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Genealogical Misconceptions

- Things to ponder to avoid traps

BY MICHAEL JOHN NEILL

This is a semi-serious look at some misconceptions that genealogists (and non-genealogists) have about family history.

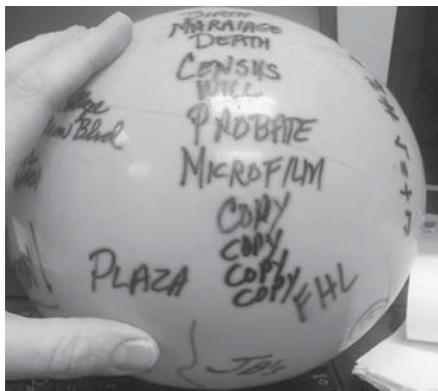
1) We all have a famous ancestor, somewhere. I have found the names of over three hundred of my ancestors and have yet to have any of them qualify as famous. In some cases, you may want to reconsider being related to someone famous. Hard-working, law-abiding relatives are nothing to be ashamed of. Try and document your ancestors accurately, whether they were famous or not.

2) There are no early babies or shady stories in my family tree. Trace your ancestry completely for six generations and then we will talk.

3) There were three brothers with the last name of [Takeyourpick] who came to America. We descend from the youngest (oldest, middle, tallest, smartest, etc.). If this is true, then the number of families who had three sons is beyond statistical expectations. Check it out.

4) Immigrants were all poor. There's no doubt that the vast majority of them were and came to America with only the clothes on their backs. Once in a while though, you'll find one who had a little bit of money and came to America hoping to make more.

5) Life before 1900 was one of bucolic pastoral bliss, dotted by barn raisings and church socials. Life before 1900 was hard. No running water, no electricity, no law (in some areas), rudimentary medical care (if any), child labor, and few of life's creature comforts. This only scratches the surface.



Genealogy can be a ball, that's no misconception!

I'm not even so certain life was simple. If I want a loaf of bread, I go to the store. Great-great-grandma likely did not.

6) Everyone likes to hear the tales of notorious ancestors. Not everyone will think the story of great-great-grandma's four husbands, two divorces, involvement in a murder, and the running of a tavern should be included in the family history.

7) Census ages are always correct. You must be kidding.

8) Official records should not contain errors. They do. The best way to deal with it is to try and research around it where possible.

9) Genealogists are all retired. Not so. There are genealogists out there who have yet to hit forty or retirement. If you see one who has yet to hit puberty, tell them to interview their grandparents now. Most of all encourage them, gently.

10) Genealogy is not an intellectual hobby. Ever tried to read through (and understand) sixty pages of court records

from the 1840s? I've taken calculus exams that made more sense. Same thing goes for platting property in metes and bounds. Talk about applied mathematics.

11) My family has a castle in Europe. Some did, but don't believe it until you see it. Don't really believe it until you see the deed, title, etc.

12) My ancestor served with Washington, Lee, Grant, etc. Choose your war... take your pick. There are lots of these stories. Check them out before believing them. Document your ancestor's service, accurately.

13) I got it on the internet, therefore it must be true. Nope.

14) I got it on the internet, therefore it must be false. Nope.

15) I can do my genealogy entirely via the internet. Nope.

16) I can do my genealogy without the internet. Possibly, but it really saves time.

17) The records in State Y are closing because it was posted to the genealogy mailing list for that state. Check out rumors before you spread them. Think before you forward or copy and paste this type of information to other people or lists.

18) I can do all my research using only vital records, obituaries, and census records. Goodness! There's a vast treasure trove of other sources out there that you can utilize.

- 19) **The spelling of my surname has always been the same way; we never changed it.** Maybe, but then again, maybe not.
- 20) **Everyone replies to e-mail immediately.** Some genealogists have non-genealogy commitments, such as family and employment. Be patient and wait a few days before posting a follow-up e-mail.
- 21) **I can trace my ancestry in one afternoon at the computer.** Time for a reality check.
- 22) **I can trace my ancestors in one afternoon at the Family History Center.** (see number 21)
- 23) **Someone has already traced my entire family tree. I Just Have to Find It.** That's the tricky part – finding it! Then comes the fun of documenting it.
- 24) **Documentation is only for genealogical geeks who get cheap thrills by asking, Where did you find it?** How will you ever compare three different birth dates for Grandpa if you don't know where you obtained each date?

