

The Amateur Genealogist

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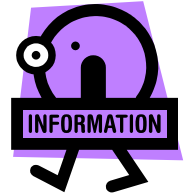
Your Family Tree: What “everyone knows” may be absolutely wrong!

I've recently been going over the family tree for Emily & John, clients of mine, and Emily was very upset at some of the details of her ancestors. Her constant refrain was *“That can't be right!”* For instance, the birth and death dates were not quite right, two aunts' and her greatgrandmother's first names were different, the county name of birth for one person was definitely wrong – or so she was sure. And there were other surprises too.

I'd done the research quite carefully, so I took her back, document by document, detail by detail, to see if we could find errors in my evaluation of supporting documents. One aunt was listed by a nickname in one census, her given name on the next, a baptism name on the next one, living with the same correct parents in all 3 censuses – definitely the same aunt. A surname was spelled three quite different ways: on a birth registration, a census, and a military draft. Then there was a newspaper report of her greatgrandmother's marriage with her given name recorded as a version of her middle name instead. Interesting details. Finally, her Greatgrandfather was born in one county (according to the birth registration), and then the family apparently moved to the second county by the next census, 2 years later. Both counties were right next to each other, so it wasn't much of a jump! Both Emily & John were very surprised to read the actual documents and see the errors – or were they correct details? – for several of their ancestors.



Surprises like these are actually quite common when we search back in time, following clues and details. Family stories are frequently incorrect in small details. For example, the immigration year may be off by 1-5 years, a birth year may be misremembered, or it might have been deliberately changed by a young man wanting to enlist in WW1. Of course, remember that a long-term residence is not necessarily going to be the birthplace of your ancestors. And Census-takers sometimes rounded the birth years up or down, by direct order of the government. Who knew?



As you search backwards in time, keep open-minded about all the details that you think you know for certain! In general, you can only trust a Primary Source: that is, a document that is filled in at the time of the event: e.g., a registration of birth or marriage or death or burial, the ship's passenger list, or perhaps a listing in a family Bible (if listed at the time). But even so, the information is only going to be as accurate as the person giving the details can be, plus as accurate as the person writing down those details. And then of course, there's the additional problem of being able to read the handwriting years and years later!

The refrain of denial: No, that can't possibly be right! - should change to “Oh my goodness, look at this – he had a twin brother who died before the next census record!” or perhaps, “I never knew she was called that before.” Sometimes, it means there's more digging to do to confirm all these details. You need to carefully evaluate the information you find, before you accept it as valid. Write down why you have decided to accept information, so that you can support your conclusions when another relative questions your details and results!

Curiosity will be your best friend as you search documents and records for your ancestors' details. Remember that the path to building accurate family trees is filled with many potholes, potential pitfalls - as well as challenging surprises and exciting finds!

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