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SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

PastFinder

Infected trees

10 common errors that plague online family trees

By Allin Kingsbury

You may be pleased to learn that you have an excellent chance of finding your ancestors in an online family tree. The easier places to look are among sites such RootsWeb.ancestry.com, Ancestry.com, and OneGreatFamily.com.

I was surprised that when I looked for descendants of my ancestors, I was able to find more than 90% of those born during the late 1800s. My family has lived in the United States and had ancestors from the British Isles or from Germany. I have traced descendants of my ancestors who went to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the former British Empire.

The descendants outside the United States are slightly less likely to be in the online family trees, but the likelihood of finding mine listed also appears to be higher than 90%.

Although these conclusions are not scientific, many families have individuals doing research, collecting information, and contributing to trees. To ignore this work, even though it may have many errors, is somewhat like reinventing the wheel.

However, cutting and pasting information from these trees into your family tree without eliminating the errors is bad practice that risks compounding the problems. Misinformation, repeated often, attracts believers. Some family historians seeing many family trees with the same errors conclude that the details must be accurate because they are consistent.

To avoid errors found in family trees, you should verify the data. An online family tree can be a finding

tool, but it is not a primary source. Those few trees listing primary sources are in the minority. These trees are good secondary sources, and though they point to primary sources, you should check the primary sources to verify the information.



Data from the tree may provide clues as to the source even when no sources are cited. For example, if only the year appears for birth or death dates, the information may have come from a census or grave marker. If the birth place is listed only as a state or country, the source could be a census.

It is good practice to look for other trees containing the same individual, since different trees may contain research on different family members. Such trees are likely to be independent

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Family trees *(continued)*

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and differ in quality and amount of data. Trees also differ in scope or purpose. Trees containing descendants of an immigrant or early ancestor might contain the ancestor's descendants. Some of these trees follow only descendants with the same surname. An ancestry tree follows the pedigree of an individual. Some contain the complete immediate family of some ancestors, but some list only those children

who are direct ancestors or direct descendants.

Some trees are posted on sites where anyone can add or correct information. These trees are an alternative to the practice of posting queries to get information. The information may be sketchy but useful.

If the information from an online family tree cannot be verified or disproven but you want to include the information in your database, be sure to note what steps you took

to verify the information. Later you may be able to search for more information. Research status can be color coded in some software; for example, you could color-code those names yellow to indicate caution about accepting the data.

Many trees published on the Internet now include photos and images of documents. They also may have stories, obituaries, and notes about individuals. Usually you can copy and paste these attachments into your data

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Sue Johnston: Coming soon to a source citation near you

“If you’re not documenting, you aren’t doing research.” That’s the sentiment of Susan Goss Johnston, who will share her documentation and research skills with the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group on March 12.

Without documenting, “your research has no credibility, and you can’t revisit your research to determine how valid your conclusions were.”

From the beginning of her genealogy days, Johnston liked to know where information came from. Her early work was at the National Archives, the Library of



When Susan Goss Johnston’s grandkids see the camera, they know it’s Grandma.

Congress, and the Maryland Historical Society — repositories with a lot to cite. Now that she’s an experienced researcher and teacher, she sees that her early notebooks weren’t necessarily as comprehensive as she would like, but “at least I knew where things came from.”

She engages in research on a professional level primarily because “it’s important to set things right.” She also finds research intriguing — “the fact that they exist, under-

standing them, finding them, correlating them — the records themselves are fascinating.”

Sometimes people attempt to tie themselves to someone famous, at the expense of the information. “A lot gets lost when people start making a mess of reality,” she says. “The reality is often more interesting than what they end up fabricating.”

Her emphasis is on getting to know the people she is researching. Thus she is always trying to “make it better,” and “correct what’s wrong in the published accounts.” As have many others, she has found that some published accounts are inaccurate.

Building a database by just downloading and adding names isn’t what the research should be about. “You should at least know the name of every person who goes into your database.”

