



Genealogical Fingerprints: Merging and Separating Identities in Family History Research

Core genealogical problems involve *identity* and *relationship*. Genealogical research generally proceeds in three steps:

- 1) Firmly establish the existence of an individual in the past. The evidence for an individual's *existence* is usually direct -- for example, the person appears in a census or on a passenger manifest, registered for the draft, was named in a newspaper article, or was taken to court.
- 2) Ascertain the individual's unique identity through time, by either merging biographical fragments from different places or times into a single identity, or by separating identities of two individuals who are easily confounded because of similar names, ages or residences.
- 3) Link individuals together into families (siblings) or across generations (parent-child relationships).

The second and third steps often require proofs based on logical arguments tying together both direct and indirect evidence, drawn from information provided by a mix of informants with primary or secondary knowledge of events. Genealogists use both inductive and deductive reasoning to solve identity problems.

Inductive reasoning leads to probabilistic conclusions based on a series of observations. For example, if documents from 1790, 1800, 1810 and 1820 identify a man with the unusual name, Mumford Fawcner, in the same town, and what is known about these men does not rule out the possibility that they are different men, there is a good chance all the documents pertain to the same man.

Deductive reasoning is logically more certain. For example, the transitive property of equality dictates that, if $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$. In genealogy, if Individual A is the same man as Individual B, and B is the same man as Individual C, then A and C are the same man.

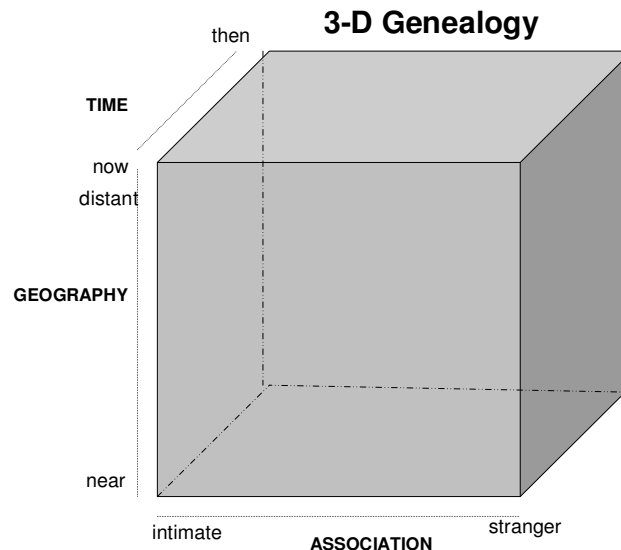
Kinds of Identity Problems

- **Merging identities across time and space.** The most common challenge is to prove that Johnny Appleseed in one time and place is the same as a man of the same name in another time and place. Censuses, city directories, and tax lists can be key pieces of evidence. (See Birch, below).
- **Merging fragmented identities.** Even when the same name, however unusual, appears over time in the same place, a researcher might not be certain if all refer to the same person. In these situations, it is especially important to pay attention to chronology and determine if the timing of events makes sense for a single person. It is also important to look for evidence that would prove two individuals were involved; it is equally important to eliminate alternative explanations as it is to prove our favored hypothesis. (See Sanborn, below).
- **Separating identities of two easily confounded individuals.** In this case, a researcher needs to use attributes other than name or age to differentiate between them. Occupation is often a key, but other personal attributes can also help. (See Jones, below).

Migration as a special problem. The person who lives her or his entire life, under the same name, in the same place, is usually not hard to follow (common names notwithstanding). When a research subject moves, the researcher has the challenge of proving that the Johnny Appleseed in one place is the same as the Johnny Appleseed in another place at another time. Several kinds of records might help.

- An obituary that summarizes a life.
- a biographical sketch in a county history.
- affidavits or letters in a file that remains open several years – for example, probate files or military pension records.

3D-Genealogy. Expanding research across three dimensions -- time, geography and associations -- increases odds of reaching a sound conclusion about identity and relationships.



