

STB—THREE LETTERS TO AVOID A GENEALOGICAL PITFALL

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Several years ago I corresponded with one of those distant genealogical cousins we find via mail (and now the Internet). He had heard that I told another genealogical cousin there was no justification for naming our ancestor's wife as Margaret Smith [I've changed the names]. William was certainly married to a Margaret, and I believed she was probably the mother of all of his children, but I had several reasons for thinking that she most certainly was not a Smith. This new cousin told me he believed he had "pretty good documentation." Hopeful that we would finally be able to resolve this, I asked what the documentation was.

Eventually I received a charmingly frank letter from him. It was headed "Recipes for Crow." The genealogical cousin had researched his notes to discover it was a case of "he said, she said, all say, all think, all hope." He was, as he said, "back to square one."

It's an easy trap to fall into, especially when the information comes from a source from which we've gotten reliable information before, whether a published genealogy or a correspondent.

As good genealogists, we follow the dictum to "document your sources." Unfortunately, once we've entered the "source" into our word-processing file or database, the fact that our information was secondary or tertiary, rather than primary, is no longer prominently displayed, but is neatly tucked away in tiny print or some hidden portion of our software.

I could empathize with my genealogical cousin. I'd done the same thing myself. Fortunately, I had come up with a solution. I place the letters STB (Said To Be) in front of every piece of information for which I don't have what I consider an adequate source. (I type the letters STB as part of the name or date field in a database.) For example, I might describe the wife of Stephen Stone as any of the following:

- Mary STB Jones
- Mary Jones [license], STB daughter of William Jones
- Mary Jones, daughter of William Jones, possibly by wife Phebe [will], STB Phebe Brown
- Mary, born 1821 in Kentucky [1850 census], STB 1 March 1821 in Barren County, Kentucky

Notice that this notation is flexible and allows me to mix information from primary records with STB information from secondary records so that I don't lose it as a clue. At the same time, it never lets me forget that I haven't really established it as fact.

WHY NOT USE A QUESTION MARK?

There are two reasons that I do not use question marks to identify said-to-be information. I generally reserve question marks for something questionable found in an original source. For example, suppose a county marriage book says that John Jones married Tabitha Tingle, but

Tingle is not easy to read and could quite possibly be Fengele or something else. I would mark Tingle with a question mark. Or suppose the marriage book clearly says the wife is Ursula Umphrat, but I've searched high and low and there is not an Umphrat family in that county or in any adjoining county. Since young single women rarely moved to the frontier alone, I would add a question mark to the surname.

The second reason I use STB instead of a question mark is that it clearly telegraphs important information to me. The name or date or place has been claimed by someone—I just don't have a primary document to support it. In other words, I need to go look for the proof. That isn't at all the same as questioning a piece of data.

USING STB AS A RESEARCH STRATEGY

Let me reiterate what I said in the previous paragraph—I need to go look for the proof. Sounds like a research plan to me! On one of my families, for example, I wrote a narrative and genealogical summary, carefully flagging all STB information. For good measure, I marked STB in bold. I took the printout with me when I made a research trip to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. My research plan? To turn each STB into a documented statement.

This is not the same as simply doing research. STB tells me that *someone* has seen *something* that suggests this is a true statement. Furthermore, it provides specific data to focus and direct the research. For example, let's say the STB is a marriage date for a couple. First, I will recheck the marriage book, searching chronologically. I may have missed it for one of several reasons; perhaps the record wasn't indexed or maybe the published abstracts were only for the loose bonds. If I still don't find the record, I will search all adjoining counties (remember, someone saw that date) and any churches in the area. I will also search for Bible records, including those for surnames of sons-in-law.

What if I don't find a document to clear the STB? I turn it into a statement that says so (often in a footnote). "The marriage date is said to be 1 March 1838 [source], but no marriage record was located in Green or any surrounding county, nor in other records searched [list of items searched]."

Did I clear all the STBs on my trip to Salt Lake City? No. In following up on the clues offered by a couple of the STBs, I solved an interesting puzzle that begged to be turned into an article. In other words, I got sidetracked! I still have STBs to research.

These three little letters, STB, can be very powerful in helping us avoid pitfalls—and they can help us improve our research focus.