

WORDSCAPE: RELATIVITY

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, FASG

I've been working lately trying to separate and/or connect several early colonial families of the same surname. Several of the records I worked with used terms for people and relationships that are not used in modern times, or that have different meanings. In early America, word usage was based on word usage in England.

MR., MRS., GOODMAN, GOODWIFE

We think of *Mr.* and *Mrs.* as denoting marital status, but if we think of their long forms of *Master* and *Mistress*, we will come closer to the meaning in early America, indicating a level of standing in the community. Thus, even a small child might be called Mr. or Mrs.

The status below that of Mr. was *Goodman*. His wife would be called *Goodwife* or *Goodie*. These titles were not official, nor were they fixed. I noticed in the records I was studying, for example, that one man was called both Mr. and Goodman in two different records in the same court.

SPINSTERS AND RELICTS

To us, a *spinster* is a woman who never married. However, upon occasion we find it in records referring simply to a woman who is unmarried or acting on her own. The term *single woman* might also be used in the same context, both into modern times. The term spinster is also an occupation, but in legal documents women were almost always referred to by marital status rather than occupation.

Legally, *relict* means the survivor of a marriage and refers to either the husband or the wife. However, we normally see the term used for the widow.

STEP, IN-LAW

Terms of relationship are most likely to trip us up. We have distinct understandings of the terms *in-law* and *step*. To us, our daughter-in-law is married to our son, our father-in-law is our spouse's father. On the other hand, a stepson is a child of our spouse's by an earlier marriage and a stepparent is married to our mother or father. In early America, these terms often seem to mean just the opposite. Legally, in-law refers to relationships that are not by blood. For example, a stepson could be called a son-in-law. When using any document, we should be open to both meanings.

Usage was flexible. I was almost tripped up when analyzing one will in my recent research. A man referred to his son-in-law. He was, indeed, referring to the husband of his daughter. Then he instructed his son to provide for his (the son's) mother-in-law, which meant the son's stepmother. I can't remember encountering a document in which both interpretations occurred within the same document. In the future I will be less rigid in my expectations.

BROTHER, SISTER, FATHER, MOTHER

The usage of *brother*, *sister*, *father*, and *mother* have tripped up many an unwary genealogist. They have even caused problems for the most knowledgeable researchers. Whereas we consider them as explicitly defining blood relationships, our ancestors were perfectly comfortable using them as more generic terms, without modifiers. Thus, they could refer to a blood relative, an in-law, or a steprelative. A few years ago in an article in *The American Genealogist*, I significantly rearranged the ancestry of some early Maryland residents when a careful reading of a will showed that the provisions made for "my Honoured Mother Margaret Nottle" were for the man's mother-in-law, not his mother.

Occasionally, these terms are used to refer to persons who are not related by blood, as when we sometimes find that someone was a brother or sister in the church.

COUSINS, NIECES, NEPHEWS, AND GRANDCHILDREN

The exact relationship of the terms *cousin* (often spelled *cuzin* or *cuzen*), *niece*, and *nephew* weren't as fixed as they are today. In one of the documents I read during this recent research, bequests were made to two female cousins. I suspected this might be an important clue overlooked by other researchers. I was able to determine that the women were sisters and that their father was not related to the man writing the will. Chronology and other factors suggest that their mother was a heretofore unidentified sister of the man who left money to them. In other words, they were his nieces.

Very rarely in early America we find interchangeability between the terms niece or nephew and grandson or granddaughter. This derives from the fact that in Latin, Old French, and Middle English, a single term was used for grandson, nephew, and other male descendants and another for granddaughter, niece, and other female descendants. However, before concluding that you have such a case, you should always research the whole family exceptionally thoroughly.

I should mention a term that occasionally was (and is) used and that could easily be misinterpreted. A *cousin german* is a true first cousin. It has nothing to do with nationality.

NATURAL CHILDREN AND NOW WIVES

In wills we see terms that I have often heard misinterpreted by genealogists. Natural children are those related by blood, as opposed to in-laws and stepchildren, but it does not imply anything about the legitimacy of a child. An illegitimate child is a natural child, but a natural child is usually not an illegitimate child. When an illegitimate child was named in a will, the circumstances are usually very clear, with the mother named. I saw a will recently in which a man mentioned three illegitimate children. Each of their mothers were named. All three of them!

When a man mentioned his *now wife* in a will, he was not making any statement about the possibility of a previous marriage. He was simply trying to be completely unambiguous in indicating that he was referring specifically to the woman to whom he was at that moment married. In other words, if she died and he remarried, the new wife would not receive the bequest. (It is to be hoped that under those circumstances he remembered to write a new will or add a codicil.)

SR., JR., III

If you've been reading *Ancestry Daily News* regularly, you've probably seen columnists mentioning that Sr., Jr., and III do not necessarily denote any blood relationship, but instead are used to distinguish among persons of the same name in the same locality, with Sr. being the eldest. The terms were dynamic. When the eldest in the list died, everyone moved up a notch.

ELDER, YOUNGER

In England in the time period preceding the earliest American colonization, we find examples in which the same name is given to two children in the same family. I am currently working on the English origins of a seventeenth-century Rhode Island immigrant. The will of his grandfather mentions his "sonne John the elder" and "my sonne John the younger." In this case, I suspect they may have been by separate wives, but that was by no means always the case. American examples of this are extremely rare.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important things we can remember to do in genealogy is to remind ourselves constantly that our world and our language is not fully that of our ancestors. Words change meaning. When words describe a relationship, make sure that you seek other records to confirm their meaning.