

What Happened to Uncle Walter?

Evidence Analysis and Correlation Uncover a Man's Dual Identities

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Genealogy researchers sometimes encounter a brick wall when a person they are researching seemingly disappears from records without a trace. Walter Johnson's story shows how collaboration, evidence correlation, and predictive research resolved one such case.

Walter Johnson, the son of William Henry Johnson and Martha Carter, was born about 28 January 1896 in Soldier, Kansas. After his parents' 1909 divorce, Walter moved with his mother and sisters to San Diego, California. He appeared in records there until early 1920, when he seemingly vanished. His sisters' children heard only vague mentions of him, and they wondered what had happened to their missing uncle.

Establish a Unique Identity

Thoroughly research and document the life and attributes of the person you're researching. Comparing age, birthplace, parents' birthplaces, occupation, and household members across records can identify consistency or conflicts in the data; suggest additional research strategies; and minimize the possibility of confusing the records of similarly named people.

- Determine the person's likely places of residence and compile a list of sources that might provide information on their identity, either directly or indirectly.
- Assess the credibility of each source and the information it contains.
- Develop specific research questions and compare related evidence from each record as shown in the examples below.

Research Question: Where and when was Walter Johnson born? *[selected examples]*

Source	Information Provided	Not Stated
Family Bible page	This reverse-image copy contains Walter's name, middle initial (B.), and birth date (28 Janu 1896). It names his likely parents and siblings. Handwriting suggests that it was written by Walter's mother.	Birthplace or relationships. Creation date.
1895 Kansas census	Parents' residence at Soldier before Walter's birth.	Relationships.
Newspaper birth notice	Father's name (Wm. Johnson); child's birthdate (27 Jan.), gender, and likely birthplace.	Child's name.
1900 Federal Census	Given name ("Walder"); age; birth month/year; birth state; family relationships; residence in 1900.	Birth date; Birth city.

- **Correlate Evidence:** Walter Johnson, the son of William Johnson and Martha Carter, was born 27 or 28 January 1896, probably in Soldier, Jackson County, Kansas.

Analyze Evidence

Compare similar information from records to identify patterns and differences. Tables and spreadsheets can be useful tools compare similar information from records.

Data Comparison Table: What was Walter Johnson's middle name?

Year	Name	Record Location	Source Type
1896	Walter B. Johnson	[Not stated]	Family Bible page
1900	Walder Johnson	Topeka, Shawnee, Kansas	1900 U.S. census
1909	Walter Johnson	Wabaunsee Co., Kansas	Parents' divorce record
1910	" "	San Diego, Cal.	1910 Federal census
1912	" "	" " "	1912 San Diego City Directory
1914	Walter H. Johnson	" " "	San Diego newspaper mention
1915	W. H. Johnson	" " "	" " " "
1920	Walter E. Johnson	" " "	1920 Federal census

- Walter Johnson's middle initial variously appears as B. (1896), H. (1914-15), and E. (1920). He had at least one middle name which does not appear in the records reviewed above. (See *Genealogy Standards Second ed.*, Standard 49, Unresolved evidence inconsistencies.)

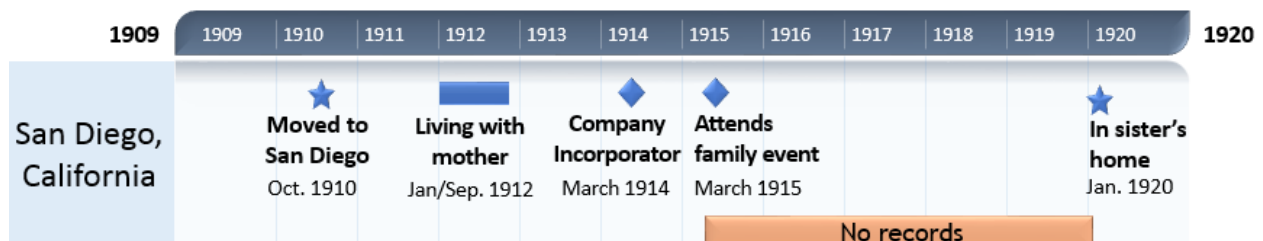
Document Record Gaps and Negative Findings

Sometimes, the person or family you're seeking isn't found in a source where you expect to find their record. Note their absence from the source and consider possible reasons.

Walter was in San Diego in May 1915 and January 1920, but his name was not found in World War I draft registrations there in 1917 and 1918. Reasons investigated for his absence included:

- He was already serving in the military, perhaps in the Navy at San Diego.
- He registered for the draft somewhere other than San Diego.
- He registered under a different name or failed to register.

A timeline of Walter's San Diego records highlights a lack of data between March 1915 and January 1920, suggesting that he may have lived elsewhere during those years.