“They were real people who don’t go into a history book, but you can learn about them and make them three-dimensional. People don’t know they can do this.” When she finds she’s on the wrong track genealogy, “At least if I’ve documented everything, I can go back and find where I went wrong.”

And she has found much, including these: An ancestor hanged in Salem, Massachusetts, as a witch; an ancestor who lost most of her children; and a line with a common name with ties to famous families. Even if everything in the line is all messed up, it’s a lot of fun trying to straighten it out.” 

Family trees *(continued)*

(Continued from page 2)

collection. Consider copyright laws before publishing them, however. Even though an image or story is published on the Internet, the author retains the copyright. Obtain written permission before using another author's material.

Family trees are not all equal. This is especially obvious when one looks at children in a family. Some authors make an effort to include all children, while others list only direct ancestors. The same problem occurs with multiple spouses and stepchildren.

I found a family tree that is merely a list of names of related individuals, with no marriages and no linkage of children to parents. I wondered, why publish such a tree? The methods and procedures for compiling and publishing trees affect the problems that users encounter. Some trees stop at arbitrary boundaries, with no explanation. Some trees have accurate information that is contaminated with errors in spelling, dates, places, or syntax.

Listed here are ten common problems with family trees. If they exist in a family tree you are studying, be alert and avoid using bad data.

Problem 1: Missing dates and places for birth, marriage, or death

Many family trees suffer from lack of research. Many individuals are missing dates and places for birth, marriage, or death. It is obvious that easily available records, such as the census and vital records, were not consulted. Don't assume that a missing record is unavailable or cannot be found. With searchable data on sites like RootsWeb, Ancestry, FamilySearch, and FindaGrave, you may be able to locate data for those born in the 19th and 20th centuries. You may also find the missing data in another family tree.

Problem 2: Mis-connected families

I found a tree that contained many of my relatives, and proceeded to navigate through the tree, checking data as

I went. However, I suddenly stopped when I came to an individual born in the late 1800s whose children were born in the 1600s. This syntax error is easily caught by using a possible-errors feature to search for such errors in a genealogy database.

Problem 3: Disguised duplicates

Occasionally, an extra child or extra spouse is added to a family. This appears to be

caused by carelessness. A person may be listed differently in the records by the given name in one record and by the middle name in another. In one family tree, a woman married, had three children, divorced, and remarried. Three children were listed for the second marriage with the surname of the second husband, but the given names of the two sets of children were the same. A closer look indicated that they were the mother's children from the first marriage and were adopted by the stepfather. This was not obvious from the data in the tree because no birthdates were provided for the children.

Problem 4: Misspelled names of individuals

Some individuals spell very creatively. Don't enter incorrect spellings for places and surnames; rather, check an atlas or gazetteer.

Given names and surnames may

have been spelled various ways by the individual and others. Explain variations in spelling with comments in the Notes field, and use [brackets] to indicate that you have changed the spelling.

Problem 5: Missing spouse

If an individual in a family tree has no spouse listed, it does not necessarily mean that the person was never married. You may

be able to locate a spouse by using searchable census records, for example.

Some spouses missing from trees are from a second marriage. The spouse sometimes can be found by looking at later census, voter registration, and marriage records, as well as directories and obituaries.

Problem 6: Missing children

When no children are listed for a couple, it is possible that the compiler did not include them even though they existed. When

only one child is listed, it's possible that only the direct-line names from a pedigree chart were included. In one case, only children listed in the 1910 U.S. Census were included, because later census records were not consulted. Similarly, children who were born and died between censuses were missing.

Problem 7: Syntax errors

Genealogy database software allows ready searches for syntax errors such as children born before the parents' marriage or after

a parent's death, a marriage after a death date or before the individual's birth, children born less than 9 months apart, marriage at too young an age, and more.

(Continued on page 4)

Family trees *(continued)*

(Continued from page 3)

Such errors could indicate an error, or they could indicate missing information. For example, a child born several years before the parents' marriage could be from a previous marriage. As in the case of my great-grandparents, the oldest child was adopted when her parents died. She was born before my great-grandparents were married, and no adoption records have been found. Fortunately, many in the family knew that Aunt Ida was adopted.

