IS THE RECORD WRONG?—LIKELY MISTAKES

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It’s a quandary we occasionally face in genealogy—a record that “just doesn’t fit” or conflicts with other data. Or perhaps it’s a name or fact for which we can find no other records. Is it possible that the record is wrong?

In my conversations with other serious researchers, I find some who are more willing than I to say a record is wrong. I hesitate to proclaim that a record is in error unless I believe that it is a likely error. What are likely errors?

THE ECHO SYNDROME

One of the most common errors is what I describe as an echo. Let’s say that the birth record of your ancestor says “Constance, dau. of John & Constance Jones, b. 17 May 1777.” So you look and look for a marriage of John Jones to a Constance in the appropriate time period. There is nothing.

To determine if a record error is likely or not, it is necessary first to look at the record in context. You return to the vital records. John and Constance had no other children. However, there are several births for children of John and Alice. When you examine them as a group, the likely error is readily apparent.

- Alice, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 7 March 1773
- Barbara, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 20 April 1775
- Constance, dau. of John & Constance Jones, b. 17 May 1777
- Deliverance, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 23 April 1779
- Elizabeth, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 13 June 1780
- Faith, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 9 February 1783

A common mistake is to record the name of one person as that of another person who was involved in the event. In this case, the mother’s name echoes that of the daughter.

SECOND-CLASS PERSONS

Men were considered more important than women and children, plus the recorder was more likely to know the men in the community personally than to know the women or children. Therefore, errors are more likely to be made in the names of women than of men.

CENSUS ECHOES

We very often see echoes in the place of birth on censuses. There are a variety of reasons, ranging from laziness or lack of precision on the part of the enumerator to the reluctance of the enumerated to impart any information that was not directly requested. Once again, the errors are more likely to occur in the information about women and children. When the wife’s state of birth is the same as that of her husband (or the husband’s birth state is the same as where they are living), I always feel safer with a second record confirming it before I pursue further research.

For example, in 1880 the census taker visited a household in which lived a widow and four of her grown children. For all five, the enumerated noted the place of birth of the individual and parents as LA LA LA. In 1850 and 1860, however, the husband and father had given his state of birth as TN. Clearly, the enumerator had echoed the information for the widow as also being that of her children. (Hint: To avoid this trap, check to see what all siblings said in 1880 and later. The results don’t always agree with each other, which points out how important this extra step is.)