Collaboration

Extended family members and other researchers who are working on the same line may provide valuable insight. As part of reasonably exhaustive research, family members who might have information about Walter were contacted. Nearly eighty years after Walter's disappearance, a niece who recalled seeing him at his mother's home in San Diego recounted a family story. Walter reportedly "came home on a ship from the Orient" about 1918 or 1919 and was arrested soon afterwards by "federal agents." No one in his family was known to have seen him again, and Walter was "never mentioned in their homes."

The niece who had once met him shared a photograph of Walter Johnson as a young man. Combined with family lore about his possible arrest, Walter's picture would prove to be a critical piece of evidence that revealed the mystery of his fate.

Research Strategies

Verify Family Lore

Walter's reported arrest suggested the need to search prison records. Online indexes of Federal prison records yielded no results, but digitized California prison records returned likely matches.

- "California, U.S., Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950," database and digital images, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8833/>); citing California Secretary of State, Department of Corrections, Correctional Institutions, Folsom and San Quentin State Prison Inmate Registers; California State Archives, Sacramento.

Mine Records for Details and Create Research Plans

Review all data in the records and consider what new searches it suggests, then create related research questions and plans. Folsom Prison Register entries gave Walter's dates of incarceration and revealed his previously unknown aliases and places of residence.

New Evidence	Sources to be Searched
Photograph	Compare to known photos for similarities, differences, likely date.
Walter's alias	Newspapers, prison/court records, census, directory, WWI draft, ...
County sent from	Census, directory, newspapers, tax records, voter rolls, ...
Crime	Additional prison records, newspaper articles, arrest records, ...

Research the Institution

When researching inmates of an institution (prison, medical, educational, military, etc.), determine what institutional records exist, where the records are held, and how to obtain them. Walter was incarcerated at California's Folsom Prison. Researching the records created there identified a series of Inmate Case Files which are now held at the California State Archives at Sacramento. A search request to the Archives produced Walter's case file. It contained a wealth of information about his places of residence, crimes, former incarcerations, aliases, occupation, and family members.

- California Secretary of State, Correction Agencies Records, Folsom State Prison Records (1881-1942), Inmate Case Files; California State Archives, Sacramento. For a description of these records, see: California State Archives, *Minerva Online Catalog* (<http://gencat.sos.ca.gov/minerva/permalink-d.html?key=1847>).

Thoroughly Investigate Alternate Names

When an alias is identified, determine when and where it was likely used and develop a research plan to locate related records.

- Consider searching for related initials and nicknames. For example, Edward could appear as Ed, Eddy, Eddie, or Ward.
- If relevant, re-search sources that were previously checked for an expected name without success. Walter's name was not found in World War I Draft Registration Cards, but searching that source for his alias Edward Wilson identified two relevant records.
- Consider the possibility that an alias may reflect family or other connections. Walter may have chosen the surname Wilson because he was "Will's son" (the son of "Will" Johnson).

Correlate Documentary and Photographic Evidence

Walter's personal data and photograph were compared to physical, social, and photographic evidence in his incarceration records to confirm his identity. When comparing photographs, note any physical features such as scars that can help to identify a person over time, and document any changes in appearance that might help determine when photographs were taken.

Seek Supporting Evidence

Newspaper research based on clues in Walter's prison records verified and expanded on known information about his crimes and revealed intriguing details about his life. Use dates and places of crimes, arrests, and/or trials mentioned in newspapers or other records to locate related records in courthouses, archives, penitentiaries, and police records. Researching other people who were involved in the same events may provide more information on the person you're seeking.

Predictive Research

When someone disappears from records, their past behavior may be a useful predictor of their next move. Consider all aspects of a person's life, including their past and potential military service, religious affiliation, family birthplaces, ties to a community, personal or family health, etc. It's important to place them in the context of the time and place in which they lived and consider possible options based on what was happening in the area (e.g., war, crop failure, economic boom, etc.).

Considering the following aspects of Walter's life helped to locate his next record after 1925.

- Personal and societal circumstances.
- Previous occupations and skills.
- Previous places of residence.
- Relationships with and residences of family members and associates.

Bibliography

- Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards, 2nd ed.* Revised. Nashville, Tn.: Ancestry, 2021.

Articles

The following case studies deal with merging a person's multiple names into a single identity.

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- Jones, Thomas W. "Misleading Records Debunked: The Surprising Case of George Wellington Edison Jr." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 96 (June 2012): 153–56.
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Prison Records

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 - Arons, Ron. "Researching Criminal Records." 28 April 2017.
 - Russell, Judy. "Doing Time – Prison Records as Genealogy Resources." 8 April 2022.
- *Cyndi's List* (www.cyndislist.com/timelines).

Timelines

- Taplin, Cari. "Using Timelines and Tables to Analyze Your Research." 22 February 2019. *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. <https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar-library/>.
- Timelines in this presentation were created with Office Timeline (www.officetimeline.com/), a PowerPoint add-in tool. For information about timelines and tools in genealogy, see *Cyndi's List* (www.cyndislist.com/timelines).