consolidations are interlinked from above via C1 and C2; the person web pages via P1; and the transitions via T1.

- Finally, any text from any layer may have hyperlinks to any other web page on any other layer to take advantage of the hypermedia capabilities of a website. This is especially true for referring to the various people web pages from elsewhere in the website. To avoid making Figure 4 too complicated, we have not shown these hyperlinks.
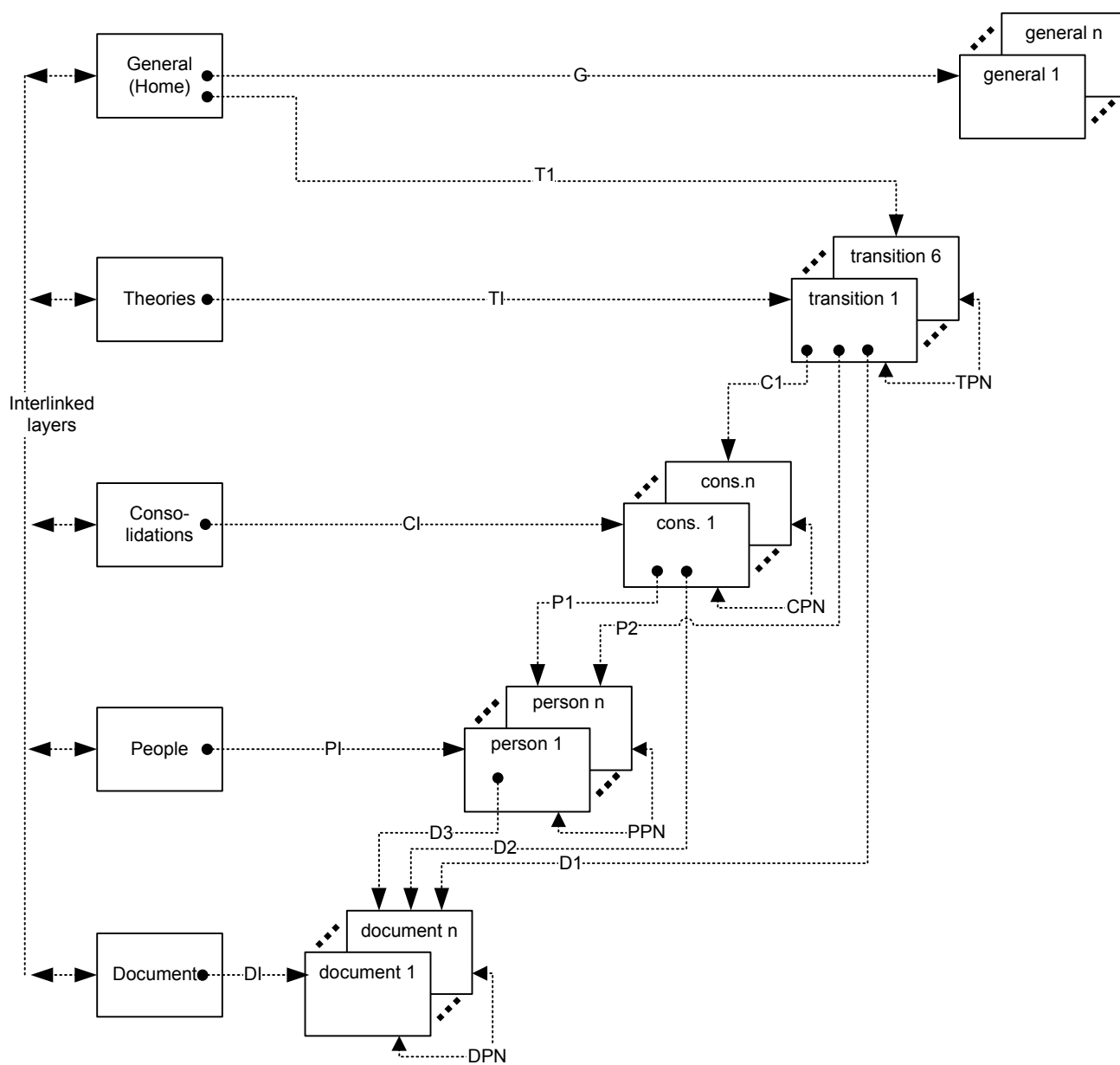
Figure 5 – Elusive Ancestor Website Hyperlink Model
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Implementation of www.poill27.info

Domain Name:

We selected the domain name of "poill27.info" to show how one would deal with a popular surname. Ideally, the domain name would be the surname-subject of the genealogy website with a proper top-level node suitable for genealogy such as ".info," ".name," or ".org." For example, for our elusive ancestor website which is based on John J. Poill the ideal domain name would be "poill.info," "poill.name," or "poill.org." Unfortunately, when attempting to register a domain name for a popular surname, it is likely that the obvious domain name has already been taken. However, one can always append a serial number to the surname as we have done in this example. Thus, no matter how popular a surname may be, one can always obtain a pretty good domain name based on the surname by appending a number to the base surname. While lacking in elegance, appending a serial number to the surname satisfies the need for instant recognition of the website by fellow genealogists.

Website Authoring Application

We used Microsoft Publisher to create the *www.poill27.info* website. MS Publisher is ideal for creating genealogy websites, especially an elusive ancestor website. MS Publisher's free-form placement of content in WYSIWYG web pages is a great relief to the genealogist trying to piece together shreds of circumstantial information into a convincing proof. The author does not have to worry about the constraints of the website authoring application and can be creative in finding meaningful ways of presenting the proof using MS Publishers free-form entry of text boxes and images. We have presented a detailed explanation of using MS Publisher as a website authoring application in the book "Getting Started on Your Genealogy Website," available on the *www.genealogyhosting.com* website.

Hosting Plan:

We selected the "Economy" hosting plan at *www.genealogyhosting.com* for *www.poill27.info*. In particular, we selected the Microsoft operating system for this website (versus the Linux operating system). There are no external differences between Microsoft and Linux and the visitor would have an identical experience under either. The difference is in the free software offering of each (i.e., with a Linux plan, you get a lot more free software). Whether Linux or Microsoft, the "Economy" hosting plan gives us gigs of disk storage which we use for both the website and for online file storage. Online file storage on the web server is a very handy capability to store files as they are collected on a genealogy trip as explained in the article "The Genealogy Road Warrior" available on the *www.genealogy.com* website.