

DECODING THE DASH

BUILDING THE STORIES OF THEIR LIVES

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Every person has a birth date and a death date; when they appear on a grave marker, these dates are usually separated by a dash. Life happens in that dash. That is where we will find the details that will interest us, and we will see the context that helps us to understand more about a person's life. Our goal as family historians should be to decode that dash.

To do that, we need to look beyond the obvious. The bare information found on a pedigree chart or in genealogical software should be just the starting point. We need to put flesh on the bones, so to speak – we need to be able to tell our families what their ancestors did in that dash. We need to go beyond the standard genealogical sources.

This session includes four examples of decoding the dash:

Josh Wilson. Why did he go to Edmonton, who did he go with, and when? The search for clues includes newspapers as well as genealogical sources such as border entry records. It also delves into business history, an element that many family historians might ignore, but is often essential to our research. (Consider that our ancestors needed economic opportunities to survive.) An additional point: Allow yourself to be distracted from time to time. It can be fun.

Maxine Carr / Bernice Strang. Were there two women, or one, using two names? The answer was found by analyzing information from several sources, including the usual genealogical ones as well as newspapers, court records, geographic clues and a little bit of common sense. An additional point: Do not be satisfied with what seems to be a simple answer; listen to the little voice that expresses skepticism.

Maria Louisa Ferguson. Sometimes, you will not be able to start your research using genealogical sources. Newspapers have the background that you need; once you have checked them, then everything else will fall into place. An additional point: Always look at the context. A female in business in the Klondike during the gold rush? How cool is that?

Leslie Maurer. After adding information to the family tree, a quick search in newspapers makes the story much more interesting! An additional point: Don't ask questions if you can't handle the truth!

What do all four of these examples have in common? Newspapers. There is great value in making newspapers an essential ingredient in your research strategy.

Newspapers provide information available in no other source. They might provide context to help you place your ancestors within the history of a region or of an era, and could hold the details that will help you gain a better understanding of your ancestors. Newspapers could fill in gaps or correct errors in official records, confirm details, provide information available from no other source, or simply add color and personality to family histories.

Genealogical research is much like journalism: We collect information from a variety of sources, then put it into a format so it all makes sense to others. Every pitfall in journalism – missing the point, leaping to assumptions, failing to tell a story objectively – can also apply to genealogical research.

Digitization projects have made old newspapers more accessible than ever before. We do not have to go to a library and look at microfilmed newspapers, searching every column for items of interest. We can simply use the search functions on newspaper websites.

A newspaper might contain information about births, deaths and marriages in your family – but look beyond the basics. A newspaper could have references to land transactions, business openings and new jobs. It could include stories on school graduations and university degrees, as well as news from local churches. It might have lists of people compiled for a wide variety of reasons, including school graduations and charity fundraising.

All of these things are key to genealogical research – and decoding the dash. Try to ensure that your work covers the five Ws:

- **Who.** Who were your ancestors? Give details of their lives. Who did they deal with? Which non-relatives had an influence on your family? A newspaper can help you to find out.

- **What.** What did they do? What were the factors you should consider as you do research? Check the newspaper for trends, major developments in the community, and so on.

- **When.** You should determine the key dates in your family history, and that includes noting which events were important in the day-to-day lives of your ancestors. The newspaper will help you track which events might have had the greatest impact on your ancestors.

- **Where.** Geography is vital to genealogical research. It can be difficult today to understand the interaction of communities a few generations ago – but newspapers published at the time might have answers for you. They might include references to the development of roads, railroads and shipping routes, as examples.

- **Why.** Try to determine the reasons why your family members did what they did. (Be careful that you do not make too many assumptions here – and do not be discouraged if you have trouble answering the “why” questions. Newspapers often miss those answers, too.)

One website will probably not fill all of your newspaper needs! Different sites have different newspapers, so determine your areas of interest and the time frame, then look for the names of the newspapers published in that community.

Are they on any of the major websites? If not, have they been digitized in local projects? If they are not on the internet, you might need to look for microfilmed copies, or even bound volumes in a library.

Key newspaper sites include:

Newspapers.com

Newspaperarchive.com

Genealogybank.com

Elephind.com

Chronicling America (check the newspaper directory as well)

Fultonsearch.org (47 million pages from New York State, courtesy Tom Tryniski)

Trove newspapers (Australian newspapers)

British Newspaper Archive

Also check websites of local universities, colleges and public libraries

To find titles:

CanGenealogy.com (for Canadian titles, courtesy Dave Obee)

The Ancestor Hunt newspapers (courtesy Kenneth Marks)

Some basic strategies:

Identify sources. Check them. Think of more sources. Check them. Fill in the gaps. Toss names into search boxes; see what happens. Stay skeptical. Stay curious. Don't assume anything. Keep an open mind. Check more sources. Don't believe everything you read; question everything, and when other sources contradict the first ones, check the discrepancy rather than simply disregarding it.

To produce meaningful, accurate research, you need to understand local geography and history. Your ancestors were affected by local events, after all – they were not living in isolation. If you draw your information from only the usual genealogical sources – church registers, census returns, civil registration and so on – you will be missing much of the color of your ancestors' lives. You will also fail to understand and appreciate what they went through.

The usual sources don't tell of major events in a community. They don't record that a factory has closed, that the farms have been hit by drought, or that an invasion has taken place. They won't help you to understand the many forces that had an impact on the history of your family. Your ancestors might have made life-changing decisions based on what was happening around them, and the official records won't tell you about those events.

So how do we turn our research into rewarding, informative histories? How do we put the lives of our ancestors into context? Start with geography. Get current and old maps of the areas you are researching, because these will teach you about the places where your ancestors lived. Look at photographs, old and new; Google the name of the community and see what pops up.

Information on external forces, such as events in a community, will give you context. That places your family into the bigger picture. It is easier to understand the lives of ancestors

when you know about their communities, and the changes taking place in the world at the time they lived. Context is looking out from the family, at the influences that affected it. Context will often help us determine why our ancestors might have made the decisions they made.

Look into local history books for information on a community such as: What kinds of crops were grown there? What was the climate? What was the environment like? What was the quality of the water supply? What was the crime rate? Always read the pages at the front of a local history book – they provide general information about the community. And check for family members, always bearing in mind that the information provided by some of your family members might be, to be kind, flawed.

Try to date photographs to the best of your ability. Use ones with known dates as a starting point to narrow down the date range for others. Use external sources – anything from local archives to newspapers to Wikipedia – as needed.

Be aware of name variations, in both spelling and pronunciation. Your ancestors might not have been literate, or might have had a heavy accent. Beyond that, the way we pronounce words can vary by region. Be flexible, and be curious.

To help you find more information:

Have you checked all of these sources?

- Immigration documents
- Local histories
- Newspapers
- Cemeteries and probate records
- Military records and diaries
- Directories and voters lists
- Fraternal organization records
- School records

Beware!

- Indexes are not source documents
- Spellings may vary
- Assumptions can waste years
- There are many possibilities to check and consider
- Quick answers can lead you astray
- It's not all on the Internet
- Not everything on the Internet has been indexed properly
- A lot has not been microfilmed
- Your records might have been misfiled in an archive somewhere

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