Problem 8:
Children listed with the wrong parent

When there is a divorce or the death of a spouse, followed by a second marriage, a child may be linked to the previous marriage, especially if the source is a census.

Problem 9:
Indexing errors

Indexing is the process of extracting data from handwritten records so that a search engine can find a name and display a digitized image of the record. Reading old handwriting is not easy. An error in reading a date or a name can make a record difficult to find using a search engine. The mind can detect patterns in a family and recognize that the family is the one we want much more efficiently than a search.

Indexing errors not only cause data not to be found, but they also can provide misinformation that can get into the database. I was looking for the surname *Ham*, but the family had been indexed with the surname changed to *Hanl*. I looked at the image and immediately recognized the handwritten name as *Ham*. The person who indexed the name did not.

I recommend following these steps when critical data cannot be found using a search engine:

- Search for each family member in case the error is in indexing the given name.
- Try a first-name-only search in case there is an indexing error in the surname.
- Try a manual search, family by family, for the town or township where the family resided.

Searching is very difficult if the surname is common. It is also more difficult if you are searching a heavily populated area such as New York City. Persistence helps bring success.

Problem 10:
Unreliable sources

I have a letter saying that my second-great-grandparents had a daughter who died at sea while

coming to America. I also have several primary sources stating that both parents were born in Pennsylvania. The letter is probably based on a family tradition that was passed on through generations. It may be based on an actual event, but somehow got attached to the wrong family.

By looking for information, you may find sufficient evidence to prove the event true or false. If there is not enough evidence to decide, you can either ignore the event or you can mention the event and state that there is no evidence to prove that the event happened. A timeline can show that someone who claimed to be a witness was present when the event is said to have happened and was old enough to be a credible witness.

If no account was written, the lore account becomes less credible as time passes. Without primary sources, you have no way to be sure a story is true. As for my story, I was able to prove that the family came to America long before my second-great-grandparents were born. It is good practice to find evidence for each genealogical fact in your family tree.

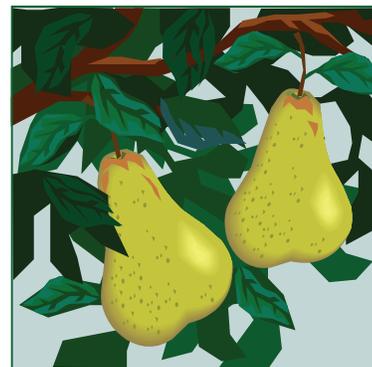
The skeptic

Some family historians ignore family trees altogether because the trees lack source citations. I believe that rejection of the tree is a mistake, because you can save a lot of time by checking the data in the tree rather than searching for information as though the tree did not exist.

In almost all cases the individuals in the family tree were real. The problems are in the details. If you can remain skeptical until the details are verified or corrected, your database remains good. If the information in a tree is wrong, you can expand the search until you find the record needed to fix the data.

A wise man once said, "To lead a happy life, accept the good in the world and reject the bad." This adage seems to work when you find a family tree that contains some of your family.

Meanwhile, I remain convinced that the family tree is a great finding tool for the family historian. 



Apples on your pear tree? Use the data to solve the problems.



Ask the doctor Plus signs, PDF links redux

Q Do you know what the plus (+) signs mean when they show up in Modified Register Reports in PAF 5 beside certain individuals, but not all individuals? ?

Individuals with a plus sign preceding their name have entries containing their descendency in the book on following pages. Those without plus signs have no further information in the book.

Q Regarding the information from *Past-Finder*, February 2011, p. 3, it is possible to link a PDF file to a PAF database record, as documented on the FamilySearch help site. Document files (.pdf, .doc, .wpd,

etc.) can be linked to a PAF record in the Edit Individual screen: select Multimedia, Add, Sound/Video, Files of Type (all), then Browse to the file and link to it.

