

LIKELY AND UNLIKELY MISTAKES

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The previous article, “Is the Record Wrong?—Likely Mistakes,” exposed just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, on the issue of likely mistakes in original records. This article looks at some things to consider in analyzing possible mistakes.

ABSENTMINDED CLERICS

Some ministers did not immediately record the events they performed. This was especially true when the baptism, marriage, or burial was performed at a distance from the church. In many cases, the minister probably assumed he would remember to record the events upon his return. (How often have you not bothered to write down an appointment, sure you’ll remember to put it on the calendar when you get home?) In reality, it may be the crumpled note, “wedding at Sam Smith’s,” found in a coat pocket weeks later that reminded him. What would he forget or remember incorrectly? The date? Or that the bride was not Sam’s sister, but his sister-in-law Tabitha True?

How can you tell if you have an absent-minded recorder? You can’t, but the original record may hold clues. Are events recorded chronologically as they occurred or are several out of sequence? Do the ink and handwriting suggest that events were recorded in clumps? Are there blanks in any of the records (not necessarily the one for your ancestor)?

I had a problem in which the month and year matched between a birth record and a tombstone, but the given name was blank on the birth record and the day was different. I’m never surprised when the year doesn’t match, but I expect the month and day to be the same. Did I have the wrong record? I reexamined the original and noticed that the next event, which appeared to have been recorded at the same sitting had even more blank spaces. It seemed likely that the minister not only could not remember several facts, he remembered the day of the birth incorrectly.

OFF A LINE

Did you ever have to stay after school and write “I will not talk in class” fifty or a hundred or even five hundred times? I did. A lot. From experience I can tell you that if I didn’t use lined paper, the last line on page was significantly off the horizontal. The same was true of scribes of the past.

Consider a list of marriages with columns for groom, bride, date, and official. Very often they don’t line up as well as we would like. If any fields are blank, the potential for confusion is worse. Some records are spread across two pages—and perhaps microfilmed as separate sheets. If you are having difficulty with a record from a tabular format, carefully reexamine the original. The mistake might lie with you or the abstractor, rather than the original record.

Pre-1850 censuses are fraught with danger because they have both rows and columns that can be difficult to keep straight. If you find yourself having difficulty matching a family with the age brackets on an early census, stop immediately and reread the microfilm. You may find the problem lies with your notes. The extra column for males 16–18 on the 1820 is a potential pitfall. (Hint: The column for youngest females usually has numbers on almost every line. I use it to assure myself that my counts are correctly oriented.)

In tabular information, although the recorder may have gotten “off,” perhaps by omitting some data, it is more likely that the mistake occurred in copying the entry instead.

REPETITIVE MISTAKES

How many times does the possible mistake occur in the record? While it is easy to make a slip once, it is much less likely for it to occur multiple times. Thus, if a deed mentions a name three times in different places, it is not as likely that the name is in error as if it only occurred once in the deed.

UNLIKELY MISTAKES

Interestingly, the concept of *likely* mistakes has a flip side—that of *unlikely* mistakes. Sometimes when we have two conflicting pieces of information, we would do well to ask ourselves which of the potential errors is more *unlikely*.

For example, suppose that the 1920 census proclaims that your ancestor Elizabeth was born in 1854. However, you find Elizabeth listed as a 2-year-old on the 1850 census. Doesn’t it seem *unlikely* (in fact, impossible) that the census taker prognosticated her birth? It also seems *unlikely* (albeit not impossible) that the child died and that the next-born girl was given the name of the deceased child—especially in this time period.

On the other hand, how likely is it that your ancestor—either accidentally or deliberately—became younger as she grew older? Quite frankly, the older you get, the less important it seems to be to remember your exact age. I know—I always have to do the math to respond to the question “how old are you?”

But suppose your ancestor Elizabeth’s death certificate in 1932 says she was 78 at her death? Is the 1850 census outvoted? Of course not. The death certificate information was provided by someone other than Elizabeth. The provider was dependent upon Elizabeth or another source and furthermore was relying on his or her own memory. (Which reminds me—I need to call my son and find out which day this month is my daughter-in-law’s birthday. I never can remember.)

In the previous article, we discussed the “echo” syndrome in census birthplaces. So let’s talk about the flip side. Suppose that in 1870 the birth places for Tom and his

wife Fanny are both given as MS, but the 1880 household for three widowed women imparts the following information:

- Dolly head 70 GA GA GA
- Elizabeth daughter 50 MS SC GA
- Fanny granddaughter 30 TX LA MS

Where was Fanny born? Clearly, we're not seeing any echo in 1880, although it is a possibility in 1870. The information in 1880 is internally consistent (Fanny's mother born MS; Elizabeth's mother born GA). Furthermore, the individuals intimately involved in the events

(Dolly in the birth of Elizabeth, Elizabeth in the birth of Fanny) are all present in the household. Do you think it is likely Fanny was born in MS and unlikely that she was born in TX—or vice versa?

ASK YOURSELF—LIKELY OR UNLIKELY?

When you are faced with problematic records, analyze them in their full context, make sure the mistake is not in the abstract rather than the original, and then ask yourself which information is *likely* to be a mistake and which is *unlikely* to be a mistake.