Personal Attributes as Keys to Identity

In daily life, most people are adequately identified by name. Yet, they are commonly known by other attributes, as well. They can be picked out of a crowd by their facial features, their body shape, or even their voice. It's a bit the same way in genealogy. Ancestors had lives, which means they had other attributes that can be used to identify them. These include:

- Occupation or employment status
- Middle names, as well as titles like "Rev." or tags like "Jr." and "Sr."
- Property holdings – who did they buy property from or sell to? Does a deed possibly name the wife? Who did they inherit from? Who did they make bequests to?
- Citizenship status – were they citizens? When did they become citizens?
- Religion – what church did they belong to? Who else belonged to the same church?
- Physical descriptions – passenger arrival records, citizenship applications, passport applications and draft registration records may include physical descriptions that help match or differentiate identities.
- Wedding and funeral reports – who attended the wedding or funeral? Where did they come from?
- Court cases – who was on whose side in court cases?
- Handwriting – A consistent script may help match a person appearing in different places over time.

Because occupation is reported in so many kinds of records, it is one of the most useful attributes for matching individuals over time. The accompanying lecture illustrates with several examples.

- The Christian Gerloff, 24, who landed at Philadelphia on the Brig Louise in 1843 was a wheelwright; the Christian "Gatliff," 30, in Lee County, Iowa, in 1850 was a wagon-maker – likely the same man.
- Robert Tidball's occupation of shoemaker in the 1861 census of Bosanquet, Ontario, along with names and ages of his children, matches the family of cordwainer Robert Tudball of Cutcombe, as reconstructed from parish baptism records in Somerset, England.
- Fourteen year-old Bartholomew Lee was a railroad porter in Bristol, England, in 1851; he married Eleanor Price in 1857. Birth records of his children and occupation proved that he was the John Lee, 24, a porter, enumerated in 1861 in Melcombe Regis, Dorset.

Merging identity can be as simple as following a family from census to census by matching names, ages, and birthplaces. This can be more difficult when names are misunderstood or mangled by enumerators.

- Family structure – ages and birthplaces – strongly support matches across censuses. The birth dates and places of Falkner children in Coles County, Illinois, in 1880, are a solid match for "Falker" children in Boone County, Missouri, in 1870.
- Unusual given names make it possible to match the Faulkner children of Putnam County, Indiana, in 1860 with the Fortner children of Moultrie County, Illinois in 1850 – even though their parents were not present in 1860.

Merging Identity: Case Studies

Same Name, Conflicting Evidence – Katharyn Fawkner. A California death certificate for Katharyn Fawkner states that she was born 8 May 1883, the daughter of George S. Fawkner. The informant was Hubert Starr. Could Katharyn have been the 3-year old M. Kate, daughter of George S. Fawkner in the 1880 census of St. Paul, Minnesota?

1880 U.S. Census St. Paul, Ramsey Co., Minn.	1885 Minnesota Census St. Paul, Ramsey Co., Minn.	1895 Minnesota Census St. Paul, Ramsey Co., Minn.
Fawkner, G. S., 41 _____, Mary C., 29 _____, Jenny C., 13 _____, Farry B., 11 _____, M. Kate , 3	Fawkner, Geo. S., 46 _____, Mary C., 44 _____, Jenny C., 18 _____, F. B., 16 _____, Kate , 8	Fawkner, Geo. 50 _____, Mary C., 51 [Jennie, d. 1898] Mary C. Braden, 25 Kate , 17 Maggie, 16

The three censuses yield estimates of Kate's birth date from 1876 to 1877. The 1900 census stated that "Catherine" was born in 1879. Yet, the 1910 census implied a birth date about 1881-82. Two pieces of evidence confirm that the censuses and death certificate pertain to the same Katharyn.

- When she arrived at New York from France in 1932, Katharyn Fawkner carried passport no. 287,505. Issued in 1930, the passport stated that Katharyn was born 8 May 1833 – the same date on the death certificate.
- In a statement supporting her claimed date of birth, an affiant stated that Katharyn was the daughter of George S. Fawkner.

No found evidence suggests George Fawkner had children born after 1880. Between 1895 (where she was 18) and 1930, she trimmed six years off her age.