Thank you for this creative workaround. The caution is that because the document would be attached only as multimedia and not attached to a source, it might be unnoticed in this unexpected place. Other users might never think to look for it, and the originator might forget it's there. The attachment also appears to be limited to one item, which shows up as a path. If you use this approach, use a Note indicating that the file exists and explaining how to find it.

Free access to Ancestry.com returns to Family History Centers

Rejoicing was heard around the world when the FamilySearch folks announced at the recent Roots-Tech Conference that an agreement had been reached to allow free access to the subscription-based repository of Ancestry.com. The announcement suggested that a limited edition of Ancestry would be available, but so far it appears that the Family History Center version has few if any limitations.

The link to the popular search site is made through the Family History Center Portal, which has been revamped to contain links to all of the family history services available through the LDS Family History Department except new.familysearch.org.

Presumably, when new.familysearch.org is released to the general public, it too will be added to this new home page. Consequently, the new home page targeted for Family History Centers (FHCs) can be a convenient way to gain access to virtually all of the LDS-sponsored services from a single web site. Keep in mind that the portal to the fee-based sites available for free at FHCs can only be used at a Family History Center.

The address for the FHC home page is fhc.familysearch.org. In late February, FHC computers were modified to automatically boot up to this site, making it easy to find. Currently the home page links to nine services:

- Premium Subscriptions
- FamilySearch

- FamilySearch Indexing
- FamilySearch Microfilm Ordering
- Online Research Courses
- Family Tech
- FamilySearch Research Wiki
- FamilySearch Forums
- FamilySearch Help Center

All links are available to the general public except the Premium Subscriptions and the Microfilm Ordering system. Premium Subscriptions will only work at a FHC, where patrons can access Ancestry.com and other fee-based sites.

The Microfilm Ordering system is the link for the beta-testing version of a new service that will allow patrons to use the Internet to order microfilm or microfiche from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, to be delivered to a FHC of the patron's choice. FHC's in the United States have been notified that this new service will be implemented sometime in the next few months. It no longer will be necessary to order films in person at a FHC. Payment will be by credit card; the patron will be notified by email when the films have been shipped.

If it has been awhile since you have used Ancestry.com, you will discover that their search engine has been upgraded with a different look-and-feel. Now that the service is available for free, the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group will host a training session at a meeting soon.

Who Do You Think You Are, anyway?

The do-it-yourself version

By Janet Brigham Rands

Television network NBC launched a new series last year showing celebrities discovering their ancestors. Viewers saw Matthew Broderick discover his Civil War ancestor, and traveled with his wife Sarah Jessica Parker on the trail of her ancestor accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts.

And don't forget Brook Shields discovering her aristocratic forebears, and Emmitt Smith learning where in Africa his ancestors were enslaved. And perhaps most searing of all, Lisa Kudrow standing where her ancestors were brutalized by Nazis.

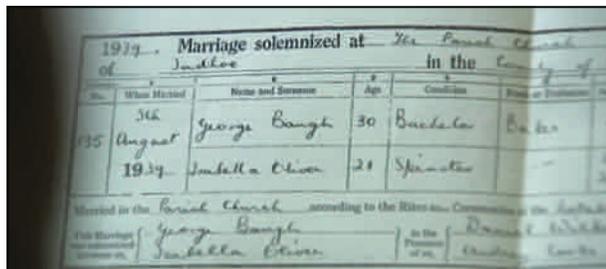
It makes for gripping television, but is it the stuff of family history as we know it? Does it happen to the rest of us? Or to paraphrase King Arthur in *Camelot*, What do the noncelebrity folk do?

We noncelebrity folk, as it turns out, have many of the same resources that the program *Who Do You Think You Are?* has. We might have a somewhat harder time accessing historians who have just the right knowledge, and it's unlikely that if we go to an archive, it will be empty and we'll have our own dedicated archivist. Also, we would have to wear gloves.

Even so, the recent *WDYTYA* episode featuring actress Kim Cattrall searching for her grandfather gave clues about how we *can* do it ourselves. She accessed records we can access, even without a professional researcher.

