Using Identity Characteristics To Locate Ancestors

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A name is only one way to identify an individual. Researchers can also use other identity characteristics to locate individuals in a particular record group, or sort records that may belong to individuals with the same or similar names.

Using Identity Characteristics

Comparing information found in one record to that of another record can help determine if they refer to the same individual. This technique can be used both when looking for a particular individual in a source, or separating individuals of the same name.

The goal is to determine what makes your subject unique.

What distinguishes him or her from others? Even if some of the following identity characteristics are shared by two individuals, there are usually some that are different.

Use these characteristics to identify an individual:

♦ **Middle name, initial or nickname** – These minor differences in a name can differentiate your subject from others.
♦ **Age** – Matching age in records can help narrow a list of possible candidates. Note that "junior" and "senior" do not always denote a relationship. These terms can be used to distinguish an older and younger man in the same area regardless of relationship.
♦ **Spouse** – the name of the spouse may help identify one individual from another.

- ♦ **Occupation –** Many records list occupation and can distinguish the baker from the blacksmith.
- ♦ **Names of family members** – If the name of the children or siblings of a person are known, they can assist in identifying the correct family in a record. If one family member has a very unique name, it may be more efficient to search records such as censuses for the unique name to locate the family.
- ♦ **Birthplace** – Comparing birthplace across a variety of records can help show that they refer to the same individual. Some records list the city, county, state or country of birth.
- ♦ **Residence –** Where an individual lived can be significant, especially if you can identify the particular part of the city or county, or even the creek, where your subject lived.
- ♦ **Land ownership –** Knowing whether you subject owned land or rented can be helpful, and deeds can be used to identify the residence, or specific area where the subject lived.
- ♦ **Religion –** If you know the religion of your subject you may be able to use that information to identify your subject in records.
- ♦ **Military Service –** Military pensions can provide information on a man's wife and children. Men of the same name can be distinguished by the unit they served in or the location where they enlisted.
- ♦ **Socio-economic status** – Use clues in the records you locate to estimate the socio-economic status of your subject. Clues can be found in various records such as deeds listing the price paid for property, the value of a farm in the agricultural census, whether an individual owned or rented a home in the 1940 census, etc.
- ♦ **Signatures** – Signatures can be very helpful, as they are generally unique to an individual. Comparing the signature on a pension application to one on a land transaction can provide evidence as to whether they are the same person.
- ♦ **Physical characteristics** – Military records, passports applications, naturalization records and others provide a physical description of an individual. These details can be compared to other records for consistency.

Examples will be shared to demonstrate using each of these characteristics to locate individuals in various record sets.

Locating an Individual in Records

As genealogists, we spend much of our time searching for an individual in a particular record set. Indexing has made this task easier, but if the individual has a common name, or there are several individuals with the same name in the area, it can be a challenge. This technique of using a variety of characteristics to identify an individual can be especially useful to overcome indexing issues where your ancestor's name may not be identifiable, or in situations where a name has been changed. It requires comparing the details about the subject found in a variety of records.

- Identify whether a particular record refers to a certain individual
  - Compare known facts about the individual with the information contained in the record.
- Locate an individual in a record without using his or her full name
  - Search by the name of a family member.
  - Search by specific location, occupation, birthplace or age. These criteria can often be entered in a database under the advanced search option. Many times you can leave the name field blank, and search by other specific criteria.

- **Focus on what makes your individual unique**
  - What is different about your subject than others by the same name? Did he live in a different part of the county? Is his occupation unique? Does he have a child with an unusual name? Can you combine details such as age, residence, occupation and wife's name to locate him in a database?

> "Our hardest task is to be absolutely sure that a particular document or event pertains to the specific individual we are researching."
>
> Marsha Hoffman Rising
> *The Family Tree Problem Solver*

Sorting Individuals of the Same Name

Sometimes you have two or more individuals of the same name in a community at the same time. This can be a difficult, yet common problem. In order to distinguish them try the following strategies:

- Locate all the records you can relating to the individuals and their family members.
- Sort the records using whichever identifying characteristics may apply to the particular record or individual. This may depend on how much information you have on the individual. The more details you can use to distinguish him or her, the easier it will be to tell which records apply to your subject.
- Be sure you have identified ALL the individuals using the same name, so that you can properly distinguish them from others of that name.
- Place the records in chronological order and look for patterns.
- Determine what is **unique** about each man or woman. This will help you distinguish them in records.

♦ Pinpoint exactly where in the city or county each individual lived and search for details that distinguish him or her in the community from the others by the same name.

♦ Determine the ages of the individuals involved. Separating them can become easier if they are in different generations. Remember that "junior" and "senior" does not necessarily mean father and son. These designations can be used to distinguish any two men of the same name.

♦ Broaden your research to include family members and associates, as they may help determine which man is identified in a particular record.

> "Perhaps the one thing that would improve the quality of research being done, more than any other single factor, would be a concern for complete families rather than just direct lines."
>
> Val Greenwood, author
> *The Researchers Guide to American Genealogy*

Case Studies

Two case studies will be shared to demonstrate the use of a variety of identity characteristics in separating same name individuals. One is an early 20th century case in Washington, D.C. where two individuals share many characteristics besides name. When the individuals have many of these characteristics in common, it is helpful to create a chart to keep the records straight. It is also helpful to include records of family members that may also help to separate the men by comparing addresses and other identifying details.

The second case is set in 19th century England where there are a dozen men by the same in the same parish, and research on all of these men was required. It was necessary to determine the spouse, residence and occupation of each man in order to separate the various records in to family units accurately. The church baptismal records generally list the name of the mother and the father, but the church marriage and burial records usually just named the father. It was helpful to know the residence and occupation of each man in order to separate out the records into family units.

Further Study

For further study see chapter 8 on "Sorting Individuals of the Same Name" in *The Family Tree Problem Solver: Tried-and-True Tactics for Tracing Elusive Ancestors*, by Marsha Hoffman Rising (Cincinnati, Ohio: Family Tree Books, 2011).