

RED FLAGS AND RATIONALIZATION

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The amount of time and effort wasted by researchers based on rationalization can be substantial. Closer examination of the evidence usually reveals that the claimant has two things: an ancestor in a certain place and a document for someone bearing the same surname. He or she then tries to rationalize how the two can be paired.

We must watch diligently and not be trapped. One red flag of rationalization is that the number of documents considered is very small (often just one or two). This is often a reality in genealogical research, but we can't assume that those are the only documents for the surname until we have checked.

Rationalization can often be identified by the red-flag phrase "must have."

"MY ANCESTOR MUST HAVE BEEN A POSTHUMOUS CHILD."

The claimant's William Jones isn't mentioned in the will of John Jones, which is the only Jones will in the county; ergo: William must have been posthumous.

The percentage of men writing wills is much, much smaller than researchers would like. Very often the claimant hasn't bothered to determine if there are other will-less Jones families around.

Researchers who have had to read numerous wills are aware of something else. Testators often specifically mentioned posthumous children in their wills. "If the child my wife now goes with be a boy . . ." or "If my wife be with child . . ." Our ancestors understood the basic facts of life (both biological and material). If there might be another child on the way, the father wanted to provide for that child according to his own choices.

"MY ANCESTOR MUST HAVE RECEIVED HIS/HER PORTION BEFORE THE WILL."

Yes, sometimes it is true. But most testators wanted to make sure that their property was distributed according to their wishes, and that squabbling children wouldn't later try to overturn the will. They would state "my son Thomas has already received his portion," sometimes giving Thomas a nominal amount, just to be certain the will would stand.

If you believe this "must have" might be true, look for supporting information. If the child is a daughter, she must have been married before the date of the will. It is a most unusual papa who would give his daughter money before meeting and approving of her potential husband.

You might look for a sale of land from testator to the potential son for a nominal amount of money, which

would suggest he was indeed helping a son get a start. If, on the other hand, your ancestor remains landless until decades after the will, it is almost impossible to justify a claim that he had been "taken care of."

In colonies with primogeniture (in which the eldest son inherited any land not specifically given in the will) you should be able to prove a bloodline chain of title for property. Be aware, however, that most men making wills under such circumstances still mentioned the eldest son (if nothing else, to appoint him as executor).

"IT MUST HAVE BEEN A RECORDING ERROR."

Yep, errors definitely happened (I found one just last week). But not as often as claimants suggest. Look at the record carefully. Are there specifics that might justify the claim? Misdating the first month of the year, assigning the child's name to a parent, or even confusing a name with that of another family member are all errors researchers have encountered.

If a recording error seems reasonable, seek supporting evidence. For example, I found a marriage record for my ancestor's daughter Anna in Ohio. Unfortunately, the real daughter Anna never left Maine, had married there six months earlier, and lived to a ripe old age in Maine. But I noticed that my ancestor had treated the Ohio groom just like a son-in-law in a deed. So I searched the grantor deeds for the groom. I found one in which he sold land with wife "Amy." My ancestor had a child "Ame" about whom nothing was known other than the birth (we weren't even sure it was a daughter). Clearly the "Anna" written twice in the marriage book was a recording error, a claim supported by other documents.

"MY ANCESTOR MUST HAVE RETURNED HOME TO MARRY/HAVE A BABY/DIE."

It helps to look at this rationalization through the lens of common sense. How far away was "home"? How long since the ancestor had left "home"? How settled was the new locality? A woman might have left the frontier to go back to mama for the birth of a child. *If* it wasn't a difficult trip for a pregnant woman. *If* she didn't have older sisters in the new locality. *If* her mother was still alive. *If* it was the first child (think about making the journey with a 2-, a 4-, and a 6-year old).

Watch for the red flags of rationalization. Don't let the rationalized conclusion creep into your own family tree. When you see a red flag, it's time to stop and dig into the records.