To recap: Ms. Cattrall's grandfather abandoned his young family, a wife and three daughters, in 1938

in Liverpool, England. Neither his parents nor siblings knew where he went; they then had little contact with Cattrall's mother and sisters, leaving them in poverty. The family had but one dim photograph of him, peering through a window.



Anyone can order records like these from the British General Register Office.

Cattrall tracked down the grandfather's sisters and hired a researcher to find records of Cattrall's grandfather. At this point, the researcher sends her a document that do-it-yourself (DIY) genealogists recognize: a British civil registration record. Veterans of our group's classes on British civil registration know that the records are indexed at FreeBMD.co.uk, and that copies of the records can be ordered at www.gro.gov.uk (the General Register Office).

The British civil registration marriage record indicated that the grandfather had married again in 1939. Since he evidently had not divorced his earlier wife, this was bigamy, a crime (thought not that uncommon) under British law.

The program did not explain in detail how one would know that the man marrying the second wife was the same who had married the first wife. A divorce was unlikely, but that could be verified.

Cattrall then tracked down the family of the second wife, inquiring at a pub (an odd choice, perhaps) and using a telephone book. We could skip the pub inquiry and go directly to the telephone book. In a town several hours from Liverpool, Cattrall found a niece and sister-in-law of her grandfather, from the second marriage.

The county records office—accessible by mail, telephone, email, or fax—pulled voter and parish records showing where the second family lived, and what children were born. Evidently a child was born earlier in

Manchester, England, but was not documented in the program.

Alternatively, our homegrown DIY team found index references to the children in less than five minutes of searching at FreeBMD.

The grandfather suddenly moved his second family to Australia, where he later died; however, no proof of the death was presented, and we found no death records readily available from the National Library of Australia, Ancestry.com, or WorldVitalRecords.com. An alternative approach could involve a collateral search of the grandfather's descendants.

The NBC Web site has a video of Cattrall learning that her grandfather was a stowaway to New York in 1935 under an assumed name. The source is not explained.

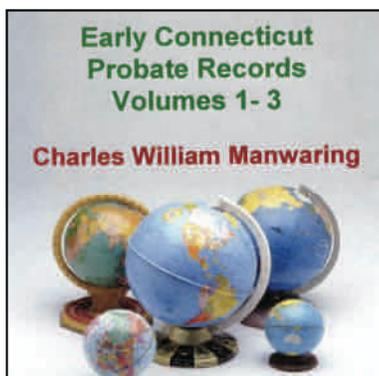
In sum: If we were combining NBC and the DIY Network for genealogy, we'd do more of the work ourselves, and we'd document every inch of it. 

How I Found It: The answers in probate records

By Richard Rands

A few years ago I made a discovery that turned out to be a surprise and led to a significant revision of one of my ancestral lines.

My direct-line maternal ancestry (Randall) comes through a delightful seaport town on the coast of Connecticut, Stonington. It is an historical area that played a minor role in the Revolutionary War, and has been studied both historically and genealogically.



This CD-ROM clarified the mix-up of the two Mary Randalls.

In 1900, a large volume, a history of Stonington, Connecticut, was published by Richard Wheeler, who at that time was a member of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, and one of the vice-presidents of the Connecticut Historical Society. A significant portion of the volume contains genealogical details for virtually every family that had lived in Stonington, covering the period from its founding to 1900. The book has been the source for the Randall family genealogy for more than 100 years.

The author claimed to have used original sources for his information. The community was closely knit, with hundreds of intermarriages among the families. About fifteen years ago I decided to pains-

takingly enter the entire 500 pages of genealogy into a computer database. I knew this would help me discover many new family links, would help me detect obvious errors, and would significantly improve my skill with PAF.

During this process, I flagged a few inconsistencies in the data, so that I could come back to them later. One such inconsistency in the Randall family involved the marriages of two women both named Mary Randall. The first Mary was born in 1698 and was the daughter of John Randall, the second generation of Randalls in America. She was listed as having married a Stephen Wilcox. On the face of it, there was no reason to question this fact, except that in the section covering the Wilcox genealogy, no corresponding Stephen married a Mary Randall.

