

## IS THE RECORD WRONG?—LIKELY MISTAKES

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It's a quandary we occasionally face in genealogy—a record that “just doesn't fit” or conflicts with other data. Or perhaps it's a name or fact for which we can find no other records. Is it possible that the record is wrong?

In my conversations with other serious researchers, I find some who are more willing than I to say a record is wrong. I hesitate to proclaim that a record is in error unless I believe that it is a *likely* error. What are likely errors?

### THE ECHO SYNDROME

One of the most common errors is what I describe as an echo. Let's say that the birth record of your ancestor says “Constance, dau. of John & Constance Jones, b. 17 May 1777.” So you look and look for a marriage of John Jones to a Constance in the appropriate time period. There is nothing.

To determine if a record error is likely or not, it is necessary first to look at the record in context. You return to the vital records. John and Constance had no other children. However, there are several births for children of John and Alice. When you examine them as a group, the likely error is readily apparent.

- Alice, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 7 March 1773
- Barbara, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 20 April 1775
- Constance, dau. of John & Constance Jones, b. 17 May 1777
- Deliverance, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 23 April 1779
- Elizabeth, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 13 June 1780
- Faith, dau. of John & Alice Jones, b. 9 February 1783

A common mistake is to record the name of one person as that of another person who was involved in the event. In this case, the mother's name echoes that of the daughter.

### SECOND-CLASS PERSONS

Men were considered more important than women and children, plus the recorder was more likely to know the men in the community personally than to know the women or children. Therefore, errors are more likely to be made in the names of women than of men.

### CENSUS ECHOES

We very often see echoes in the place of birth on censuses. There are a variety of reasons, ranging from laziness or lack of precision on the part of the enumerator to the reluctance of the enumerated to impart any information that was not directly requested. Once again, the errors are more likely to occur in the information about women and children. When the wife's state of birth is the same as that of her husband (or the husband's birth state is the same as where they are living), I always feel safer with a second record confirming it before I pursue further research.

For example, in 1880 the census taker visited a household in which lived a widow and four of her grown children. For all five, the enumerated noted the place of birth

of the individual and parents as LA LA LA. In 1850 and 1860, however, the husband and father had given his state of birth as TN. Clearly, the enumerator had echoed the information for the widow as also being that of her children. (Hint: To avoid this trap, check to see what all siblings said in 1880 and later. The results don't always agree with each other, which points out how important this extra step is.)

### FAILURE TO ASK

The census taker was counting people in the Fred and Margaret Smith household, he was not recording vital events. Therefore, he probably asked “What are the names of the children and how old are they?” to which the answer—an accurate one—was “Able is 8, Barbary is 6, and Charles is 3.” He then carefully recorded Able Smith 8, Barbary Smith 6, and Charles Smith 3. The only problem for descendants is that Able and Barbary were the children of Margaret's first marriage to John Jones.

It is likely that names in blended households could be recorded erroneously. This, in turn, might cause the researcher to look for a marriage for father Fred and mother Margaret preceding the birth of Able, rather than that of Charles. Or, if a marriage is found for Fred Smith and Margaret Jones, the conclusion could be that Fred had a first wife and the doomed search would begin for the Jones parents of Margaret.

### OLD HABITS DIE HARD

I shouldn't have much difficulty convincing you of this likely error. How many checks did you date January 2001 rather than 2002 earlier this year? (I have to write the new year in advance on the first dozen or so checks to avoid this problem.) Ministers, clerks, and justices of the peace were human beings. They had the same problem.

Check the original in context. If the events were recorded in chronological order, you may be able to demonstrate the error by showing that it is chronologically impossible to record a child born in January 1822 immediately after a child born in December 1822. If, however, the events are recorded in family-record format and say that John was born in August 1821 and Jane was born in January 1822, you'll just have to explain that it is *more* likely that Jane's birth was recorded erroneously and was really January 1823 and *less* likely that John was really born in 1820 and his birth year recorded incorrectly.

### HOW LIKELY IS IT?

We must always be careful not to overlay modern values on people who lived one or more centuries before us. On the other hand, certain human traits are not modern inventions. When a record becomes problematic, consult the original. Make sure that your notes accurately reflect what it says. Then analyze the record to see if there is a potential “likely error.”