SEPARATING MEN OF THE SAME NAME

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If you are having difficulty separating your ancestor from other men of the same name, try this technique: quit focusing on your ancestor. Collect all information for men of the same name and then separate out those records that do not belong to your ancestor. Let's look at the process step by step.

1. Record all the information that you have collected thus far in a single place. You may choose to enter the information in a word processing document, a database program, or an organizational system such as Clooz. Old-fashioned 3x5 file cards work really well. Make note of every name on each document, occupations, localities (including roads and waterways), and the type of document (a full citation isn't necessary in your analytical file if you have recorded it in its proper place),

2. Make sure that you have collected all census records for the surname. Write down the ten names listed before the key person and the ten names after.

You may be able to begin the separation process based on censuses alone. Let's say that you suspect your ancestor John Jones was born about 1815, married about 1840, and died about 1848, based on the information about his widow and children on the 1850 census, but you did not find a good match on the 1840 census. Forget about your ancestor. Look at the other records. Here is a John Jones in 1850 with girls aged 12, 14, and 16. He is probably the man in 1840 with females: 21001.

3. Make sure that you have collected all land records for the name. Include grants and mortgages. Expand your search beyond the time period in which your John Jones might have bought or sold land. Go several decades earlier and later.

Suppose you have a deed of sale in 1845 that might be for your ancestor. By extending your search, you find a deed of purchase in 1820 for what is clearly the same piece of property. Either your John Jones was many years older than his wife, or (more likely) the land was owned by a different John Jones.

4. Look for tax lists. One of the most powerful tools for separating men of the same name are tax lists, especially where a long continuous run of them survives. These have rarely been published, but can usually be found on microfilm. Record every entry completely.

You should be able to separate several of the men on the tax records: the man who owned slaves versus the man who had none, the man who had seven cows versus the man who had one, the man who had 322 acres of land versus the man who had none, the man who was identified as "blacksmith" versus the man who had a cryptic CR next to his name.

5. Play cards. Collect the file cards or print out all the data. (File cards are easiest for this step.) Find a variety of colored pens or highlighters. Find a large, flat, empty surface (dining room table, bed, floor) and spread out the cards or paper.

6. You will be working with what I call "markers"—things that identify a person in a record. Markers include residence, occupation, names of wife and children, signature or mark, and so on.

Find two documents that share a marker. For example, here are two records (an 1850 census and a deed) for John Jones blacksmith. Use the orange highlighter to highlight the word "blacksmith." Now see if either document has a marker that you can find elsewhere. Yes, this deed names a wife Mary, and so does another deed. Highlight (still in orange) "Mary." And here is a census record with neighbors Brown and Green, who are also the adjoining property owners on one of the deeds. Continue chaining until you run out of matching markers. Then pick up the green highlighter and begin the process again, looking for new matching markers. At this stage, don't analyze or evaluate, just highlight.

7. When you've run out of matching markers, it's time to evaluate. Collect all the cards with orange highlighting and arrange them chronologically.

If they all belong to the same person, you should be able to go through them sequentially and read the story of the man's life. Does it seem reasonable? Clip the cards together and set them aside. Or does he die before he got married? It's a pretty safe bet you've got two men. You may be able to study the cards and separate them easily. For example, if the only connection between the pre-death cards and the post-death cards is the name of the wife Mary, you have a clear break.

8. What if you have far too many cards with a single color? This is often the case when dealing with an extended family with no imagination in name choices who lived in a small geographic area. Back up to step 6 and start over. This time use a different color for each marker.

Choose a pair of colors. Analyze the documents. Would they likely apply to the same person? Pay special attention to reasonable ages for events. Typically, you can match up several of the sets, but not all of them.

9. Look at the cards with no highlighting, in other words those cards that you could not connect with any other card. Analyze the critical records first (probates, vital records, land purchases, censuses).

Compare them to the men (stack of cards) you have identified. Is there only one reasonable fit? A marriage in 1836, for example, is a good fit with an 1840 census with two children under five, but a bad fit with an 1840 census with a single man over 60. Not impossible, but a bad fit.

10. If you are fortunate, you have now managed to pick out those records that belong to your John Jones—and those that do not. If not, it is time to expand into whole family research, to research collateral lines, and to research the families named as neighbors and associates.

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Probates or deeds in another surname may produce statements of relationships or markers that can solve the problem.

11. Write brief "biographies" of each of the men you have identified. It will help you keep them straight as you continue in your research and can be invaluable in corresponding with the distant cousin who is having difficulty understanding why you say your John Jones did not live on Cripple Creek.

Very often you will not have documents that specifically state the relationship you think is true or tie a specific document to a specific individual. It is useful to say so. "No document states that John Jones husband of Sarah and father of Jonathan is the man who lived on Jones Run rather than the man who lived on Cripple Creek. However, taken as a whole, the documents point strongly toward this identification." Then follow this with the document-based biographies for each man. Don't neglect to acknowledge documents that you couldn't place. "It is unclear which man was paid for killing three crows in 1840."

Caveat: The process described above requires collecting *all* data available (in other words, you cannot pick and choose which documents you want to search, nor which ones you want to leave out). It is based on reasonable life patterns. Unless and until it doesn't solve the problem, choose the simplest solution. Occam's razor is a rule that says that when faced with complex problems, the preferred solution should be based on the known quantities (the documents you have found, rather than a theoretical "maybe") and on the simplest solution rather than a more complex one (a single marriage at a reasonable age with several children, rather than a series of four marriages in eight years).

The most common reasons we have difficulty disentangling men of the same name are:

- we don't collect all the data
- we don't search broadly enough
- we don't analyze the data methodically
- we don't analyze the data dispassionately

All of those reasons are easily overcome, and often men of the same name are more easily separated than at first seems possible.

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