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# Separating and Merging Identities of Same-Named Men (and Women!)

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## Objective

The issue of same-named men (or women) is all too common in genealogy. Two different probates years apart appear to be for different men, but they are not. Research into probate records revealed more men by the same name. Each man's identity needed to be developed to distinguish them from each other. This case study uses probate records, deeds, census records, newspapers, tax rolls, town records, newspapers, neighborhoods, and handwriting analysis to distinguish these men. Learn ways to distinguish same-named men as well as warnings of how identities can be incorrectly conflated and how to recognize when it happens.

## Recognizing you have a problem

- Common sources of error
  - The name is the same
  - Unique names aren't that unique
  - Desire to be attached to the famous
  - Take hints from other researchers
  - Confuse father and son
  - Confuse same-named children
- Steps to recognize you have this issue
  - Step 1: Census comparison
  - Step 2: Timeline
  - Step 3: Address conflicting evidence

## Richard Bedell Case Study

- Research question: What was the relationship between Richard Hawkins, who was born about 1795 and lived in Hempstead, New York in 1810, and Richard Bedell, his chosen guardian?
- Identify all records for your target in the location and time
  - Vital
  - Probate
  - Newspapers
  - Census
  - Church
  - Cemetery
  - Land
  - Court
  - Published genealogies
  - Taxes
  - Town records
- Spreadsheet Sample:

Year	Category	Nickname	Confidence	Notes	Signature?	Citation	Link
For sorting purposes	Census, Vital, Probate, Land, etc.	Leave this blank at the beginning, then as you sort out identities use some sort of nickname to distinguish between men of the same name	Identify confidence level such as likely, probably, certainly	What was your subject's role in the record? List associates, action items, waterways, geographic descriptions, etc.	Is there an original signature?	Citation	URL

- Steps to solve this issue:
  - Assumed there were multiple men of the same name
  - Gathered as many records as possible
  - Distinguished between different people using identity characteristics
  - Further research led to merging two identities into one
  - Created a timeline for each identity
- Identity Characteristics
  - Age or birthdate
  - Immigration status
  - Middle name/initial
  - Economic status
  - Occupation
  - Geography
  - Signature
  - Religion
  - Literacy
  - Title or post-nominal
  - Family members
  - Military service
  - FAN club
  - Physical description
  - Birth location
  - DNA

**People are more than a name**

## Helpful Hints

Throughout the webinar I tried to offer some helpful hints that pertain to genealogical research, even if they don't pertain to the focus of separating men of the same name. In case you missed them...

1. Just because someone with your ancestor's name bought land/was on a church membership list/paid taxes, that is not enough of a reason to assume they are your ancestor.
2. Historically it was common to name a child after a deceased child.
3. Consider changing geographic boundaries in your research.
4. Check the law in the time and place where you are working.
5. Correlate census records to narrow down a birth range.
6. If they signed with an "X" or "his mark" they were likely illiterate.
7. Spelling variations of surnames can help you learn how a name was pronounced, which can help you generate potential spellings to look for in records.
8. Know what publications or websites to search that might contain transcriptions of records for your location.
9. If a minor is getting a guardian, there must be a reason.
10. Genealogists always search for the "most" original version of a record. For example, the original transcription of headstones instead of a published transcription.
11. Church records are a great substitute for vital records.
12. The people enumerated around your ancestor in a census \*might\* be neighbors.
13. Loose papers are the ones with original signatures.
14. "Cemetery plot-mates": a phrase I made up but that will be catching on soon 😊

## Resources

### Resources referenced in webinar:

- *American Ancestors* by New England Historic Genealogical Society. <https://www.americanancestors.org/>
- Bingaman, Dawn. "Census Comparison Worksheet Revisited." *Ancestor Roundup*. 22 March 2018. <https://ancestorroundup.com/census-comparison-worksheet-revisited/>.
- Green, Shannon. "Two Probates and Three Richards: Who Was Richard Bedell of Hempstead, Queens County, New York?" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 107 (December 2019): 259-270.
- Kelley, Mary Ann. "CensusTools Spreadsheet Templates for Census Data." *CensusTools*. <https://www.censustools.com/>.
- *New York Genealogical & Biographical Society*. <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/>.

**Books for further study:**

- Anderson, Robert Charles. *Elements of Genealogical Analysis*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.
- Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013.
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*. 3rd ed. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2015.
- Morgan, George G. and Drew Smith. *Advanced Genealogy Research Techniques*. New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2014.
- Rising, Marsha Hoffman. *The Family Tree Problem Solver*. Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2011. Especially chap. 8.

**Legacy Family Tree Webinars:**

- Fonkert, J. H. “Genealogical Fingerprints: Merging and Separating Identities in Family History Research.”
- Koford, Rebecca. “Are You My Grandpa? Men of the Same Name.”
- Koford, Rebecca. “John Jacob Kramer: Case Study of Mistaken Identity among Revolutionary War Soldiers.”