DATES: RECORDING AND INTERPRETING

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Names, dates, places—the basic building blocks of genealogy. So basic, in fact, that we don't think much about them. We should. This article and several to follow will take a closer look at these building blocks. We'll begin with dates.

RECORDING DATES

How should we write a date (or enter it in our computer)? A simple thing, right?

One of the first lessons I learned in my beginning genealogy class was to write out the month, give the full year. It was explained that 7/9/11 is a bad idea. Is it July or September? And which century? When I designed my first computer genealogy database back in the early 1980s, I carefully left two spaces for the date, three for the month, and four for the year. The fields were free-form, so I wasn't as restricted as some of the early commercial databases, which expected one of twelve predefined codes for months, but it wasn't long before I began running into problems.

As my genealogical research experience grew, I came to realize that any predefined assumption about dates could present a problem; there must be no restrictions on the date field (an awkward position for a systems analyst to take). Why? Because our ancestors and their world didn't have computer consistency, nor do we. I told Juliana I would work on this article "next weekend," and it would be done by "Monday the 14th." I just made a commitment for "next Tuesday at noon." The local genealogical society meets on the third Monday of the month. And so on.

How should you record the date? The safest and best method is to enter it *exactly* as written. You can add your interpretation of the date, expressing it in traditional format. The proper way to do this is to put your interpretation in square brackets [ ]. Square brackets have universal meaning as an addition by the editor (you). Do not use parentheses, which have other uses and might even appear in the original document.

We should always retain the original version in our own files, thus there can be no misunderstanding in the future. I have family group sheets from several researchers on an early Quaker family. Due to Quaker dating and the calendar change, researchers had converted, unconverted, reconverted, and adjusted the dates they found on other group sheets (several times), leaving both the months and years in substantial disagreement. I couldn't even guess at which sheet, if any, contained the original dates and had to search for original documents to help resolve the discrepancies.

INTERPRETING DATES

As we work our way backwards researching our ancestry, we are likely to encounter variations such as the following common Anglo-American examples. Readers will eventually encounter other variations.

- 10th September last; 12th instant.
- in the 5th year of George II; in the 14th year of our Independence
- Easter Monday; the day after Christmas; Michaelmas
- first month
- 1712/3
- OS; NS; Old Style; New Style
- 7ber 7th day

"Last" and "Instant." These terms seem to appear most frequently in newspapers, and occasionally in financial records such as mortgages. "Last Thursday" is pretty clear (assuming we know when "now" is), but what about "10th last?" It isn't as difficult as it seems. "Last" means previous; in this example the day is given, but the month is lacking, so "last" means last month. "Instant" means "this." I'm not sure why, but "next" doesn't occur much in records.

Regnal years. In past times, people seemed to evaluate "when" an event occurred more often in relationship to other events, rather than an absolute calendar. In England and the American colonies deeds often have dates such as "the 5th year of George II." Later we see the same type of terminology, but in reference to our own independence. I noted in one set of New England town-meeting records that the last one in which the year was stated as "in the fifteenth year of his magesties reign," was on 28 February 1775. No matter what our history books tell us, I think we can see the town's subtle declaration of independence in the spring of 1775.

If the "real" year for a regnal date isn't given in a document, I find the table in the back of Black's Law Dictionary (at your local library) most helpful.

Church calendar. Many of the dates in which we are most interested were recorded in churches: baptisms, marriages, burials. Thus, it isn't surprising that dates are stated in relationship to days or seasons in the church calendar. While we may think of, say, Easter as a single day, it is a season in the church calendar, hence the "second Wednesday of Easter."

Part of the church calendar is based on the secular calendar and part is derived from the lunar calendar. Thus, Michaelmas (the traditional day for paying rents in Virginia) is always September 29, but Ash Wednesday moves around. Because the Scandinavian countries relied heavily on church-calendar dating, I find that tables to help calculate the "14th Sunday after Trinitas [Trinity Sunday]" in

1793 are most often found in the Scandinavian reference section of the library.

"Quaker" dating. This term is something of a misnomer, as the practicing of giving the name, rather than the number of a month, was common practice and not limited to Quakers. Through 1751 (see below), the first month in England and colonial America was March; beginning in 1752 it was January.

