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How to spot and avoid 9 common genealogy mistakes & errors

BY MARY HARRELL-SESNAK

Family history researchers are often frustrated by the mistakes of others—particularly when there is an obvious error in identity, such as the mistake explained in a 1914 Virginia newspaper article. It points out that a member of the Gwathmey family was incorrectly identified as having been a maid of honor to Queen Elizabeth. This maid was named Hannah Moore, married to Sir John Temple. Their daughter was Hannah Temple, who married Owen Gwathmey, and their son was also named Owen Gwathmey, and was born 1752 Nov. 25. It is not possible that a man born in 1752 could have a grandmother who had been a maid to Queen Elizabeth, who died in 1603.

This sounds like an obvious mistake, and one that could have been corrected with simple subtraction. Unfortunately, once a mistake is written in a book or newspaper article, the mistake is often carried into other research—forever frustrating the more serious genealogists.

Genealogical mistakes are not often easy to sort out, so let's discuss some strategies.

1. Abbreviations are not always what they seem

Two of my favorites are “NA” and “NMI.”

In the case of the first abbreviation, “NA” might indicate *non applicable, naturalized, Native American*, or even *Navy*, demonstrating the importance of finding the “key” explaining what an abbreviation actually means.

Another abbreviation that sometimes causes confusion is the use of “NMI” in place of a middle name. It is not an actual moniker, but rather

used to indicate that a person has *no middle initial—no middle name*.

2. Age-related mistakes

* *Women who are too old to be mothers.*

Although Mrs. Steve Pace, of Rose Hill, Virginia, reportedly gave birth to her 17th child in 1939 at the age of 73 (see the Wikipedia article “*Pregnancy Over Age 50*”), it is rare for women to give birth after the age of 50.

If a woman continued to give birth through her 40s, then it is possible that a report of her having a child as an older woman may be correct.

However, whenever you see such an older mother-child relationship claim, examine the possibility that the family may have been raising an orphan or a grandchild.

* *Persons who were born too young or old to have served during a military event.*

If you are researching an ancestor for a lineage society, such as the Sons or Daughters of the American Revolution, start by figuring out the beginning and ending dates of the event.

For example, the American Civil War occurred between 1861 and 1865.

Although there are examples of very young veterans, most of the younger set did not serve in a military capacity – unless they were older. One exception was Civil War Missouri veteran George Huffman, who enrolled as a volunteer in the 13th Missouri Infantry on 4 November 1861 at the age of 14. He re-enlisted on 8 February 1864, and was considered to have been the youngest veteran to have re-enlisted that

year – as explained in an 1864 Massachusetts newspaper article.

For the most part, however, it is safe to assume that someone – other than a drummer or bugler – must have been at least 15 when he enlisted for combat service. Therefore, it is unlikely that a combat veteran actually served in the Civil War if he was born after the year 1850.

Now, if a child served in a non-military capacity, then you might find evidence of children as young as seven involved in a war – such as Nathan Futrell from Northampton County, a young boy who served in the American Revolutionary War.

You can also apply an age factor to determine the likelihood of an older person serving in the military.

3. All applicable genealogy records have not been found

Just because you can't find a genealogical proof doesn't mean that one doesn't exist. For example, many military records were burned, so look to other types of records for evidence.

In other words, if an original record is missing you might be able to find alternate records. In the case of a missing military record, look for a petition for a pension, or a list of enlistments, reprinted in an old newspaper article. Other possible genealogical sources: a family diary or letter, or church bulletin, that references military service.

4. Children listed without parents may not be orphans

Just because a child is not recorded

with a parent on a census record doesn't necessarily indicate that both parents are deceased.

On one of the 1850 U.S. Federal Census records, I noted that the children of my ancestor Permelia Ann (Davis) Drake were living in different households.

Not finding their mother, I at first assumed that she had died. It turned out that she was very much alive, and recorded in the census with her second husband, Samuel Bassett. It's not clear why the children were with the neighbors in 1850, but perhaps they were mother's helpers or farm helpers working to support the family.

5. Informants are not always correct

A primary record is one that was recorded at the time of the event. A secondary record is one that is recorded later, generally from an informant. In the case of a death certificate, the date and place of death is primary evidence, but the birth date of the decedent, along with the stated parents, is not necessarily correct.

In my family, my great-grandfather's parents were recorded on his death certificate as his natural parents, when in fact court records and other records establish that he had been adopted.

6. Just because two people with the same name reside in the same area does not necessarily mean they are related

In the case of my ancestor William Harrell of Virginia (and Indiana) of the late 1700s and early 1800s, it turns out there are three men by the same name. Now that descendants have submitted results from DNA studies, it is clear that they were not closely related.

7. Spelling errors

Alternate spellings are the norm, rather than the exception.

For example, my Ebling ancestors can be found with the surname spelling Ebeling, Hebling, and even Heblinger. As a result, I always browse a book's index to see if there are similar spellings. When searching online or in a search box, such as at GenealogyBank, I frequently use a wildcard such as a question mark (?) or asterisk (*) when searching for ancestor names.

- * The ? is used to take the place of one letter.
- * The * is used to take the place of several letters.

For example:

- * Eb*ing* would find Ebling, Ebeling and Eblinger.
- * ?Eb*ing* would find all of the above, and include Hebling or Heblinger.
- * Cath?rine would find both Catherine and Catharine.

8. Transpositions (reversing or mixing up letters and numbers)

Many people, including myself, are prone to transpositions. The year 1787, for example, might be unintentionally entered as 1778, or even 1877.

To overcome this tendency, be sure to closely examine recorded figures, such as the reported age at death. Several genealogy programs calculate this figure, and may even note it during an error check.

9. Widows and widowers may not necessarily be widowed

In the event of a divorce, separation, or bigamy, a spouse might be recorded as widowed on an official record. This may be to handle a delicate issue, or simply to accommodate a census form that didn't have other options.

These are just a few common genealogical errors. If you have some that you have observed, please share

them with the Swedish American Genealogist editor!

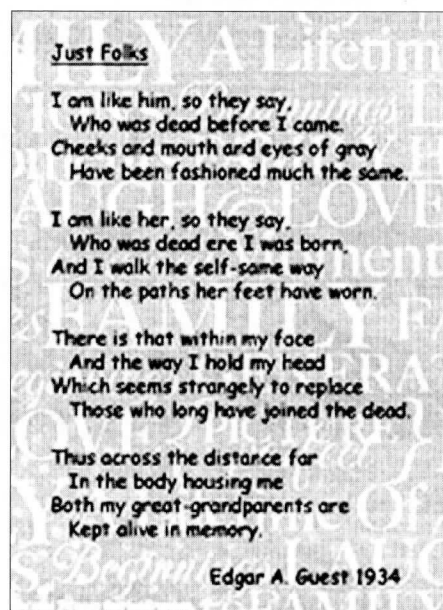
SAG Editor's note:

In Swedish church records divorced people are often listed as widows or widowers. Divorces were quite unusual in the old days, but they did happen.

In the forms that the pastors had to fill out every year and send in to the Central Bureau of Statistics there was no column for divorced people, so they ended up in the column for deaths.

This article was first published 2013 Aug. 7 on the GenealogyBank blog (see link on p. 30), and is re-published in SAG by permission from the author and GenealogyBank.

Mary Harrell-Sesniak is a genealogist, author, and editor with a strong technology background. In this guest blog post, Mary discusses 9 common mistakes made when doing family history research, and suggests ways to avoid them.



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