

USING DATES TO IMPROVE YOUR RESEARCH

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

Dates can be more than an element in properly recorded research. They can actually help us with our research.

My first suggestion is that you list all records for each ancestor (and probably the entire family) in date order. (If you have more than one supposed date for a particular event, list each of them.) Now sit down and review them carefully for reasonableness. This allows you to review your ancestors' lives chronologically, in the order in which they lived them.

Pay attention to the locations. For example, is it likely that a man farmed in Illinois for 15 years and then traveled back to his birthplace Georgia to marry a bride who was only 8 when he departed that state? I don't think so.

For each event, I calculate the ages the people would have been. I put a red star next to any event where the age is outside the most common "age-at" range. My general "age-at" red-flag list is:

- marriage before age 21 (husband or wife)
- marriage after 35 in which parties aren't named as widowed
- first child before or immediately after marriage
- first child more than 3 years after marriage
- wife under 21 at first child
- wife over 40 at last child
- gaps between children less than 2 years or more than 4 years
- husband first public act before 25
- husband last public act after 50
- death after 60 (husband or wife)

This doesn't mean that events don't occur outside these ranges, or even that they are uncommon. It just means I want to be extra careful. I reexamine the record for transcription accuracy or overlooked information, and I check the laws and customs of the time and place.

Usually everything is just fine, but again and again I have found this the most useful technique I have in my bag of tools for identifying same-name problems.

If you have implemented the suggestions from earlier articles in this series, your records have clear and unambiguous dates in many of the date fields. You have noted that John Jones was born "13 January 1722[3]" and that Samuel Smith was born "10 February 1849 [calc.]" But what about poor Nathan Nobirth, whose birth date is blank?

I believe that you should estimate dates for vital events, but only if there are no documents to let you bracket the date as described in the last article. I am most likely to estimate the events of marriage and birth (including all siblings and children). Death is usually better defined as a "before" or "after" date.

In my early computer database, I didn't have many real vital dates to work with. There were a lot of blanks, even

after I added the bracket dates. I looked at the few dates I did have, and decided that on the average my direct ancestors were born when their fathers were 30. I calculated estimates and entered them in the database, flagging them by putting "est" in the month field. I was pleased to see that these birth dates were generally compatible with the dates I had (recognizing the bias in using the database to come up with the average to begin with).

In some instances there were problems with my estimates. Or so I thought at first. On closer examination, I discovered that often the problems were with the respected, oft-repeated, published source.

This was an important lesson to me. Estimating, when done carefully and with defined parameters, can be a valuable tool. It persuaded me that many incorrect genealogical lines would never have seen print if the compiler had been forced to use calculated dates, bracketed dates, and estimated dates.

I have refined my methods. I collect as much data as possible on an individual and his or her entire family. When I must resort to estimating I use the following criteria. Husband married at 25, wife married at 21, children spaced 2 years apart, with the first child arriving 1 year after marriage. I do not quickly make adjustments because something doesn't fit or because of wishful thinking.

Genealogists tend to marry off their ancestors at a younger age than those ancestors were really getting married. There were, of course, variations from time and place, but the numbers above have worked for the broadest spans. As I come very familiar with a specific time and place, I may pick a different set of parameters for that entire portion of my study. When family data is seriously lacking, I sometimes estimate a man's birth based on age 25 as the age for first purchase of land or appearance in a public role.

The "est" for "estimated" that I used in my first database has been replaced by the more scholarly "say." They both mean that the date is estimated from life events. I hope that it translates to "give or take 5 years," but recognize that this is not a bracketed range and the date could certainly be off by more than that. As explained in earlier articles, I use parentheses in text to indicate my criteria: "Thomas Titus was born say 1745 (estimating 25 at first land purchase)" or "Michael Mitchell was married by say 1824 (three children in 1830)."

One of the main purposes of estimating is to flag problems. It may be that the children (or some of them) or the wives (or some of them) or the land records (or some of them) belong to a different man. When a family just doesn't fit, do not fudge the dates. Stop immediately and carefully reexamine all the records and the family structure. You may need to start over with a clean slate, free of earlier, prejudicial conclusions. Reconstruct the family,

one record at a time. I often find myself doing this, with good results.

There are caveats. Estimating is an iterative process. We often pile one estimate on top of another. This is risky. However, it is worthwhile as long as we follow our criteria at all times; proceed slowly, carefully, and logically; and mark every estimate as such.

Too many genealogical conclusions are reached because too few events are considered. By collecting all records for a person, we may avoid assigning our ancestor a second wife who was really the third wife of his uncle.

