

DATES: WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE A RECORD

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In the first part of this series, we discussed the variety of ways in which dates may be expressed in records and offered suggestions for entering them into our files (DATES: RECORDING AND INTERPRETING). But what should you put in the date field when you don't have a record? There are several methods you can use when you don't have, say, a birth certificate to provide an exact birth date.

- calculate from age in later records
- look for brackets, fence posts, and boundaries
- estimate

CALCULATE FROM AGE IN LATER RECORDS

Genealogists commonly come across ages in these records:

- tombstone [exact age in days, months, and years]
- census, tombstone, deposition, newspapers [year only]
- census [range]

When we find a tombstone that gives an exact date at death and an exact age at death, we can, and should, calculate the birth date. You'll just have to dust off some math skills or, easier yet, use the date calculator that comes in most genealogical database programs. (Do *not* use the formula that keeps surfacing in newsletters and on the Internet. It is mathematically invalid, returning the correct date only about half of the time.)

Having calculated the birth date, we should indicate that we have done so, saying "born 10 August 1878 [calc.]" In this way, it is clear how the date was obtained. You can spell out calculated. I suggest square brackets reserving parentheses for source information "born 10 August 1878 [calc.] (tombstone) or 11 August (letter from sister)."

The censuses from 1850 on give an exact age in years. Exact might be a misnomer. We aren't sure if the response was as of the day of the visit or as of the official enumeration day. And we aren't sure how accurate the answer was. To record an age based on a census, you have options; choose one, don't switch back and forth.

Suppose you have a child who was 2 in 1850. The simple way is to subtract 2 from 1850, giving an approximate birth year of 1848. Genealogists can easily denote that this is a date calculated from a year-only age by using the word "circa," its abbreviation "ca.," or its English form "about." We understand these terms to mean that the year results from a calculation, and that it is "give or take a year." Thus, we would record that the little girl was born "about 1848." Do not use [calc.] in these imprecise estimations.

We could be more precise. The enumeration date was 1 June, so presumably the child was born between 2 June 1847 and 1 June 1848. We have three options here. We could say "1847-48," "about 1847-48," or "between 2

June 1847 and 1 June 1848." All are accepted. You might add [calc.] to the last option.

Suppose that in 1860 we find the girl is 13. The recording date was once again 1 June, so we have a disagreement. It is this typical variation that prompts me personally to favor the simple "about 1848" in the first example above.

We can't ignore the conflict. Most databases now allow you to enter more than one record for single events, permitting multiple birth dates. In a word processor, the suggested solution is to enter all dates, but with the added information of an event modifier. It isn't uncommon in problems I've worked on for there to be numerous possibilities. "She was born about 1848 (1850 and 1870 censuses) or 1847 (1860 census and obituary)." It isn't smooth narrative, but it gets all the information in front of the reader without undue wordiness.

A few caveats—the closer the date is to the event reference, the more likely it is to be correct. Too often we give preference to the engraved-in-stone date we find in a cemetery. Suppose our little girl lived to a ripe old age, and it is noted on her tombstone or in her obituary that she died in 1917 aged 74. This would mean she was born "about 1843." But think a minute. Don't you think the census enumerator would have noticed if the little girl were 7? It is more likely that he could tell that the toddler gazing at him with her thumb in her mouth was about 2.

The phrases "aged" and "year of their age" on a tombstone don't mean the same thing. If a marker says someone died "aged 50," it should be interpreted in the same way we say "50 years old." If a stone says someone died "in the 50th year of his age," this is recognizing that he lived for a whole year before he became one year old. Hence, the second man was a year younger at death than the first; he was only aged 49.

Before 1850, you have only age ranges to work with. It is sometimes possible to narrow a birth date down considerably by analyzing all the censuses. If a man in 1790 was 16 or over, we know only that he was born by 1774. If in 1800 he was 26<45, we still know he was born by 1774, but we've added the knowledge that he was born after 1755. We could record that he was "born between about 1755 (1800 census) and 1774 (1790 and 1800 censuses)."

If we're lucky enough that he survived to 1830 and gave his age as 50<60, we would know that he was born between 1770 and 1780. Actually, we know a lot more than that (assuming the information was accurate on each census), because we eliminate the time period between 1755 and 1769. We would now write "born between about 1770 (1830 census) and 1774 (1790 and 1800 censuses)."

Two hints: It is helpful to take a set of pre-1850 census forms and write the birth-year ranges on them for each category so you don't have to keep subtracting in your

head. Also, especially during the research gathering stage, I write the category information in the parentheses so all the information is in one place; for example, “born between about 1770 and 1774 (16+ in 1790, 16<26 in 1800, 60<70 in 1830).”

LOOK FOR BRACKETS, FENCE POSTS, AND BOUNDARIES

These are not familiar genealogical terms, but they are terms I use interchangeably when describing this process (usually waving my hands in the air to illustrate). They recognize that events have order. We may not know exactly when a vital event occurred, but we often know when it couldn't have occurred. A person had to be born before being baptized. One was buried after dying. This order establishes boundaries.

Look for brackets, fence posts, and boundaries in every record of your ancestor. Once we begin to open our eyes, a wealth of information is revealed. He must have died after he appeared in court to acknowledge a deed. The date of the death of first wife occurred before the date of his marriage to his second wife. Get busy reviewing records and filling in blanks. I strongly recommend that you enter the best bracket dates in each vital field. It is great at preventing you from searching probate records before he sold land or similar foolishness (been there, done that).

Remember the facts of life. The mother must be alive at the birth of a child. Not so the father. On the other hand, he did need to be living at the time of conception. (We routinely give our ancestors credit for good behavior unless the data strongly suggests otherwise.)

Identify your fence posts in your file. “He died between 1 May 1755 (will) and 2 February 1756 (probate).” Look at the records you have found that aren't

death related. “He died between 1 May 1755 (will) and 11 November 1755 (Mary called widow).” or “He died between 22 September 1755 (deed acknowledged) and 2 February 1756 (probate).” It can almost become a contest to see how narrow you can make the confines of his death. Notice that if all the above were true, we would have “He died between 22 September 1755 (deed acknowledged) and 11 November 1755 (Mary called widow).” We have reduced the time period from nine months to less than two, and we did it without using the typical death event of a will and probate.

Don't neglect the relationship of time and place. If your ancestor consistently claims to have been born in Kentucky, and you can identify the family's presence there as from 1813 through 1819, use it: “He was born during the family's residence in Kentucky from 1813 through 1819.” This can be especially helpful if his age was extremely inconsistent.

Make a list of bracket and boundary words to get you thinking. Here are some suggestions:

- before, by
- after
- between
- during, while

ESTIMATE

Estimating is closely entwined with using dates in research analysis. Therefore, we will take it up in the next installment on dates as tools (USING DATES TO IMPROVE YOUR RESEARCH).