

WHY DIDN'T I SEE THAT?

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When I review the written compilations and conclusions of other researchers, I often see things that the author has overlooked. I suppose it would be nice to say that it is brilliance on my part, but that rarely is the case. It usually is something obvious enough that the researcher exclaims, "Why didn't I see that?"

"Why didn't I see that?" This is a question worth answering, because the answers can help us avoid problems in our own research. Let me begin with a disclaimer. Some of the vision problems described below are familiar to me as my own. I've exclaimed "Why didn't I see that?" on more than one occasion myself.

Let's take a genealogical vision exam.

TUNNEL VISION

Most of us are searching for our own ancestry. We find an ancestor and then seek his or her parents. When we find them, we shout "Eureka!" and immediately begin seeking their parents. We are wearing ancestral blinders. We ignore everyone other than *our* ancestor.

The corrective prescription would read "Equality for siblings!"

Your ancestor's siblings have the same parents as your ancestor. If you can't find your ancestor's parents, the solution may lie with siblings. Furthermore, it's awfully easy to make a mistake. I rather like the quality control of confirming that my ancestor's siblings have the same set of parents as my ancestor.

FAR-SIGHTEDNESS

Many of us are too goal oriented. Our eye is drawn to the unknown distant past instead of focusing on the portion of the past with which we have already connected. We are so anxious to push onward that we don't take the time to establish a firm base from which to do the pushing.

The corrective prescription would read "Slow down. Observe the scenery. Get to know the people."

Be thorough. Spend ample time in the locality and with the individuals you have identified.

NEAR-SIGHTEDNESS

This problem has become more common in recent years. People seem to over analyze each piece of evidence, discussing various reasons why the document might say what it does. It is true that we need to keep in mind the reasons a document was created and any legal or religious restrictions of the time, but too much analysis can detract from what is explicitly stated in the document.

The corrective prescription would read "Just the facts, ma'am."

Those of you who remember Dagnet will remember that Joe Friday understood perfectly well that the extra information being imparted would often obscure (intentionally or unintentionally) the information he

needed. I would rather see a straightforward presentation of all documents, unclouded by analysis, than to see what I recently encountered: several pages analyzing a document, without once telling me precisely what the document said.

BLURRED VISION

One of the things I often see in narratives is smudged identities. Let me explain. Over and over I see a sentence such as "Henry deeded his land to his son John in 1830." Immediately, I want to know what the deed *really* said. Did Henry say "my son" or did he merely say "John?" I am left to puzzle whether the researcher knew there was a son John, assumed there was a son John, or *wished* there were a son John. When we add these "helpful" phrases, we smudge the identity of the individuals involved (in this case, perhaps, a second cousin once removed).

The corrective prescription would read "Always present literal transcriptions of names and relationships."

Until your research has been compiled and reviewed, William should remain William, Billy should remain Billy, Will jr. should remain Will jr., Wm. F. should remain Wm. F., and so on.

POOR FOCUS

This is the old-fashioned "can't see the forest for the trees" problem—or perhaps the "can't see the trees for the forest" problem. We need to maintain a balance and examine *both* the individual records and the records in relationship to each other.

The corrective prescription would read "Step back, blink twice, and look again. Then step forward, blink twice, and look again."

My favorite mechanism for doing so is to create a chronology with extracts of all records (including places), with names given exactly as in the records. It is amazing what is revealed when we let our ancestors live their lives in chronological order.

MONOCULAR VISION

The genealogical manifestation of monocular vision is only researching half of a couple—almost always the male half because of the focus on surnames. We can all fall into this trap, because women's birth surnames disappear upon marriage. But that is no reason to ignore the wife. Are we sure he had only one? What records do we have indicating her name? For exactly what years do we know the name of the wife?

The corrective prescription would read "Give her a paragraph of her own."

If we force ourselves to discuss the wife as an individual, specifically identifying when we know of her presence, even if nameless (birth of a child, "Henry and wife received communion"), we are less likely to miss clues of identity or to latch onto the wrong ancestry.

OFFICE HOURS ARE OVER . . .

. . . but these prescriptions for clearer vision can be filled at any time. The sooner, the better.