

I HATE LEFTOVERS!

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I needed a vacation. (A professional genealogist's definition of vacation is "working on my own family.") I picked a family that I hadn't worked on in about fifteen years. I didn't expect to find new ancestors, although I hoped for leads on one of the wives. This family had been "done" decades ago. *The Book* was typical. It had a coat of arms, twenty-eight generations of probably fanciful European origins, and no documentation. However, it seemed fairly accurate when it came to American descendants. Nothing I had found in the course of correspondence or in records I had encountered thus far contradicted the lineages in *The Book*.

But I had found a some minor inconsistencies that bothered me, often related to chronology. For example, *The Book* said my ancestor John moved in 1765, but I had found a record showing he had acquired land in the new locality in 1744. In fact, there were several persons of the surname who came into general area much earlier and who weren't accounted for in *The Book*.

I call these things that don't fit "leftovers." Unlike dinner leftovers, I can't with good conscience just throw them out. They bother me, like having a pebble in my shoe. Until I can put them in their proper place, I'm not happy with my genealogy. When did John really move? Who were those early unplaced persons?

My vacation would be spent disposing of leftovers. I called a professional colleague in the area and invited myself for a visit. I had very little time to prepare for the trip, but I did manage to eliminate a few of the leftovers based on specific locality and social status. I did not, however, finish looking through the many published abstracts on the area that had appeared since I first worked on the family.

Thus it was that at 9:30 on the evening of my arrival my friend and I had covered her large dining room table with piles and piles of books from her extensive library and maps (I wanted to identify where my ancestors had lived and go see the land). I was entering deed abstracts into my laptop computer when she asked, "Do you have this 1761 court order for Thomas, son of John deceased?"

Barely bothering to look up, I kept typing and replied, "You mean John, son of Thomas deceased, don't you?"

She checked the other entries for the case (like many court cases it was continued through several sessions). "Nooo, John is definitely the father."

My typing stopped. "But my John didn't die until 1788, and the only other John never came here and died in 1738." I searched *The Book*. There definitely was no John of an age to have an adult son Thomas in 1761. It looked like we had another leftover.

We began a concentrated search through the piles of books for every John and Thomas. Because the time period was so early, we had to look through the records of three counties (the current county and two parent coun-

ties). There were plenty of entries for John and Thomas, but most were not adults in 1761.

We discovered that the land that I originally thought my ancestor had acquired in 1744 was the land of the court case. Each document was reexamined for significant wording. What was the place of residence? What was the occupation? If someone was called "senior" or "the elder," then there had to be a younger adult man of that name around. It wasn't long before we had more leftovers.

Then things got worse.

Thomas the joiner died in 1748 leaving sons including Michael and Thomas. There was a deed from Michael son of Thomas the joiner to his brother Thomas the wheelwright. This was nice; we'd added an occupation for the son Thomas. *The Book* said Thomas son of the joiner had sons Thomas, Joseph, Isaac, Josiah, John, Samuel, and Levi. Yes, I found records showing Thomas (no occupation) deeded land to his sons Thomas, Joseph, Isaac, Josiah, John, Samuel, and Levi around 1788. This all fit nicely.

According to the tax lists, Thomas the potter had sons John, Samuel, Thomas, Joseph, and Levi. The potter? It seemed unlikely, but apparently Thomas had changed his occupation from wheelwright to potter. No, wait! There were several lists with both Thomas the potter and Thomas the wheelwright. Oops! The family structure in *The Book* simply wouldn't work. As long as we look at only one record at a time, everything fits. But when we demand consistency among the records, things fall apart.

We abstracted and analyzed; analyzed and abstracted. We were still overwhelmed. John the younger eventually became John the elder; Thomas the potter could be Thomas the yeoman in a deed. Many records referred simply to John or Thomas. It was like shooting at a moving target.

I knew one thing that sits still—land. Maybe if I tracked the ownership of the various pieces of property, I could establish a few family groups and eliminate part of the clutter. Some deeds referred to the original grantees, others had to be platted and matched up with the original like puzzle pieces, but eventually I was able to create small family clusters, several of which were no longer connected to the family tree.

Surely they belonged on this family tree, but were simply misplaced. Where did they go? I analyzed the relative ages of all the individuals and began to form a possible structure, but still couldn't connect them to the tree without adding a whole new branch.

I reread pertinent sections of *The Book* (several times). I noticed that the author claimed that Thomas the wheelwright wrote his will in 1799. The will, when checked, however, did not actually state an occupation for Thomas. Helpful authors who add identifiers such as occupations, middle initials, or family relationships when discussing a document can create a substantial problem. Was that true

here? I returned to the tax lists and was able to show that the man who died in 1799 was indeed the wheelwright. Unfortunately, *The Book* had assigned him to another branch of the family.

I began typing up the family, making my *own* book, adding documentation as I went. Suddenly everything became clear. The father that *The Book* assigned to Thomas the wheelwright had died the year before Thomas the potter appeared in the locality. And the marriage record of the Thomas whom I had determined was the wheelwright gave the locality where Thomas the joiner lived. If I simply swapped the cousins (as it turned out they were), the records fit.

The search isn't over. Frankly, I've still got some leftovers (I guess I need another vacation). My own ancestry is intact, but now I have to figure out how to break the news to descendants of Thomas the potter and Thomas the wheelwright that there's a slight error in their ancestry. They won't be pleased, but I am. Why? Because during my efforts to use up leftovers, I discovered a likely place to search for information on the wife in my direct line.

Does your research have any leftovers? You can't just throw them out. They need to be used. The most insignificant leftover can lead to important breakthroughs.

So where are you going on your next vacation?