

COLLECTING YOUR ANCESTORS' MARKERS

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Have you been collecting your ancestors' markers? "Markers?" you ask, "What's a marker? I don't remember anything about markers in genealogy class." Markers are the things that mark, or identify, our ancestors. They are not documents and they are not events, although they are found in documents and events.

For each person you are researching, review the records you have found and make a list of markers.

A valuable marker is that of occupation. We find an ancestor's occupation in censuses from 1850 onward, in deeds, and in obituaries. Tax lists and city directories may give occupations. If we look thoroughly, we may find that an ancestor had more than one occupation, either two related occupations, such as carpenter and shipwright, or a skilled occupation in addition to being a farmer. The tools in a probate inventory may silently tell us of an ancestor's occupation. The inventory and agricultural censuses tell us of the types of crops and livestock he raised.

Another marker is a focused place of residence (smaller than a county). Again, censuses, deeds, obituaries, and tax lists will help. For urban dwellers, death certificates and city directories may provide exact street addresses. The residence for farmers may be a named township, a township-range-section description, or the name of a waterway.

You should be specific about each marker. Land ownership is not necessarily the same as residence. Some men, as funds permitted, purchased land removed in distance from the "home place" with the intent of giving, selling, or willing it to their sons to get them started on their own place. On your list of markers indicate "residence" versus "land ownership."

At this point, it would be good to point out that you shouldn't add more to the marker than what is actually given in the source. If the census says "toolman," don't say "toolman at ABC Manufacturing." If another record tells you of the place of employment, list "employer: ABC Manufacturing." This helps prevent you from overlooking the fact that your ancestor left his job as a toolman at XYZ Manufacturing to take a job as a supervisor at ABC Manufacturing.

The people in the lives of our ancestors are important markers. I find it helpful to identify those people by specific type of connection and by year. I include locality if this is a migrating ancestor. For example, a deed might provide the following names:

- Sarah () Smith (wife, 1791)
- Stephen Simpson (sold Clear Creek land to, 1791)
- John Jones (adjoining Clear Creek, 1791)
- William Wilson (adjoining Clear Creek, 1791)
- Adam Ackley (witness, 1791)
- Benjamin Brown (witness, 1791)

Notice that I didn't mention the deed, go into the details, or add a citation. That all belongs elsewhere in your research files.

Don't neglect the other persons found in lists containing your ancestor's name. You've surely used the census in your research to record information about your ancestor, but have you collected the nearby names for your list of markers? I recommend doing 10 households on each side of your ancestor. For lengthy lists of names, I sometimes note only surnames; I can add given names later if needed.

If you are adding markers from the 1850 or a subsequent census, the state of birth of each child may be a marker:

- Virginia resident (1838)
- Kentucky resident (1841, 1843, 1845)
- Illinois resident (1848, 1850)

Needless to say, kinship is an important marker. The names of siblings, parents, spouses, and children are important markers. Our ancestors had extended kinship networks, so pay attention to in-laws also. Be especially careful to be specific and not to add more than a record says:

- John Jones (married daughter Jennie, 1788)
- When we write our family narrative, this care will help us be accurate in what we say. For example, look at these two markers:

- John Jones (married daughter Jennie, 1788)
- John Jones (adjoining Clear Creek, 1791)

We would say "In 1791, when he sold his land on Clear Creek, John Jones, husband of his daughter Jennie, was an adjoining landowner." But we would not say "In 1788 his daughter Jennie married adjoining landowner John Jones," because we don't know that John Jones owned that land in 1788. By keeping markers separate and specific, we avoid small errors, which can grow into big ones.

The church your ancestor attended is a marker. Actually, it's two markers—the name of the church and the denomination. Membership in a fraternal organization is a marker, as is society membership of any kind. In turn, the membership of the church and organization may provide a list of persons who are markers for your ancestor. Did your ancestor have a talent? You may list as separate markers "played a cornet" and "was in John Philip Sousa's band."

In your haste to find relationships that fit on a family group sheet, don't neglect the other persons found in records, such as the doctor and the informant on a death certificate, the bondsmen or the official for a marriage, and the sponsors at a baptism.

The cemetery in which your ancestor was buried is a marker. If you can identify the specific plot, that's another marker.

Your ancestor's signature or mark can be an interesting marker. Collect as many original signatures as you can, but don't neglect the facsimile signatures found in record books such as county will books and deed books; many

clerks tried to replicate unusual signatures and marks. It is useful to scan just the signatures for your markers file.

Markers related to wealth and social status (or lack thereof) may be found in probate inventories, wills, tax lists, and some censuses.

As is so often the case in good genealogical practice, collecting your ancestors' markers is about recognizing that our ancestors were people, not a collection of documents.