

WHY I NEVER GET ANYTHING DONE ON TIME

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

After the National Genealogical Society conference in Sacramento, several of us stopped to research at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. I had client research to do, articles to finish, and illustrations to locate for a book. My week was fully booked.

On Monday I began work. The client's ancestor appeared in South Carolina in 1778. The surname is uncommon, and we'd researched the other families of the surname, but found no connections. I thought maybe he was the immigrant, and last year I found a baptism in the English IGI for the right name, albeit a couple of years later than I would have liked. The name is uncommon enough, though, that it demanded investigation.

On my trip to the library in January, I dug into the records. The father in the baptism came from a yeoman family, but attended Cambridge and became a minister. The mother came from a gentry family (in fact, both of her parents were from that family). The immigrant in South Carolina had a fancy signature and was comfortable financially, owning much land and quite a few slaves, so these factors were compatible.

The father had died in 1770, leaving no will. At least three of his eleven children preceded him in death. I had found no further records of the family in the parish, although I found two of the children marrying and having families elsewhere in England, leaving the mother and six of the children (including the one who shared the name of the South Carolina man) unaccounted for.

One of the tasks on this trip was to examine any wills of individuals with the surname of either the father or the mother for a mention of the widow or orphans. Gentry families are more dispersed than average families, necessitating record searches in a variety of places. Testators with estates over five pounds or having assets and liabilities in more than one diocese were supposed to have their wills probated in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC).

I was efficiently identifying each will, finding the right microfilm, finding the right page (the pages don't have one number per page, but one number for every eight pages, in the old folio numbering style), and scanning the will for mention of the family of interest, while keeping an eye for a vacancy on the microfilm printer to make a copy. I was reading a one-page PCC will written in 1780, probated in 1793, for a man who seemed to be single and childless. I was going quickly, because in spite of my crowded schedule, I was taking the evening off to go to Provo where a member of the Ancestry staff had invited us to a cookout.

I'd deciphered the part about the mourning ring with an aunt's hair in it. Next he gave to someone I'd never heard of "a picture of Erasmus that has a Bird upon the hand and my two Battle pieces and a young mans head by Rembrandt also a picture of my . . ." Whoa! A what? I backed up and read it again. Yep, that's what it said.

I hurriedly made a copy to take to the cookout. Needless to say, I couldn't wait to share my find. While waiting for the burgers to broil, several people played with trying to track down the painting on the Internet, but we couldn't find it.

The next morning I admitted that I couldn't ignore this. On my own time, not the client's, I checked databases for the recipient of the painting. His name was difficult to read in the will, but I figured it out from the databases. I tracked him down. He never married. I found his will. In 1785 he left his household furnishings to his recently widowed sister, but he didn't die until 1829. His sister had died shortly before. She had no children. He had two other married sisters. They had no children. The Rembrandt was at a dead end.

Then I did some creative Internet searching. What did I find? Two more paintings in the family. One was a portrait of a couple and, coincidentally, the recipient of the Rembrandt, done in 1782 by a local artist of good repute. The other was a portrait of a man in military uniform done in the 1760s by Gainsborough. Yep, the famous one.

Both of the paintings had descriptions, identifying the persons involved. Being a genealogist, I immediately began trying to place all of these people in the family. Wouldn't it be cool if some of these people were closely tied to the potential immigrant?

I dug into the stack of photocopies from the last trip, printouts from Ancestry.com's British collection, my brief compilation related to the potential immigrant, a variety of databases, and the stack of wills from this trip. I adjourned to my hotel room where I had room to spread the various papers out on the beds (I try to get a room with two beds for this very purpose).

Hmmm. Things didn't fit. The man owning the Rembrandt left it to a distant cousin. The people in the family portrait were very distant cousins.

And the man in the Gainsborough? He was closely related to the potential immigrant all right, his uncle according to the description. Except that on genealogical charts the uncle of that name is said to have died young. Further research has not yet resolved this issue.

Then I found an indication that a brother of the man who bequeathed the Rembrandt had come to Virginia. Could this be true? In the stack of wills, I found a detailed one for their mother, in which she left money to her son "at his returning into England." Did descendants know about this origin? Research showed that it had been published, but without mentioning the mother's will. And they certainly didn't know about the Rembrandt.

So, why would someone leave a Rembrandt to his first cousin once removed when he had siblings? What happened to the Rembrandt and which one is it? Why would the couple in the painting choose to be portrayed with a second cousin twice removed instead of their own four small children? Who was the man in the military uniform?

Why am I researching the provenance of paintings?
Why do I never get anything done on time? Curiosity.
Plain, old-fashioned curiosity.

I've continued researching, and I now have ideas about
some of those questions, although I've added a new one:

When will I learn to control my curiosity? I think I can
guess that answer, too, and I know the reason. When I told
a dear friend about my finds and lamented that I was, once
again, not going to get anything done on time, she grinned
and exclaimed "But isn't it fun!"