Same Name, Different Location – George N. Faulconer. Was George, 84, in Atchison County, Kansas, in 1880, the same man as George Falkner, indexed as 34, with wife Margaret, in Jessamine County,

Kentucky, in 1850? Yes, in affidavits in support of his War of 1812 pension application, Faulconer stated that he married Margaret Bourne in Jessamine County and lived there until 1851, when he moved west to Missouri, and eventually on to Kansas.

Variant Names, Different Locations – John C. Fawkner. A search for the Kentucky past of John C. Fawkner found several candidates with name variants in different **locales**.

- Between 1795 and 1800, Elijah Nuttal bequeathed 100 acres in **Gallatin County** to his daughter, Elizabeth *Faulkner*, the land to be selected by his son-in-law John *Folkner*.
- John C. Faulker married Patsy Nelson in 1806 in **Garrard County**.
- John C. Fawkner quit his claim to estate of Patsy's father in 1813 in **Garrard County**.
- The 1813 **Garrard County** tax list included a John Fawkner with 100 acres in Gallatin County.
- John C. Falkner married Ida Cozine in **Mercer County** in 1817.
- **Mercer County** tax lists included a John Fawkner with 98 acres in Mercer and 100 acres in **Gallatin County**.

Deduction leads to a conclusion that the same man appearing in four counties married three times.

Different name, same man – Hjalmar Petersen. People change names for all sorts of reasons. A Wisconsin birth registration recorded the 1 November 1894 birth of Hjalmar Peder Oldin Petersen to Ole Petersen and Carrie Nelson of West Superior. Earl Moore Franklin, b. 1 November 1894 in Superior, Wisconsin, registered for the draft in Spokane, Washington. Was he the same man? Yes, his mother had remarried to Perl Franklin. There's much more to this story.

Separating Identity Case Study: Two A. P. Overlands in Fergus Falls

The 1951 Fergus Falls obituary of Mrs. Mathea Overland described her as the “widow of the late A. P. Overland... the well known tailor in Fergus Falls.” Overland research led to confusing evidence:

- “A. P. Overland” took out final citizenship papers 26 November 1897.
- “Andrew Overland” took out final papers two weeks later, 7 December 1897.

Did the court grant duplicate papers to the same man? If not, who was the second man? A chain of evidence sorts out the identities of two men who were at first easily confounded.

- The witness on Andrew Overland's citizenship papers was “Anton P. Overland.” Two men.
- Andrew declared his intent for citizenship in Stearns County, Minnesota. A. P. Overland declared his intent in Nashville, Tennessee. Were they even related?
- The 1895 and 1900 censuses enumerated both men; Anton P. was born September 1844 and Andrew January 1846 (1900 Census) – close enough to be brothers?
- The 1920 Census found “Andrew P.” in Stearns County and “Anton” in Two Harbors, Lake County, Minnesota. Anton of Two Harbors was a photographer.
- Death certificates (two years apart, but both in Fergus Falls) gave birth dates matching the census-reported dates. Andreas' father's name was Peter Oversvea; Anton's was Peter Overland.
- Nels Oversvee immigrated as “Nils N. Svee” in 1907, saying he was going to meet his “Uncle Andreas P. Overland” in Minot, North Dakota.

Nels Oversvee was linked to both A. P. Overlands, suggesting Andreas and Anton were, in fact closely related. Norwegian parish records confirmed that they were brothers.

THREE MORE EXAMPLES OF IDENTITY SOLUTIONS FROM *NGSQ*

Many scholarly genealogical articles deal with problems of identity. The three described below are among the speaker's favorites. When this lecture was originally prepared, the authors gave permission for the speaker to use their articles as examples, but the speaker is solely responsible for the summaries presented below.

Birch, Nicki Peak, "Tracking Basil Williams of Maryland and Pennsylvania through Changing Residences and Multiple Marriages," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (March 2008).

Birch uses land and tax records to correct an earlier researcher's conclusion that Basil Williams, with wife Phebe in Frederick County, was a son of Basil Williams and wife Mary of Anne Arundel County, Maryland. She demonstrates that a single Basil Williams owned land in both counties, and subsequently migrated to western Pennsylvania, where he married a third time.

