

INDEXING AS A RESEARCH TOOL

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You probably already know that your family history book needs an index to help other researchers. What you may not know is that indexing is a tool that can help you in your own research.

I am indexing a very large project for a colleague. The index is already over 250 pages, with over 40,000 page references. By the time I see the text, it has already been proofread by the author and three reviewers. Nevertheless, the author and I periodically go over a list of questions and corrections that have arisen as a result of the indexing.

As the author recently remarked, “We wouldn’t find these things if it weren’t for the index.” What kinds of things do we find, and why? Let me deal with the “why” first. I don’t index names; I index people. In part this is because I believe that as genealogists we should never for a moment reduce our ancestors and the people around them to mere names, dates, and events.

The kinds of things I find while indexing are problems common to all of us as we gather and compile information one record at a time.

FULLER NAMES

We often set up our family groups from the first record we find. Thus, if the 1850 census names an apparent daughter, M. J., age 8, then that is how we enter her in our family group record. Later on, when we find the 18-year-old M. Jane on the 1860 census and the child Mary J. in a probate distribution, but we may not think to update our original family group, turning the anonymous M. J. into Mary Jane. I regularly print and review the index, which highlights such problems.

MERGING SEPARATED IDENTITIES

If we had not updated the name above, we also may have improperly created an extra daughter, “Jennie,” based on a mention in the 1848 will of the grandfather.

SEPARATING MERGED IDENTITIES

Determining there was one, two, or three individuals of a certain name can be tricky. Often we have no hint of multiple persons until a significant number of records have been assembled, but the damage may already have been done. We may already have inappropriately assigned two events to a single person.

I usually find this problem because I often add personal identifiers to index entries, such as “[s. John]” or “[b. 1842].” As individuals are mentioned two, three, four, or five times in the text and I try to decide on a consistent entry, I may discover that Abraham [s. Calvin] married Alexandria and that Abraham [s. David] also seems to have married Alexandria. Needless to say, further investigation is called for.

I discovered this type of problem early in my indexing endeavors when I indexed my CG project. There were

several Williams, all born in the mid-1810s. I had made some tentative family assignments based on the names of children (several had a grandmother’s name) and on exact locality of residence. Because of the close birth dates (I finally concluded they were all named for an older William who died around 1812), I had decided to use the wife’s given name as the modifier: [hus. Mary], for example.

I soon found myself playing musical chairs, reassigning events from one individual to another, but without a satisfactory fit. When this happens, it is best to go back to the basics—create a list of all applicable source records (old-fashioned file cards are great for this) and recompile the family groups. I discovered there was one more William than I originally thought, and that another had only one wife, not two—she had switched from her middle name back to her first name when her mother-in-law of the same given name had died.

HANDWRITING

It can be very difficult to read old handwriting, especially initials and unusual names. Many times it is a toss-up as to whether an initial is, say, S. or L. Because other records may use Stephen as the person’s name, we can go back and reevaluate our reading of the initial with this additional information.

CORRECTING FAMILY INFORMATION

Often we begin our research with information provided by other researchers and family members, and that is what we base our research on. The reality is that the level of research ability varies, that a family member may have “disremembered” something, or, as is often the case, has added incorrect information. We often see the latter in name forms, where someone has assumed that Fred was Frederick, instead of the correct Wilfred.

The index process sometimes provides an improved family compilation with no further research required, but at other times it can only highlight the problem. This often requires rechecking records. Even then, an answer doesn’t always emerge, and sometimes the author must simply add a note to the text explaining the conflict.

CREATING AN INDEX TO HELP REMEMBER NAMES

I was working on a client problem in which the next step was to analyze the documents I had found: one will and almost forty deeds. The deeds contained the names of many neighbors and witnesses, and I expected some might offer important clues about spouses and family origin. As I read through the abstracts, I soon became overwhelmed. How was I to keep all of the names in my head?

Fortunately, this was the day after my colleague’s comment about the value of the index. The solution was obvious. I abstracted all of the documents into one word-

processing file, one record per page, and indexed the names. I also indexed the locations of land tracts, indicating such things as that the land was on the north side of the river. This made the records much easier to analyze.

I noticed that they owned land in the county on both the north and south side of the river (a reminder to us that in the past rivers often were links, not separators, of people). When I examined a good map, I discovered that the river was actually a county boundary. There was only one

section in which land could be on the south side of the river and also be in the county. By quickly pinpointing the area of residence and studying the map, I was able to identify churches that needed to be explored, plus two other counties that needed to be added to the research list.

Now when I work on the family, it is with the index at hand, and I can devote my mental energy to analyzing, not memorizing.