

GENEALOGICAL BAD LUCK

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On Friday the thirteenth, I think it is appropriate to talk about genealogical bad luck. We've all had it, usually in the form of lost records. But I want to talk about the opposite kind of bad luck, the kind where there are too many records. The kind of bad luck where you suddenly realize that the records couldn't possibly all belong to one family. The kind of bad luck that makes you cry "Not fair!"

America, even in its earliest days, was a pretty large place. With all that land, you would have thought that families with the same surname would have the decency to settle at discrete distances from each other. But they did not.

Most researchers face the problem of correctly assigning records to two or more men of the same name. In the case of multiple families of the same surname, we have many individuals of the same names. As we try to assign records and relationships, we find ourselves playing musical chairs—repeatedly rearranging individuals, hoping that when the music stops everyone will have a place. But what really happens is that because the records and individuals are so firmly interconnected, it's more like a kaleidoscope, where each tiny twist results in an entirely new picture.

I have had to deal with what I am quite sure is more than my fair share of multiple-family research. On this unlucky day I'd like to share with you some of the techniques I use to work on those problems. I wish I could have said "to solve those problems" in the previous sentence, but these are among the thorniest of genealogical dilemmas, and a satisfactory solution can't always be achieved.

One problem that made me cry "Not fair!" is from my own family research. By 1800 several Buch brothers had moved northward from Washington County in southwestern Pennsylvania. Thereafter the surname was usually Book. I thought it was a simple matter of assembling all the records and assigning them to the correct brother.

BE CLEAR ON GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

My first problem dealt with being clear on where I was working. The 1850 census had Book/Books entries in Butler and Lawrence counties, but the earliest censuses had entries in Beaver and Mercer counties. At first I focused on the township names, circumventing (I thought) the need to keep track of county boundary changes. Imagine my chagrin when I discovered several of the township names were used by more than one county. You would have thought they could have had more originality. Not fair!

I recouped from this by sketching a multicounty map that was marked to show each township in which I found records. Often a list is sufficient, but in this case I needed the visual aid because it turned out that several of the parties were living on or near county boundaries. Not fair!

USE THE CENSUS EXHAUSTIVELY

I systematically gathered all the census entries from 1790 through 1850. I was pleased to discover that several of the brothers survived to a ripe old age and appeared on the 1850 census.

DO WHOLE-FAMILY RESEARCH

I always do whole-family research (see "In Praise of Whole-Family Genealogy"), so the next step was to assign each census entry to one of the brothers (and their children as time went on). I had constructed a nice family, I thought.

CLEAR A SHELF FOR LEFTOVERS

There were, however, quite a few leftovers. Many of them existed because the nameless pre-1850 tick marks simply didn't provide enough information to assign them. I never throw out leftovers, but instead list them in a section titled "Leftovers" at the end of my family compilation (see "I Hate Leftovers!"). An ongoing task would be to dispose of these leftovers.

COLLECT ALL RECORDS

I expanded beyond census to collect as many records as possible of all types. Cemetery records were proving quite helpful. Not only did the brothers live long lives, many of the family could afford tombstones. However, my leftover list wasn't shrinking, but growing, and the game of musical chairs had started.

USE ALL KINDS OF RECORDS

One day I was searching the Internet (not an easy task when the surname is a common word). I discovered from a transcript of an old county history that George had never married. This was not good. I had assigned a large number of children to him. Within minutes I also found a local newspaper article discussing an old house and the Buch/Book family that built it. This family came to western Pennsylvania through Canada and New Jersey. My family, I was pretty certain, was connected to the substantial Buch family of southeastern Pennsylvania.

Why did these strangers have to move into the same small area as my ancestral family? There were plenty of non-Book counties available to them. Not fair! There seems to have been no interaction of any kind between them, especially in the early years, so it doesn't appear they were cousins coming to join family. Now I had two separate families to track. Families who used the same given names. Not fair! Families who resided near each other. Not fair! In other words, I had twice the usual problems.

COLLECT MARKERS

Although there was one useful occupation, most of the markers on this family were geographical (see “Collecting Your Ancestors’ Markers”).

USE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT TOOLS

I use organizational tools to make my job easier, ranging from a chronology to the date calculator in lineage-linked database software to old-fashioned file cards. In this case, I used a spreadsheet to track censuses (see “Using Tables and Spreadsheets in Research,” *Genealogical Computing* 23 #4[April–June 2004], 15–17) and made substantial use of color coding.

My attempted compilation, including the leftovers, was in a single word-processing file. I began each family group on a new page. Then I assigned a color to each township and county name in this file and in the census-grid spreadsheet. I color-coded the cemetery names to match.

With a single glance, not even reading any words, I could tell what seemed to fit nicely on a locality basis and what might signal a problem. The color coding even helped me make some tentative family assignments. But mostly it pointed out problems. The final straw came when I realized that it really was true that one of the “other” family was buried in the same cemetery as “my” family. Not fair!

DISASSEMBLE, THEN ASSEMBLE FROM SCRATCH

For some of the potentially problematic family groups, I decided it was time to break up all the pieces and consider the puzzle anew.

USE LAND AND TAX RECORDS

I am still collecting information, but in the final analysis, I expect key clues to come from land and tax records. Too often I hear people say they’ve searched “everything” or they’ve searched “thoroughly,” but when I ask what they found in deeds or tax lists, they say they haven’t bothered with them. I’m anxious for my next trip to Salt Lake City to look for all the deeds in four counties.

FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM

Solving “Not fair!” problems of multiple families requires a level of concentration and focus that is geometrically greater than solving individual problems of linkage or identity. If you are facing such a task, you need either to make that commitment or to put the problem aside and focus on another section of your ancestry. To do a less-than-thorough job creates the likelihood that you will end up with someone else’s ancestors on your family tree.