

1790-FAMILIES PROJECTS

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One of my recent articles, “Where Were Your Ancestors in 1790?” was prompted by a family sketch I was working on. I want to tell you what I learned from my efforts and inform you about similar projects.

The projects are usually called “*State-name Families in 1790*.” The progenitor of these was *Maine Families in 1790*, the first volume of which was published in 1988 by the Maine Genealogical Society, ten volumes to date (2011). Other projects are for New Hampshire, New Hampshire Society of Genealogists, one volume; Vermont in 1791 (the year it entered the union), Genealogical Society of Vermont, two volumes; and Western Massachusetts, in progress under the auspices of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

While there are some differences between the projects, they have some things in common.

- They seek sketches of the head of household, *plus* information on all spouses and children (Vermont also covers grandchildren).
- They emphasize documentation for every statement.
- Documentation should be primary documents. To avoid perpetuating errors, citations to family histories are discouraged.
- Equal treatment of children is emphasized. They will probably forgive a few extra sentences on your ancestor, but sketchy, undocumented, or secondary information on siblings is contrary to the purpose of the project.

Back in October, I realized that if I were going to get a sketch on Daniel Harper into volume 7 of *Maine Families in 1790*, I'd better get busy, since the deadline was looming imminent. I knew it would be easy. After all, I had done my DAR papers on Daniel's Revolutionary War service, I had published an article on the Harpers from the immigrant down through a mention of Daniel in the *New Hampshire Genealogical Record*, I had transcripts of letters written by Daniel's children and grandchildren, and I had documented Daniel's wife Mary McAllister in volume 6 under her father's entry. A piece of cake, I thought.

Was I ever wrong! I couldn't meet the requirements of the project. I was woefully unprepared to document every statement with primary evidence, particularly when it came to the siblings of my ancestor Greely Dustin Harper.

I suspect my family information looked a lot like many of yours. I sometimes had dates for vital events of Greely's siblings, but many had no citation other than, at best, the name of the researcher who supplied them. For those that did have “documentation,” the information was often inadequate.

I began by looking at the documentation. Some of the incomplete citations (such things as missing date and place of publication or microfilm numbers for entries that said “Meigs Deeds at FHL”) were completed by checking the Family History Library Catalog on CD. For some records, such as marriages, I had cited a published book of

abstracts. I wanted to upgrade these citations and check for errors by reading the original on microfilm on my forthcoming trip to Salt Lake City.

There were facts and citations that were just plain incomprehensible (my handwriting is notoriously awful). These were flagged as requiring further research. And then there were the “citations” that were not to documents but to family information.

Too many facts had no documentation at all. For each undocumented fact, I made a note of the source or sources most likely to provide the information, so I could check for them efficiently on my research trip. By reviewing the substantial stack of papers and letters in my files, I gleaned a few more pieces of information and potential leads.

Last, but certainly not least, I reviewed the information for each of Daniel and Mary's children to see that all vital information (birth, marriage, death) was there, plus I wanted to include places of residence and burial. The births were well documented, because Daniel's pension file contained a Bible record naming all of his children and listing their birth dates.

But aside from that, this was really quite an amazing family. They seemed to have been immortal, if the lack of death information was any indication. Clearly, I would need to follow all children to their deaths. I enlisted the aid of a cousin, who had been in correspondence with several descendants of other branches. We learned more about the families, but still were not able to bury many of them.

I greatly improved my search techniques for figuring out where people moved. I followed one child to Oregon and then on to California. But several, particularly married daughters, proved elusive. I uncovered an error in a recorded marriage, thereby adding a branch to the family.

What did I learn from this project? Why was it worthwhile and how might it apply to your research, if my experience is at all typical?

- Your research is probably not as complete as you think.
- Your research is probably not as well documented as you think.
- You probably don't know as much about your ancestor's siblings as your “completed” family group sheets might lead you to believe.
- It can be really difficult to kill people off.
- Researching migrating pioneers can be tough.
- Researching an entire family unit is a good way to gain exposure and experience in new localities and record groups.
- Researching an entire family unit makes you take off your “my surname” blinders.
- Researching an entire family unit may uncover family connections that weren't known before.

If you have 1790 ancestors in any of the project states, you should seriously consider preparing and submitting a family sketch. If projects don't exist for the area of your

interest, prepare a sketch anyway, following the criteria described at the beginning of this article. When completed, it will be a valuable contribution to your website or to

exchange with genealogical cousins. As a bonus, your future research techniques will be improved.