

I Thought He Was My Ancestor: Avoiding the 6 Biggest Genealogy Mistakes – Handout

The Big Genealogy Problems.

1. You can't find the data you need.
2. You think you have found the data – but the data is wrong. This is today's topic. We are going to cover 6 major types of common genealogy mistakes. There are also probably a few others not included in the discussion.

Big Mistake #1: Trusting in the Old-Time, Longtime Data

- We tend to trust a lot of old-time data, such as Mayflower or Jamestown ancestry lists, or American Revolution patriots, or people in royal lines – BE CAREFUL!
- Example: Mayflower passenger/descendant data has been in existence for centuries, but it still contains mistakes; as an example, Stephen Hopkins of the Mayflower has had numerous genealogies published, but diligent researchers as recently as 2012 found glaring errors.
- Example. Postings, as in the case of Public Family Trees, are often variable from one posting to another – and many of these postings are flat out wrong. Be especially wary of the postings on the Public Trees because many/most of them are just copies of what someone else posted. Always check to see if sources are provided; if you can't find a source, the data may be wrong.
- Claims about having traced genealogies back to Adam and Eve are not correct. In fact, according to experts, family trees that go back before 500 AD are wrong.
- **The overall message:** just because genealogy data has been around for a long time, such as data published in an old book, or posted (and re-posted many times) on Public Family Trees, it is not necessarily correct. Always get a valid source.

Big Mistake #2: Trusting Data Provided by Family Genealogists

- We probably get most of our original data from family genealogists; we trust these people, and much of their data is correct – but some of it may be totally wrong.
- Our old-time family genealogists did the best they could, but often made major errors
- Example: my Uncle John who took the family genealogy incorrectly back to the Mayflower. John had laid out an elaborate family tree, but it took a very wrong turn, which meant that the total results was wrong.
- Family Myth Example: we had ancestors in Baltimore who were wealthy – not true; another myth: an ancestor was supposed to have come from Scotland, but really came from Tennessee; another ancestor supposedly came to America with his aged father – but this was not true.
- Family Story Example: driving the horses for the king. We like to think our ancestors were more interesting perhaps than they really were. Be careful of family stories.
- **Overall Message:** Double-check the family genealogist's data; with today's technology we can double-check the data provided by family genealogists in a short time.

Big Mistake #3: Connecting “Same Name” People to Your Family Tree When They May Not Be Related

- We are usually elated when we find a sought after relative with the right name, and maybe in the right time and place – but we need more than just the right name. Do not jump to the conclusion that the same name person is the correct ancestor.
- Example: Nicholas Baker (1818-1896). His name was listed in an Illinois marriage record for a small county in 1850, but it was the wrong Nicholas Baker.
- Example: I took a risk in adding Wendell Becker (b. c. 1625) to my family tree; then, someone else added an entire family and parents for him, based on finding someone with that name in that time period in Germany – but it was the wrong location in Germany and the same named person was just that, only the same name, Wendell Becker, but an entirely different person.
- Another Example: I added an unknown named person, calling him Johann Schroeder (b. c. 1580) to my database. Another researcher found a person in an online data archive with that same name, and I found that my Johann Schroeder had been further defined with a wife and parents. These add-ons were made on the basis that someone of that same name had been found somewhere in Germany. The location was actually wrong, the connection was totally wrong – it was a big mess and required a lot of trouble to make corrections.
- **Overall Message**: Be careful about connecting people to your family tree simply because the new person has the same name; verify the location, year; names of other “new” family members, and any other related factors.

Big Mistake #4: Failing the “Reasonableness” Test

- Whenever you think about adding any data into your family tree, consider factors such as year of birth/death relative to wives, children, and parents. Be sure that a possible parent is alive and in the right age group to have children in the years noted.
- Example: Public Tree postings for Samuel Tracy 1762-c.1763). On many posted trees, his birth, marriage, and death dates did not match. Almost all the trees listed his death in Durham, England; only a very few correctly listed his death place as Durham, Maine. This means that many of the trees were obviously copies – and with no sources.
- Example: Melchior Ruch (1644-1720). There are numerous (over 3,000) postings on the Public Trees relating to this man. Some postings show him born in Switzerland, and others show Alsace-Lorraine. Some postings show one set of parents while others show different parents. By far the majority of the postings show the same set of parents where the father was age 14 and the mother was age 10. This “red flag” data did not deter literally thousands of people from including that flawed data in their trees. This data has been proven to be wrong but it is still out there.
- The easy answer to the Ruch problem was to go to the original records. In a matter of minutes the problem was resolved and the correct parents were found.
- **Overall Message**: If the years specified for parenting, marriage, or death seem suspect, they probably are wrong. When possible, take a look at the original records to solve these problems.

Big Mistake #5: Trusting the Genealogy Snake Oil Salesmen

- Many of our professional and semi-professional genealogists may talk nice and be very convincing when they do work for us, but it is important that we be able to verify their findings.
- Be careful of accepting any genealogy researcher's results if they don't seem reasonable. Many experienced genealogists have made mistakes, jumped to wrong conclusions, and have made unwarranted assumptions.
- Example: the Walter Chrysler family genealogy. Genealogists researched this family in the 1930s, the 1960s, and 1980s, with three different results. The researchers made all kinds of errors.
- **Overall Message**: Whether you are doing research yourself or having someone else do it, be sure that there is enough good evidence to support the conclusions. You don't want to have bad information out there that may delude others as well as yourself. Always check the sources and verify that your genealogist did not make any of the mistakes we have discussed today.

Big Mistake #6: Trusting That All Original Records Are Accurate

- We have regularly hammered the idea into our heads that we should strive to find original records because they are the most accurate and will not fail us.
- However, even original records may be wrong. Maybe an informant didn't know the correct data, as in the case of census records, death certificates, or newspaper data. Further, although we don't like to think about it, some informants do not tell the truth for a variety of reasons.
- Example: Jack Pettis death certificate had a wrong birthplace for him; the informant didn't know the correct place; these types of records are no better than the data provided by an informant.
- Example: Aunt Nettie's newspaper obituary. In this small town example, the list of survivors was all messed up; the newspaper listed wrong data for three out of four siblings.
- Another Example: Age of Aunt Nell. She was listed in two different censuses with very different ages. To find her most correct age, we checked the 1st census she was found in, and learned she had told the census taker an 11-year fib.
- **Overall Message**: Wear your "skeptical hat" when you review various records: newspaper accounts, government records, and even books. To get accuracy, check a variety of records.

Good luck, and may all your mistakes be small ones.