

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A JIGSAW PUZZLE—II

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

It's the holiday season, a time I associate with jigsaw puzzles. I had chosen my holiday puzzle—a penguin theme—back in September, but didn't order it in time. It was late on the day after Christmas when the box appeared on my front porch. I had just located convincing evidence to establish a client's lineage and rationalized that I deserved a break.

As I opened the box and poured out the pieces, I wondered if I would find lessons about genealogical methodology in this year's puzzle, as I did last year, as described in "Lessons Learned from a Jigsaw Puzzle."

As I turned all 550 pieces face up on my kitchen table, I knew the answer was "yes." The problems I work on, in both my own ancestry and that of clients, are the really, really tough ones. Hence, my methodology is different. I don't look for an obvious record stating the ancestry of John Jones or his wife Mary. If one existed, someone would have found it already. I attack a problem as I did the jigsaw puzzle.

First, I locate *all* the pieces—all the documents for the surname and collateral surnames.

Second, I make sure the documents, like the puzzle pieces, are all in plain sight. Usually that means typing an abstract of each into one large, easily printed, easily searched word-processing file.

As I glanced at the puzzle pieces spread randomly on the table, I could see that this puzzle would be fun and relatively easy to work. Even in the mass of pieces, I could see characteristics that suggested groupings—pieces with gray, feathery markings, pieces with a sunrise-colored background, pieces with iceberg markings.

Third, I create a structure. For the genealogy, this means identifying and connecting records with stated relationships. For the puzzle, this means identifying and connecting edge pieces. If you read last year's article, you will recall I had a great deal of frustration dealing with the lack of corners and straight edges in my cat-shaped puzzle. This year I was more flexible. I understood that I would only be able to assemble sections of the penguin-shaped structure, but not all of it.

Then a new frustration arose. I had connected several strings of what I thought were edge pieces, but they most certainly were not part of the penguin. I cheated. I looked at the picture on the box. Aha! The illustration showed two separate small penguins that I had thought were just there to fill blank space. Then I noticed text "Includes two mini penguin puzzles for extra puzzle fun." Hmm. I recognized this mistake immediately. How often do we assume that *all* people of a surname in a county are related? If we aren't open to the possibility of coincidence, we can become frustrated or reach the wrong conclusion.

Having organized the edges into a somewhat-penguin-shaped outline with the mini-penguins to the side, I changed my methodology. When working on brick-wall problems, it is important to know several problem-solving

approaches and choose the one that is most likely to work at any given stage. Since this puzzle had several color or pattern grouping (family groups), that was the obvious next step.

I focused on *one* group. Too often, genealogists try to work on all problems simultaneously. I love colors so I began with the sunrise-colored pieces. They soon grouped themselves into part of the head and neck of the penguin. On one side they were surrounded by black pieces. Closer examination showed, however, that these were not pure black, they were purplish black, with little flecks indicating feathers. In genealogy we often find subtle markers, such as membership in a church, social status, or occupation, that help us separate superficially similar people.

On the other side, the pieces began morphing from the glowing sunrise colors to a peachy yellow and then to a yellow. This is very much the pattern we see as sons and daughters marry and their family units take on some of the characteristics of those of their spouses. If we watch for these subtle changes, we can connect these family units to the larger family. I am a firm believer in doing whole-family genealogy, as explained in "In Praise of Whole-Family Genealogy," because only then are we sure we have our ancestor correctly placed.

Next, I virtuously turned to the mundane gray pieces. Something was wrong. Oh, there are two groups—those with feathers and those without. I regrouped the loose pieces and tried again. This wasn't working. I begin to think dark thoughts about missing pieces. Anyone who works jigsaw puzzles recognizes this stage. Even though I have a clear mental picture of what ought to go in a certain place, I cannot see a piece to match. I can't make the puzzle fit my preconceptions.

It finally dawned on me that the gray pieces don't belong to two groups, but are peripheral pieces that are connected to many other groups. I wisely put them aside. Too many researchers don't do this. They continue to focus in one area. Many genealogical problems are solved by searching sideways. I picked a new color and began again.

As I assembled my little groups of pieces, I was amazed how often I could not seem to attach piece A to piece B, even though I suspected they belonged together. Then piece B attached to C, and C to D, and D to A, and suddenly A was firmly connected to B. That was, in fact, the type of evidence I had just found in my client's problem.

At last I had substantial clumps of pieces, with some clumps tenuously connected to other clumps and others floating where I suspected they belonged. It was time to start dealing with the leftovers, as I discussed in "I Hate Leftovers!" One by one, I put them in place. Sometimes I looked for the piece to fit a hole in the puzzle. Sometimes I looked for a hole to house the piece. Eventually,

everything fitted together, including those two “fun” mini-penguins.

The lessons? Quite simple. Both the puzzle and good genealogical research require that we find and incorporate

all the pieces, that we use an appropriate method for each stage of the problem, and that we are open to possibilities that differ from what we first expected.