- Williams' transactions in Anne Arundel and Frederick involved slaves bequeathed to his second wife, Phebe, by her first husband, Edward Dorsey.
- A son of Edward Dorsey, together with Basil and Phebe Williams, sold land earlier acquired by Williams in Frederick.
- Basil William of Washington County, Pennsylvania, gave power of attorney for sale of land in Montgomery County, Maryland, that had been inherited by Phebe.

Jones, Thomas W., "Merging Identities Properly: Jonathan Tucker Demonstrates the Technique," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 88:2 (June 2000), 111-21.

Jones shows how a "same name, same person" assumption falls short of the genealogical proof standard. A Jonathan Tucker seemed a good match for Revolutionary War soldier from Kingston, New Hampshire, who served for the town of Weare (formerly Hailestown). However, a broader search made possible a chain of identity mergers that allowed Jones to show that Tucker of Cayuga was not Tucker of Kingston, but rather a different Jonathan Tucker from Hawke, New Hampshire.

- The Cayuga Tucker's pension file identified a wife, Abigail, and a son, Ebenezer.
- Lambert Cook's Rensselaer County, New York, will named daughter Abigail, her husband Jonathan Tucker, and a son-in-law, Henry Tucker, husband of Mindwell; Cook lived close to the Cayuga Jonathan Tucker.
- Abigail was born in 1761, making her close to the age Tucker claimed for her in his pension affidavit.
- Henry Tucker's gravestone states he was born 25 October 1769, within 10 days of the documented birth date of Henry Tucker of Hawke -- Jonathan's brother.

Sanborn, Melinde Lutz, "Zipporah in Her Own Right: An African in Early Boston," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 98:1 (March 2010), 15-30.

Six Massachusetts records from 1653 to 1705 provide information about one or more individuals named Zipporah (or close variants). The records give information consistent with there being a single woman born in the early 1640s, and present no chronological conflicts.

- A 1653 will made a bequest to Zipporah, free daughter of slaves Richard and Grace.
- A 1663 court case documented a still-born child of an African-American woman named Zipporah.
- The 1663 will of William Brenton made a bequest to "the negro Zipporah."
- A Zipporah using surnames Potter, Manne and Atkins ("formerly Zip Potter") bought and sold land from 1670 to 1699.
- Thomas Veakin married "Zipporah Arra" in 1693.
- An African-American woman known as "Zapporal" died in 1705.

Sources and Further Reading

For examples of how other researchers have solved identity problems, read research articles in your favorite genealogy magazine or journal. Examples used in this lecture have been presented in several articles by J. H. Fonkert.

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OVERLAND

"Two A. P. Overlands in Fergus Falls: Sorting Out Identities," *Minnesota Genealogist*, 39:2 (Summer 2008), 15-20.

TIDBALL

"Bubble and Squeak Genealogy: Making the Most of Your Leftovers," *British Connections*, 13:3 (2012), 37, 40-5.

JOHN/BARTHLOMEW LEE

"Tracing Irish-born Bartholomew Lee Back to Cork," *The Septs* 34:2 (September 2013), 59-62.

JOHN C. FAWKNER

"Finding a Man's Past through his Children: Four Wives of John C. Fawkner of Kentucky and Indiana," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 99 (September 2011), 165-84.

"Testing Family Lore: She Married a Distant Cousin in Virginia," *NGS Magazine*, 41:2 (April-June 2015), 24-9.

"Write the Story with the Evidence You have, but Keep Searching: Proving the Marriage of John Fawkner and Elizabeth Nuttal" *Minnesota Genealogist*, 45:2 (2014), 201.

EARL FRANKLIN MOORE

"Clara V. Moore and Carrie Peterson: Proving a Double Enumeration in the 1910 Census," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 96 (March 2008), 5-12.

"A Tale of Three Records: One Leads to Another," *Minnesota Genealogist*, 44:4 (Winter 2013), 30-1

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Also see "Genealogical finger prints: Making sure of identity," *NGS Magazine* 37:1 (2011), 53-57. This article includes brief presentation of several cases used in this lecture, including Kathryn Fawkner, Mumford Fawkner, and A. P Overland.