

## A GENEALOGIST'S HOLIDAY

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I had to cancel my trip to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. This was not altogether a bad thing. I still hadn't processed the stack of papers I'd brought back from my last trip. (I can envision many of you nodding in agreement at that last sentence.)

On that trip to SLC, I was not doing family research; I was working on examples and illustrations for a book. However, I always prefer to use material from my own family, so I had collected a hefty stack of family documents anyway. Much of the material merely helped fill in the studies of my ancestral families, but I had stumbled across a new family that might be ancestral. I have been anxious to work on them, but simply haven't had the time.

Today is the Fourth of July. Instead of attending an outdoor celebration or having a backyard barbecue, I decided to celebrate indoors. With the heat-humidity index approaching 100 degrees, I don't think it is too unpatriotic of me to forego traditional events. I gave myself a genealogist's holiday—I worked on that new potential family.

### HOLIDAY DIARY 9:00–10:00 FINDING ALL THE PIECES

First I cleared all papers off the table with the view of the back yard, so I could enjoy the scenery as I worked in air-conditioned comfort.

The next step was to find the documents I had copied on the trip. They were more or less in one place, but hopelessly jumbled with other papers. (I envision more heads nodding in empathy.)

I looked at every sheet of paper in the stack, removing those related to this family. This wasn't as easy—nor as quick—as I would have thought. Several pages had notes on more than one surname, requiring me to make photocopies for each file.

Once I had isolated the documents for the family, I realized I did not have everything that applied to the problem. This family is potentially that of the wife of an ancestor, hence there was some important information about her under her married name. This meant finding the file for her husband's surname. It was a mess! I resisted getting sidetracked by reorganizing it and simply photocopied the pages that applied to her.

I felt that something was missing. Yes!—an important obituary. Where was it? Aha! I remembered—my cousin had sent me a transcript in an e-mail. I printed out that file. That reminded me to check my computer for other pertinent material. Sure enough, there was a file of notes I had made in Salt Lake City. I printed them out.

### HOLIDAY DIARY 10:00-11:00 ORGANIZING THE PIECES

My hour of effort had produced a disorganized stack of papers half an inch thick (I measured it). I sorted the papers.

I always organize papers chronologically. County histories and family genealogies are placed according to the year they were written. This helps me avoid clouding my

thinking as I am reviewing the real-time documents of my ancestors' lives. (I place properly-done abstracts under the year of the event, not publication of the abstract.)

I created a word-processing file called *family-name\_documents*. This file holds the information from all documents and sources on the surname in one place. I can print out that one file and take it with me when I research. No information is hiding at home in my file cabinet. It also means that if two years from now on a research trip I stumble upon a document for this family, I can check on what I know about the family if my laptop computer is with me.

I began with the top (earliest) document in the stack. Some documents I abstracted, some I extracted, and some I transcribed (see "Abstracts, Transcripts, and Extracts").

Every document was footnoted for source. This, of course, is real life, so some footnotes have comments highlighting problems with citations, such as a missing page number or year of publication. I will print out the file, flag those comments, and fill in the blanks on future visits to my local library and to SLC.

### HOLIDAY DIARY 11:00–12:00 RECORDING THE DOCUMENTS

Still typing. It sure takes longer to process documents than it does to find them.

### HOLIDAY DIARY 12:00–1:00 RECORDING THE DOCUMENTS

Still typing. I'm starting to feel like the Eveready bunny.

### HOLIDAY DIARY 1:00–2:00 ANALYZING AND COMPILING

The half-inch stack of papers is now condensed to a shorter printout. It is time to move on to analysis and compilation. I always create a separate file on the computer for this, called *familyname\_compiled*.

A problem for many genealogists is that they do not understand that collecting documents is a distinctly different phase of genealogy than analyzing and compiling those documents into a genealogy. You can easily find a document that says that William is the son of John, but until you analyze the document and compile the whole family, you *cannot* say that your William is the son of this John. The document may be in error, misleading, or only part of the picture. It may be impossible for this document to apply to your family unit—at least in the way in which you have it constructed.

Many genealogical errors arise from researchers who have documents—even original documents—but who fail to analyze and compile, thereby creating erroneous lineages.

In some ways, this phase goes much more quickly. I can copy-and-paste information from documents directly into this file, with no alteration of the text. I can copy-and-paste footnotes from the documents file to the compilation

file, thereby reducing the chance that I will forget to document a fact.

#### HOLIDAY DIARY 2:00–3:00 ANALYZING AND COMPILING

As I analyzed the documents and compiled the family group, I was left with more questions than answers. During the analysis and compilation phase, I routinely write notes to myself in the compilation file. I ask myself questions; I make notes of further research that is required and sources I want to check. Because this is a brand-new family for me, with many sources to explore, I decided it was more efficient to create a separate *familyname*\_to-do file.

#### HOLIDAY DIARY 3:00–4:00 CLEANING UP

The effort took all day, even for this relatively small file, but now I have all the documents in one place, I have a written record of my thinking to date, and I have a lengthy to-do list. The analysis and compilation phase

highlighted several interesting items. I still don't know if this was my family, but I am well prepared to continue the research.

I printed copies of my three files—the document file, the compilation file, and the to-do list.

Then I reviewed that half-inch stack of paper. Some of the sheets were pages of handwritten notes. That information has been transferred to the documents file, so those pages were discarded. Some of the sheets were photocopies I made in the interest of time. The information on them is now in the documents file, so those, too, were discarded also.

I made a new file folder and placed the three printouts on top of the remaining documents (mostly copies of original records). I feel so organized!

I had a wonderful Fourth of July. I hope you did also. Labor Day is coming soon. It will probably still be hot and humid. I think I know how I will celebrate.