- 25) **Genealogists are nuts.** More likely they are truly focused on their research. However, one correspondent told me that working on genealogy beats spending “all my free time at a bar.” •
- 26) **Genealogists are rude at the courthouse or library.** Genealogists are people and a few are rude. Just make certain it's not you. No family historian wants to walk into the courthouse just after the most obnoxious genealogist on the planet has left the building.
- 27) **Genealogy is boring.** You must be kidding. I've learned a great deal about history, culture, and myself researching my own family.
- 28) **You ought to be done with that family history by now.** Well, I would except every time I find one ancestor I have two more parents to learn about.
- 29) **There is one best genealogical software package.** Most have their pros and cons. Pick one that works for you, keep alert for new packages, but only change when you have good reason to. Time spent upgrading and upgrading

and constantly learning new packages can be spent doing research.

- 30) **You are completely addicted if you search the ingredient list of your breakfast cereal for your ancestral surnames.** This is likely true, but I m not admitting to this one in public!

- 31) **DNA solves everything.** NOT

The author

Michael John Neill is a well-known American genealogist, living in Illinois. His main interest in researching seems to be his Ostfriesen maternal ancestors, people with specific family names like Habben, Ufkes, and Trautvetter. Some of the first names were Noentje, Tjode, and Mimka. His paternal side seems to be Irish: Neill from County Derry, Murphy, but also fairly early Americans from Maryland, Kentucky, and Rampley from England.

He shares his genealogical experiences on his web site RootsDig. *Link on p. 26.*

His *Genealogy Tip of the Day* can be found on Facebook.

His e-mail is <mjnrootdig@gmail.com>.

A demand from the public to the Royal Library

The Royal Library (*Kungliga Biblioteket* /KB) in Stockholm is the country's national library. They have extensive collections of books, but also newspapers of many kinds from the 1600s onwards.

For many years they have had digitized newspapers from the 1700s and forwards to around 1900 open to the public for free.

A few years back they digitized many newspapers, for instance *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, and *Aftonbladet*. This sounds fine, but you are only allowed to study them until 1901 online, even if they are digitized until ca 2017.

Why is that? That is because KB follows the copyright law of 1960, evidently before the digital revolution.

The law states that 115 years must pass before it is possible to give access to the information in the more recent newspapers.

Newspapers from all times have contents of major interest to all kinds of researchers, and possibly mostly to genealogists. Well-known genealogist *Ted*

Rosvall has said that after the church records, newspapers may be the second most important source for genealogy.

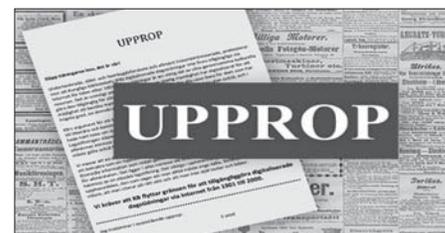
At the moment you may search the more recent newspapers, but you can not see the actual item, unless you go to KB, and use their in-house computers.

The Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies (*Sveriges Släktforskarförbund*) has for a long time tried to get KB to allow access to more recent newspapers.

On 23 March 2017 the president of the Federation, *Mr. Erland Ringborg*, initiated a petition that KB should change the rules. This petition can be signed by anyone, and hopefully many researchers will do so.

KB answers

The assistant chief librarian, *Mr. Lars Ilshammar*, has commented on the petition, and says that KB also feels that the situation is untenable, and that they are working on changing things for the better. They have several times mentioned the situation to the



government, and KB has got an assignment to facilitate the access to digital items, not just newspapers.

But there are other laws to follow, including the European Union laws on copyright. They say that all material, where the original writer has been dead less than 70 years, may not be in the public domain.

Another important law of the EU is the one on protection of personal data for individuals (*dataskydd*). That concerns questions about sensitive notices in newspapers about religion, membership in political parties, health issues, and much more.

This is evidently very complicated!

Link on p. 26.