

TYPING EVERY WORD

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In my lectures and writing I often advise that you should “read every word” or “transcribe the document.” Recently, however, I realized that those phrases don’t fully convey the message. Several months ago an Internet cousin advised me of a will that I had, I am embarrassed to admit, missed finding in a sweep searching for information about a migrating ancestor.

The will was that of the father-in-law of our known ancestor, which named the daughter and her spouse. We had had no prior clue of her identity. Thus, I now have a new surname to research in depth. A survey of published abstracts pointed to several additional documents in the county, primarily wills, giving a number of relationships.

I hired a researcher to obtain a copy of the original will and told my Internet cousin that I would send her a copy. I also requested copies of all papers in the probate, plus files for the other individuals of the surname.

When the copies arrived, I quickly read every word. They had several interesting details, but no genealogical breakthroughs. I prepared an envelope to mail the copies to my Internet cousin, but in the crunch of work and everything else I’m behind on, the copying was always on the “to do tomorrow” list.

In penance for my tardiness, I made a transcription of the will to include with the photocopies. It was as I was typing each word into my word processing program that I realized something fundamental. Typing is slow, very slow. It takes a lot of time. Thus, we normally might not do it unless we felt we needed to. But as I typed, I discovered something else. Because typing is slow and by nature sequential, you can’t skip ahead as you do when reading. When you type every word, you must read every word, and the slow pace provides plenty of opportunity to think about each word. I realized that there were lots of words to think about in that will.

The will began with the typical “In the name of God Amen” and contained several other phrases relative to the testator’s belief in the Almighty. However, having typed a number of wills with exactly the same wording, I’ve learned not to form any conclusions about personal devoutness.

It continued, providing me with a township and county of residence. I knew that the township named is not in that county, so I stopped typing to get a reference book on the state. I learned that nine years later, part of the township would become part of another county, and that twenty years later, it would become a county of its own.

This prompted me to retrieve the state-wide topographical atlas to learn more about this area. I knew the area I was most interested in, based on the other documents I had skimmed. I looked for towns, rivers, roads, and mountains. I also looked for political boundaries. Imagine my interest when I realized that the adjoining county and townships were ones in which I had also noted the surname, but dismissed as “probably not my family” because it was a

different county. I immediately began pulling out books, papers, and CDs, collecting information.

I finally remembered that my purpose was to type the will, and I had a grand total of 17 words typed. Word 18 got me out of my chair again. The testator’s occupation is given as yeoman. Of course, what first pops into mind is “yeoman of the guard.” I know that doesn’t apply here, but to refresh my memory I retrieved my trusty college dictionary. The first definition is “an attendant or officer in a royal or noble household.” Not my ancestor. The second definition is “a small farmer who cultivates his own land.” Yep, that sounds like my ancestor.

I return to typing “being at present sick and weak in body.” This gives me a mental image. He wasn’t injured in an accident, and he didn’t write the will solely because he planned ahead. (I didn’t need to get up for this insight.) The will continued with the usual provisions for burial (no location named), debts, and funeral expenses.

Then he got into the bequests. His “eldest” son got land. This word is not in the published abstract. Of course, often it was the eldest son who got the land, but not if the older sons were already provided for. Important information. The land is in the same township, but the will names the adjoining landowners. More important information. I will want to research them. I once again leave the keyboard, to get a pad of sticky notes and paper to start a “to do” list. The acreage is given, and I want to be certain I’ve learned everything I can about this land. I have copies of several deeds for the family. Maybe I should check this now. I look at the stack of books and papers surrounding my computer and decide to content myself with a sticky note instead.

He also gave this son “all my grain now in the ground in the house and in the barn either thrashed or in the straw whatsoever.” Imagine, grain kept in the house. It makes sense, especially for grain in sacks to reduce the risk of rodents, but I hadn’t thought of that before.

To a daughter he gave “my new fustian bed and a pillow thereto.” I know this means she is unmarried. I vaguely think fustian is some kind of fabric. Reference to the dictionary tells me it is “a strong cotton and linen fabric.” Another definition says “a class of cotton fabrics usually having a pile face and twill weave.” I hadn’t thought of it being like corduroy or velour.

I added to my mental image of the family, which had a new spinning wheel and bee hives (bees both provided sweetener and helped pollinate plants). They apparently grew flax. This sent me to a reference book on everyday life in the time period to learn more about flax growing and processing. There are several books or series like this; look in the youth section at the library (I bought mine at a library deaccessioning sale). Now you can find much information like this on the Internet.

As my typing neared the end of the will, I learned that one of the sons was under fourteen (again, not in the pub-

lished abstract). Another son (by inference, an adult) was to “give him schooling and allow him to be educated and receive the Holy Sacrament.” Maybe my ancestor was devout, after all.

Perhaps the best advice I can give you if you want to get to know your ancestor better is “Type every word.” But be forewarned: typing can be a messy proposition! It took me quite some time to replace all of the reference materials, folders, and documents I had pulled out.