

MUNDANE RECORDS

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As mentioned in an earlier article, “In Praise of Whole-Family Genealogy,” I believe it often is necessary to do whole-family genealogy to solve difficult problems. Thus it was that I was sorting out all the early Halseys in Meigs County, Ohio, including identifying all of their children.

In the midst of the project I encountered Samuel Halsey. I was abstracting the deed indexes for all Halseys. Samuel purchased land in lot 40 in Chester in 1832 and sold it the next year. Chester was one of the townships where the family resided, but the land was not near the others. He was not on any census in Meigs County as head of household, nor did he marry there.

Since Samuel bought land in 1830, it is likely he was born between say 1805 and 1810. An attempt to find a slot for him in a family by analyzing the tick marks on the 1820 and 1830 censuses was inconclusive because of inexact ages.

I wondered if Samuel really existed. Was *Samuel* simply an error for *Solomon*, son of Jesse Halsey? The local scribes seemed to have a lot of difficulty with his name. I had found it as *Salmon* and other interesting variants.

My search through mundane records continued. The Meigs County Pioneer and Historical Society had published the poll records for the county. These are records of who actually voted, not of poll taxes, so it isn't even a good census substitute, nor is the order of names meaningful. The lists do not survive for every year, but they were extant for the crucial time period (from my perspective).

The answer to the question “Was Samuel the same as Solomon?” was found in these mundane poll records.

On 2 October 1830 in Orange Township, both *S. H. Halsey* and *Samuel Halsey* voted. On 11 October 1831, *Samuel* voted in Chester Township (nicely consistent with his land purchase) and *Salmon* voted in Orange. On 2 April 1832 *Salmon H.* voted in Orange; on 9 October 1832 *Samuel* voted in Chester. On 27 December 1832 *Samuel* voted in Chester and *Salamon* voted in Orange.

Clearly two different men, a distinction found only on these mundane records.

Mundane records? Maybe.

Worthwhile records? Absolutely!

What is a “mundane record”? Interestingly, mundaneness is in the eye of the beholder. Novice researchers often consider land, tax, and court records as mundane, but experienced researchers, particularly in the South or on the frontier in general consider them beautiful, the types of records most likely to solve identity problems.

How do you find “mundane records”?

As a starter, the next time you check the Family History Library Catalog for a locality, explore it thoroughly. Click on all options on the Place Details screen. Don't confine yourself to the familiar cemetery, church, probate, and vital records categories; examine business records,

poorhouse records, and so on. Within a category, explore all the items listed. Don't just look at the baptismal book under church records, investigate the minute book also.

Then return to the “Place Details” screen and click on the button at the upper right marked “Related Places.” Places exist within a hierarchy—townships and towns within counties, counties within states. Records might be categorized at one of several levels. Continue to explore.

From 1996 through 1999 when I was indexing the National Genealogical Society Quarterly, I created a category called “Records and sources,” under which I indexed many of the record types that were used to provide information for, or were discussed in, the articles. Quickly scanning one list, which occupies a full page, I see a variety of entries, including account books, boundary agreements, citizen loyalty oaths, city directories, damage claims, industrial census schedules, muster rolls, pew records, stray-animal registers, and town ordinances.

What might we find in mundane records?

We would be foolish to attempt to predict the information to be found in a particular record type. Deeds were not intended to prove descent, yet they often do. Court records were not created to give occupation or approximate year of birth, yet they often do. Store records were not designed to prove residence, yet they do. The possibilities and permutations are plentiful. What we can predict is that we can't predict with certainty the usefulness of any record until we examine it. Most records have something to tell us about someone's ancestor, but few records are guaranteed to provide information about a specific individual.

Having said that, I will make a few general comments.

Mundane records are those we generally research last. They are the records least likely to provide genealogical information. Often they are unpublished and unindexed, so they are the most time-consuming to research. When other records fail us, we turn to mundane records for our answers.

Mundane records such as lists are often those most likely to help us determine how many men of the same name we are dealing with. Inclusive lists (such as poll tax lists) are invaluable for this, but even selective lists such as the voting records of Orange and Chester Township can give us an answer, as shown above.

Mundane records may provide the most personal information about our ancestors. Store records tell me that on 27 November 1784 my ancestor Killian Kreek bought, among other things, 2 bed blankets (winter was coming), 4 chex handkfs, 1 fine handkfs, a pair of men's shoes and 3 pairs of shoe buckles, 1/2 doz knives and forks, a Cuttoe knife, 5 pint bowls, lots of cloth—and a quart of rum (as I said, winter was coming, but given the quantity, it was probably purely medicinal). Not the type of information we would find in our “standard” genealogical sources!

Mundane? Well, maybe not.