

SEEKING SIBLINGS

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As researchers, we usually know what we should do. The problem is that all too often we don't do it. We know we should do whole-family research; we know we should pay attention to siblings, but we have failed to do so. (Does that sound like Sunday's prayer of confession, or what?) It is time for us to do more than simply write down the names of siblings when we find them.

Why? Well, one of the most obvious reasons is that the siblings of our ancestor were part of the same family. Many things apply to them as much as to our ancestors. The most obvious one is that they had the same parents (or at least one parent) as our ancestor.

What can those siblings tell you that your ancestor couldn't? There are many options. The ideas below, which focus on census records, can get you started.

YOUR ANCESTOR DIDN'T LEAVE A RECORD

If your ancestor John Jones died before the 1850 census, you may have no record that indicates the state in which he was born. If Mary, the child through whom you are descended (another ancestor), died before the 1880 census, you have struck out again.

But what happens if you change your focus to siblings (and suspected siblings)? Look for John's siblings on the 1850 census. Don't quit there. Follow them into the 1860 and 1870 censuses, noting their states of birth. With the growing number of published and online indexes, this has become so much easier than in the past.

List the birth years and states of birth for John's siblings in chronological order. If the earlier siblings were born in, say, North Carolina and the later siblings in Georgia, this is probably due to migration.

Now check the 1880 census for Mary's siblings. Note where each of them say John was born. Do you have consistency? That would be pretty unusual. But hopefully there is a general consensus.

YOUR ANCESTOR GOT IT WRONG

I notice this problem quite often. I worked long and hard on a problem for a client whose Mississippi ancestor claimed a Tennessee birth. He was very consistent, giving the information in both 1850 and 1860. His children repeated it in 1880. We recently learned the names of his siblings and probable residences for them. I immediately began seeking siblings and got two potential hits fairly quickly. However, they both claimed South Carolina as their state of birth. Rather than rejecting them as siblings, I did the opposite. I asked "What if Tennessee was wrong?" With this new approach, I soon found the correct ancestry in South Carolina. Why the ancestor claimed a Tennessee birthplace is a mystery, since he was a teenager when the family moved there.

YOUR ANCESTOR HAD A SECRET

Last year I helped a person at church with his grandmother's ancestry. She had lived in Texas, was born in Missouri, and said her grandparents were born in Tennessee. His research was stymied, and he had the impression there was a family secret. I discussed with him the possibility of a multiracial background. He said he had already considered this, had done some reading on the subject, and was comfortable with it. I offered to explore the 1880 census for him, since I had it at home.

On the first round, I found nothing, except to confirm his information about what his grandmother said. I couldn't even find the great-grandparents, although I knew their names. The next Sunday I was smarter. I inquired about siblings. The following week he gave me the names of four sisters, including the married surnames.

This time, the search was very productive. I found three of them on the census, each claiming a father born in Ohio and a mother born in Illinois, plus a previously unknown brother with the same parental information.

There was a bonus. I searched for anyone in the area with the same parental birth pattern and found an additional unknown sister. Living in the household was the mother-in-law of the head of household, born in Illinois, with parents born in Pennsylvania. She had apparently been widowed, remarried (hence was under a different surname), widowed again, and had moved in with her daughter's family.

The family secret was exposed. Great-grandma was a Yankee.

THE OLD FOLKS DIDN'T LIVE WITH YOUR ANCESTOR

We've just seen one example of this, but I'd like to point out some other reasons to seek the sibling with whom the elderly mother or father went to live. Family possessions, such as Bibles, letters, and photographs probably remained with the descendants of the caretaking sibling. The tombstones and obituaries for the parents are most likely in that locality.

The family stories were most likely preserved within the family of that sibling. Look for newspaper columns about old settlers and information in county or church histories and in "mug books" (the volumes published in the late nineteenth century with biographical sketches of many of the citizens). I recommend tracking all siblings and descendants down through this time period and checking mug books where they lived, too.

Make a resolution to focus as much attention on each sibling as you do on your ancestor. Better yet, resolve to ignore your ancestor entirely for a while. Take each sibling in turn and do a thorough research job on him or her. You will probably be able to return to your ancestor with new, helpful information.