

My 20-Year Mystery: Finding Family Origins with Y-DNA

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Introduction

Genealogical research is fraught with problems, particularly for beginners. Same name, different people identity problems, lack of extant records for the time and place your ancestor lived, online family trees that lead the researcher astray, skipping generations to someone famous, the mistaken impression that “everything” is online and that DNA will solve all research questions are just some of the potential pitfalls of starting your family history journey.

More than 20 years ago when I began my research into my direct paternal ancestor, Samuel Morehead, the internet was in its infancy and research had to be done by postal mail with self-addressed stamped envelopes or in person in the repositories near the ancestor’s home. Family sources, public libraries and oral traditions were the starting point for most genealogists.

Much has changed in the last two decades. With the completion of the digitization of microfilm records at the Family History Library by FamilySearch, and the marketing of commercial genetic genealogy test kits for everything from people to domestic animals such as dogs, cats and horses, entering the genealogical research world offers a wealth of information as near as the closest laptop.

It is worth it, however, to keep in mind some key concepts and proven strategies for tackling those tough genealogy problems. The basic research strategies such as starting with family sources, oral histories and working back in time from what you know to what you don’t know are often overlooked but should be revisited.

The Problem

Ferguson Morehead was born in Pickaway County, OH, in 1807 to Samuel Morehead and Catherine Gay. My grandfather’s sister, Vera Irene Nigg documented the generations for her DAR application and applied under John Gay, Catherine Gay’s father.¹ None of the county histories, oral traditions or documents available to me as a new genealogist in the mid-1990’s gave much more information than that Samuel Morehead was born in Pennsylvania and died in Vermillion County, IN. Very little of this information was documented explicitly, and this is where we begin.

¹ DAR Member, Vera Irene Morehead Nigg, DAR lineage application, National Member #548654, on-line database *Daughters of the American Revolution* (<http://services.dar.org> : accessed 4/16/2021).

In starting my genealogical journey with the goal of determining Samuel Morehead's parentage, I didn't know enough to know that it was unlikely to meet success. Only in time did I recognize this question as a complex research problem that would require evidence from multiple states over more than 100 years and the application of the genealogical proof standard to find a satisfactory answer.

Early efforts lead to later breakthrough

Pickaway County, OH, where the family of Samuel Morehead lived for more than 20 years, had a wealth of information. I spent significant time in the records office there on my first genealogical research trip. Some gems from that trip included:

A deed of land in 1813 from Samuel Morehead and his wife Catherine, in which she signs with her mark, and releases her dower rights.²

Another deed, 2 years later, when Samuel sold land to his son, Alexander, but without his wife Catherine, suggesting that she had died in the interim.³

A sheriff's sale deed transfer of Samuel Morehead's land following the loss of a court case in the Court of Common Pleas.⁴

And the last deed recorded for Samuel in 1825, presumably after which he "removed to Indiana."⁵

The Sheriff's sale deed led me to the Court of Common Pleas which had a court packet containing the original documents relating to the case.⁶ One of my favorite finds was an original signature. Anthony Groves sued George Brown and Alexander McLene, formerly partners doing business in tanning and curriering under the name Brown and McClean. Samuel Morehead and James Moore had co-signed the loan, and when the business failed and Groves won the court case, Samuel's land was sold at auction.⁷



² Deed Book A, pg 677-678, Morehead to Nevill, 1813, Recorder's Office, Pickaway County, OH.

³ Deed Book C, p. 51, Samuel Morehead to Alexander Morehead, 1815, Recorder's Office, Pickaway County, OH.

⁴ Deed Book F, p.132-134, Kinnear to MacCracken, 1823, Recorder's Office, Pickaway County, OH.

⁵ Deed Book F, p. 576, Morehead to Ragin, 1825, Recorder's Office, Pickaway County, OH.

⁶ Groves vs. Brown and McLene, Court Packet, 1821, Clerk of Courts Office, Court of Common Pleas, Pickaway County, OH, photocopies from originals taken in 2005, author's files.

⁷ Deed Book F, p.132-134, Kinnear to MacCracken, 1823, Recorder's Office, Pickaway County, OH.

This is where the research sat for a few years until a visit to the Family History Library turned up a few more significant documents confirming that Samuel Morehead had lived in Bourbon County, Kentucky, before moving to Pickaway County, Ohio. Much of this research was strictly zooming in on Samuel Morehead, and his immediate family, but led to some interesting associates. Who were George Brown, Alexander McClean and James Moore and how were they related to Samuel?

Significant Technological Developments

Time passed and some significant developments changed the way that we do genealogical research.