The calendar change. Our calendar is based on nature and the rotation of the earth around the sun. Unfortunately, this event is not an even one. In one year, the earth does not come back to exactly where it was the year before. Calendar changes are man's attempt to get his calendar back in sync with nature's calendar. In 1752, England and America made the change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. Several things happened.

Under the old (Julian) calendar, years ran from 25 March (Lady Day) to 24 March. Under the new (Gregorian) calendar, New Year's Day became 1 January, rather than 25 March. For the first time in English history, the year changed on 1 January, and 31 December 1751 was followed by 1 January 1752. Interestingly, this makes 1751 the shortest year in modern history; it ran from 25 March to 31 December!

The lost days. By 1752 the Julian calendar and the rotation of the sun were out of sync by 11 days. A correction was needed. The decree that changed the beginning of the year also ordered the dropping of 11 days from the calendar. This correction was postponed until a doldrum period in September during which there were no major festivals and the English law court was not in session. 2 September 1752 (Wednesday) was followed by 14 September 1752 (Thursday). Thus, September 1752 was the shortest month in modern history with only 19 days.

Publicity before the change instructed that things depending on elapsed time, such as mortgages and periods of servitude, would be governed by the time period (and therefore were to adjust the completion date). The general interpretation was that this also applied to birthdays. The emphasis was on age, not an immutable birth date. In other words, people who were 50 years and 1 days old on 2 September 1752 (i.e., born 1 September 1702) considered themselves 50 years and 2 days old on 14 September 1752, so they "changed" their birth dates to 12 September 1702, which would have been their birth dates if the new calendar had been in effect when they were born.

As you may recall from lessons in school, George Washington was born on 11 February (under the old calendar), but when he was an adult, his birthday was considered be 22 February (under the new calendar). This is an important reason not to separate the date from the information about the source record. It is perfectly valid for an ancestor to have two birth dates, both of them correct.

The recent rollover from 1999 to 2000 prompted a number of detailed articles in scholarly journals on the calendar change, which you may wish to consult for historical details and information about countries that changed earlier.

Double-dating. It was no secret that the English were behind the times. Other countries had already moved New Year's Day to 1 January. Many record keepers began acknowledging this potential confusion (one wonders if they were not also making a statement of their personal preference that the beginning of the year be changed) by double-dating events between 1 January and 24 March, so we see 1689/90 or 1701/2 in records.

If the record contains a slashed date, you don't have a problem. Record it as written. If, however, the day is between 1 January and 24 March and only one year is stated, what should you do? Stop! Examine the entire record carefully. Most records are recorded chronologically. Study the pattern. Which dating system was the recorder using? If the record sequence is 25 December 1712, 27 February 1712, 4 April 1713, we can confidently record the date as 27 February 1712[/3]. Do not record it as 27 February 1712. Why not? If you do that, you have removed it from its context. You won't be able to tell that the records around it provided an unambiguous year.

Records such as deeds and wills don't provide as neat a sequence of dates as do baptisms, and sometimes you can't be absolutely sure about the date. If you have an educated guess, use a question mark, giving the date as 1697[/?8] or 173[?3/]4. If you can't tell at all, it will be helpful to you and other researchers if you add [can't tell if 1744/5 or 1745/6]. More than once I have gone back and reread a document to insert the correct slash date, only to discover that I couldn't tell; I wish I'd made a note to that effect the first time and used the time to read new microfilm instead.

OS; NS; Old Style; New Style. Some recorders designated dates done under the Julian system (the one beginning on Lady Day) as Old Style and wrote an "OS" after the date; and likewise for those following the Gregorian system.

It is safest to put OS or NS in your records only if it was in the original. I suggest you use the bracketed year as defined above, but many researchers prefer to use OS or NS and omit the bracketed year, and that is not incorrect.

7ber 7th day. This does not mean 7th day 7th month. It means 7 September. This was the record keeper's shorthand, based on the name of the month, not its position.

In school I could never understand why September, October, November, and December, clearly meaning 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th, were really the 9th through 12th months. I had to become a genealogist to learn the reason. Before the calendar change, September was the seventh month. Afterwards, it was the 9th month. But 7ber is always September, no matter what year it occurred in.

Dates—not as simple as you thought, huh? Next time we'll look into dating an event when you don't have a record for that event (DATES: WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE A RECORD).