The second Mary, born in 1700, married a Caleb Pendleton, Jr. She was the daughter of Mathew Randall, a younger brother of the John whose daughter was the first Mary Randall. In the Pendleton genealogy, no corresponding Caleb was listing as marrying a Mary Randall. At the time when I noted these two problems, my thought was that the author had overlooked Stephen Wilcox and Caleb Pendleton, Jr., in their respective genealogies; I would track them down.

Some years later, using some unexpected Christmas money, I purchased a copy of the CD *Early Connecticut Probate Records, Volume 1-3*, a recent digital version of three bound volumes compiled by Charles William Manwaring and published by Heritage Books. The volumes cover 1635 to 1750 and are indexed.

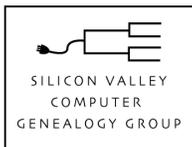
I looked up records that corre-

sponded to names in my Stonington database. When I came to the will of Caleb Pendleton, Jr., and the subsequent will for his wife, Mary, I was dumbfounded to discover that Caleb's wife, Mary, was not the daughter of Mathew Randall, but rather was the daughter of his older brother, John Randall. Correspondingly, the will of Stephen Wilcox showed that he had married the daughter of the younger brother, Mathew Randall.

I wrote a letter to the Connecticut Historical Society, which eventually wrote back informing me that I was not the first to discover the error, and indicated that my source documentation had been filed away in their archives. That was scant satisfaction once I realized that all the descendants of Mary Randall, daughter of John Randall, would have followed their ancestors through the Wilcox line, when they should have followed the Pendleton line, and vice versa for the Pendleton descendants.

What a poignant example of the importance of looking for primary source documents. It was a reminder that even the best genealogists can make mistakes. 

Discovering a record or document that solves a difficult genealogy problem is an exhilarating experience, and often leads to a flurry of new discoveries. We hope that this recurring column will recount the stories of interesting discoveries that illustrate the value of persistence in searching overlooked record collections to resolve challenging issues. To contribute your own challenges and findings, describe them in an email to: rrands@earthlink.net.



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Electronic contribution of articles is welcome. The editors reserve the right to accept, reject, and edit articles.

Upcoming SVC GG meetings, events

The group meets monthly except December, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 a.m. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right).

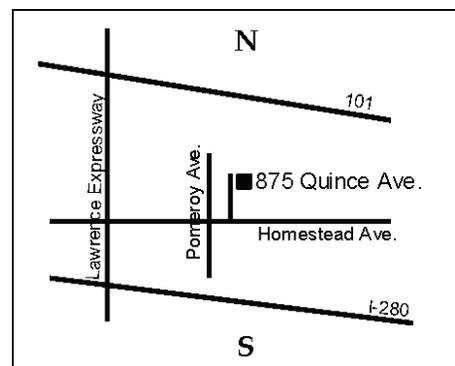
See the Meetings section of our Web site (www.svcgg.org) for any last-minute changes in the class lineup each month.

Classes for 12 March 2011

- The science and art of source citation (Susan G. Johnston)
- U. S. land records (update on changes in Web access)
- Reunion for the Mac
- Getting Started with Reunion
- Useful features of RootsMagic
- PAF and PCs for beginners – Q & A

Classes for 9 April 2011

- Brick walls and dead ends
- Data storage and back-ups,
- Beginning genealogy – Q & A
- Citing sources with Roots-Magic
- Reunion for the Mac 



See www.svcgg.org/directions.html

About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVC GG is the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, a nonprofit group of some 600 genealogy enthusiasts. The group is based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California, but members live all over the world.

PastFinder is the official publication of the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group. Published monthly except December, *Past-Finder* is distributed at meetings to

members in attendance and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter by e-mail containing a download link.

SVC GG offers research tools and materials through its Web site, www.svcgg.org.

Membership dues are US\$15 per household per year, US\$20 for Canada, and US\$25 for other international locations. 