Often, however, collecting all records for a person is insufficient. We must expand our collection to the broader family, such as parents, siblings, children, and even grandchildren.

Let's say that records show John Jones married Mary Morris in 1830 and Nancy Norris in 1836. Your ancestor, Catherine Jones, was born in 1835. No problem. We might even speculate that Mary died as a complication of Catherine's birth. But when we expand our data collection beyond John Jones, we find that Mary's father Michael Morris left a will in 1848. In it he left a dollar to each of Mary Jones' children (Abigail, Betty, Catherine, David, Elizabeth, Frederick, and George).

Now let's apply our tools of chronology and estimating. (We don't have birth dates for Abigail, etc., so we'll just give them numbers for now.)

1830 John Jones married Mary Morris
1831 child #1 born
1833 child #2 born
1835 Catherine born
between 1835 & 1836 Mary (Morris) Jones died
1836 John Jones married Nancy Norris
1837 child #4 born
1839 child #5 born
1841 child #6 born
1843 child #7 born
Oops!

Obvious, you say. Trivial, you say. Unfortunately common, I say. And I don't just point my finger at others. I have found over and over as I research that I must revise my first proposed family structure. Have I ever assigned Nancy Norris as the second wife of John Jones? Most assuredly. That's why genealogical pencils come with erasers.

We learn more from our chronology than that we were wrong about our John Jones marrying Nancy Norris. Note that Catherine fits nicely into the sequence as the third child, her position in her grandfather's will. Also note that the names of grandsons and granddaughters are interspersed in the will. This suggests that Abigail et al were born in alphabetical order. We would say "Children of John Jones and Mary Morris (order from grandfather's will): Abigail, born say 1831," etc.

Now let's look at how focusing on women can be a powerful tool in date estimating. Johannes Meyer is a bit difficult to pin down. There seem to be several of him,

with several available birth and death records, spanning several decades. Fortunately there were two wills.

In 1800 Johannes left a will mentioning eight children, but no wife. Based on our estimation criteria (two-year spacing), we would say that "Johannes was married by say 1784 (eight children by 1800) and born by say 1759 (estimating 25 at marriage)." (When counting backwards like this, I begin with the last birth the year before the record, i.e., 1799, 1797, 1795, 1793, 1791, 1789, 1787, 1785, marriage a year earlier, 1784.)

In 1790, ten years earlier, a different Johannes left a will, also mentioning eight children, but no wife. Easy, huh? "Johannes was married by say 1774 (eight children by 1790) and born by say 1749 (estimating 25 at marriage)." Right? But what if he named his children? Would it make a difference?

This Johannes named sons Johannes, Michael, Jacob, and George, and daughters Apollonia Beck, Catherina Deal, Elizabetha Freidrich, and Gartrude Hill. Notice that all four daughters were married. Our estimating criteria says that they were all over 21. We would assume (since there was no language in the will indicating otherwise) that all four sons were also over 21. Again, I begin counting one year from the event. The children are at least 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, and 36. The eldest child was "born by say 1754 (adult in 1790)," hence "Johannes was married by say 1753 (eight adult children in 1790) and born by say 1728 (estimating 25 at marriage)."

Now we have a Johannes born by say 1728 (who had begun having children by 1754, including a son Johannes) and another Johannes born by say 1759. Of course, additional evidence would be required, but begin to suspect that we might have found a father/son pair.

Look particularly for grandchildren mentioned in wills. Our estimation criteria would say that the first grandchild through a first-born son would be born when the grandfather was at least 52 (estimating first child at 26 for men) or 48 for a first-born daughter.

Examine the order of the children's names at the end of a will, the part that says "and after the death of my beloved wife Margaret, to be divided equally among my children, that is to say, Henry, Ingrid, John, Katherine, Lemuel, and Marvin." Often these are in birth order (or reverse birth order), especially if the sons and daughters names are interspersed. If you have a good birth date for Lemuel in 1810, use the two-year guideline to assign birth dates to the rest: "Henry was born say 1802 (estimated from Lemuel)."

You may be able to focus on the child-bearing years of daughters and granddaughters to estimate the birth year for a man. While men can, and do, father children at 50, women don't bear children at that age.

Why go to all this trouble, you ask? Personally, I want to claim as ancestors only those people who really are my ancestors. If my estimation techniques suggest that my John Jones was born say 1774 and therefore cannot be the private John Jones at Valley Forge, I'd rather claim the reality than the honor.

A version of this article appeared in Ancestry Daily News, 20 October, 15 November 2000; reproduced with permission of the author and

Ancestry.com.

Dallas Genealogical Society