Y-DNA Testing

While commercially available Y-DNA testing became available in 2000 through FamilyTreeDNA, my first foray into Y-DNA testing was when my brother was first tested in 2008 in the first wave of Y-DNA tests at Ancestry.com. That 37-marker test had, for many years, no matches. That test was discontinued in 2014 and we retested him at FamilyTreeDNA in 2017.

While I had great hope that Y-DNA testing would yield connections with other Morehead surname researchers and information about Samuel Morehead's parentage, it did not. We found some hints that helped us narrow our search to a specific group of Morehead's in Pennsylvania, it was not a slam dunk panacea for our genealogical problem, and most other matches ran into the same roadblock I did: the connection between the Morehead's in Pennsylvania and their numerous descendants that had moved west with the frontier.

On-Line Sources

On-line sources have been a great boon for this research problem since many early county records for Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky have been digitized and are available online, mostly at FamilySearch. While many of them are not indexed, they can be found if you know how to search.

Skill Development

In the past 20 years, development of my skills and knowledge as a researcher has probably been the most significant factor in my ability to put Samuel Morehead into a family group originating in Franklin County, PA. Understanding historical context, the process for land claims in PA and OH, the significance of the FAN club of friends, associates and neighbors, the ability to find relevant record groups in varying geographic locations and time periods, as well as zooming out for a broader picture of the problem, have increased my confidence to answer the question of Samuel Morehead's parentage.

Zooming out

Taking a broader perspective of all the Morehead's and their family and neighbors as they moved across PA and into OH in the late 1780s to 1820s led to a better understanding of the movement of this Scots-Irish pioneer family both before and after the Revolutionary War. Some

of the key difficulties in this research included their frequent mobility, pushing into newly opened lands, and their limited range of first names for male children. Following a conventional naming system, male children were frequently named after the paternal grandfather, then the maternal grandfather, and various uncles. The result in a generation or 2 is dozens of people with the same name in many different places who are all loosely related and may trace back to the same few settlers in Pennsylvania.

Some of the results of zooming out:

- # Years covered 1730-1870 = 140
- # Surnames researched = 8 and counting
- # individuals named Samuel Morehead = >10
- # States covered = 5
- # Counties in PA, KY & OH = 14
- # spellings of 2 surnames = 11⁸
- # deeds abstracted for 1 county = >100
- # individual tax records = >300
- # research hours = >500

The quantity of records required the use of spreadsheets and mapping software to see where all these people were over time.

Of the dozens of wills reviewed and transcribed in multiple counties of PA, one caught my eye.

Joseph Moorehead, who wrote his will in 1818, mentioned his wife Jean, his sons Samuel, Patrick and Richard (who predeceased him), but also a son in law, named James Moore.⁹



Research into Joseph and his wife Jean led to references that Jean was a daughter of Patrick McClean of Franklin County, PA, and now we have a tantalizing clue to the parents of Samuel. We have three surnames identified together in Pickaway County Ohio being found together in Franklin County PA. McClean, Morehead and Moore. No other references to Samuel, son of Joseph, are found in Franklin County, and subsequent research showed that Patrick moved to Brown County, OH around 1815. At the time of the will being probated, James Moore, the son-in-law was named executor of the estate, presumably because neither Samuel nor Patrick were still in Franklin County.

Zooming in again

After surveying hundreds of tax records, deeds, probate records, court records and indexes of all kinds, it's time to zoom in again. While suggestive, the next steps require applying the

⁸ Franklin County, PA, Will Books, 1784-1905, Register of Wills, Vol C, 1811-1826, p. 579; Pennsylvania, U.S. Wills and probate Records, 1683-1993 *Ancestry.com*, Lehi, 2015 (<http://ancestry.com/imageviewer> : accessed 4/16/2021.)

⁹ Ibid.

Genealogical Proof Standard to the evidence currently available, that Samuel Morehead, b. about 1768 in PA, is the oldest son of Joseph and Jean (McClellan) Morehead, of Franklin County, PA.

Perhaps that may lead to understanding more about the relationships between Samuel, James Moore, Alexander McClellan and George Brown.

Revisit those old problems!

Zoom in and out

Make sure as you research that your focus varies between sharp focus on an individual, followed by more general research of the context surrounding that individual and then back in again.

Use DNA!

Use the appropriate type of DNA results for your problem, but don't expect it to miraculously solve your genealogical research questions.

Use the FAN club for complex cases

Significant progress can be made noticing patterns of movement over time and the relationships between families with different surnames. In-laws, neighbors and other associates can be important in make indirect connections and get around brick walls.

Happy Ancestor Hunting!