TOOLS of the Trade

Understanding the Lingo: Parts 1 and 2

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Part 1: A Tool for Solving Genealogical Problems

When my husband first began texting, our children said they needed a Rosetta Stone to translate what he typed and sent. The problem was three-fold: first, he didn't know the standard abbreviations that experienced texters used; second, he made up his own abbreviations; and third, his big thumbs would hit the wrong keys. It took me a while to learn that LOL means laugh out loud, MT means empty, N means no, and NMP means not my problem. The list of abbreviations is almost endless. It's a new language and if you don't read text, you might not understand the message. The same is true of old historical documents; if we don't understand what their abbreviations meant or how words were used, we won't understand the messages our ancestors are sending us.

Language is constantly changing and, when dealing with language from another time period, there are always problems with semantics. Understanding the language can shed a whole new light on solving a genealogical brick wall. The four criteria used to identify individuals in time—name, date, place, and relationships—all have their own language anomalies.

Nicknames

A diminutive, or "nickname," is a shortened or substituted version of a proper name. Some make sense while some do not and if you are not familiar with nicknames you might not recognize individuals of different names as the same person. For example: Bell for Isabell, Becca for Rebecca, Cass for Cassandra, Alex for Alexander, and Bart for Bartholomew make sense. Molly for Emily, Polly or Molly for Mary, Patsy or Patty for Martha, Nancy for Ann, Agnes for Nancy, Willis for Willoughby, Kit for Christopher, Nab for Abel, Tad for Thaddeus, and Ted for Edward may not be so intuitive. Lists of nicknames can be found in the following publications:

- Evans, Barbara Jean, *A to Zax, A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists & Historians.* Alexandria, Virginia: Hearthside Press, 1995.
- May, Elizabeth White, "The Dilemma of Nicknames." *Wake County Treasures* (Spring 1994).
- Rose, Christine, *Nicknames: Past and Present.* San Jose, California: Rose Family Association, c2002.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for names are often found in documents. When recording an abbreviated name, leave it in the form you found it; resist the temptation to spell the name out because you may misinterpret the abbreviation and record the wrong name. Some examples of abbreviations are Abra^m for Abraham; Benj^a, Benjn, Benj, for Benjamin; Chas, Char^s, Chas. for Charles; X^r, Xopher, Xofer for Christopher; Geo, G^o for George; Ja^s, Jas, for James, which is easy to confuse with Jo^s, Jos for Joseph; Jno or Jn^o for John; and Will, Wm, W^m for William. Benj^a could also be an abbreviation for Benajah, so again it is important to record the abbreviation as it was recorded.

Titles

Titles were also used and understanding their meanings tells us something about the person bearing the title. In England, someone bearing the title of Esquire was able to bear arms. In the United States our usage of this term was more flexible; it was also used by the social elite, such as lawyers, doctors, clergy, large land owners, magistrates, Justices of the Peace, and important political figures. The title Gentleman was just a step down from Esquire. A farmer, who usually owned more than 100 acres, was called a planter; later the word planter also came to mean a man of affluence. A yeoman was a man, who owned a small amount of

land that was used for his own support. Colonel was a title used by old southern planters and usually had nothing to do with military service. Although a minister might use the title Reverend, it was also used as a given name.

Among the early colonists Mr. and Mrs. were used only in upper class families. Mrs. did not necessarily identify a married woman but was used as a title of courtesy identifying a woman of "genteel" birth, married or single. Goodman and Goodwife, in early records, were used to identify the head and mistress of a household.

Junior and senior in modern usage means father and son but in earlier times these titles were used to differentiate two individuals of the same name living in the same place. They were often uncle and nephew. Watch for changes: when Sr. died, Jr. could become Sr. and someone of a younger generation could become Jr.

Calendar

The Julian calendar was the old style calendar and the Gregorian calendar is the new style. In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII reformed the Julian calendar to remove mathematical errors that were causing the dates to move out of line with the seasons. His calendar was adopted by many Christian nations and countries; however, England and her colonies, with the exception of Scotland, did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until September of 1752.

The Julian calendar was an ecclesiastical calendar and its new year started on 25 March (9 months before the celebration of Christ's birth). All of March was considered to be the first month. If you are searching in a church or town record book that uses the Julian calendar, the dates could cause confusion. If two children with parents of the same names were born 1 April 1720 and 10 February 1720, it would appear that an error was made in recording the dates or that they were not children of the same couple. You might conclude they could not both be your ancestor's children and that there were two couples of the same name in the parish.

However, in Julian time one child was born the second month of the year (April) and the second child was born the twelfth month of the same year (February).

Problems interpreting dates occurred when the calendar changed from the Julian to the Gregorian. A date could be off by a year. The Gregorian calendar began its new year on 1 January. Use "double dating" whenever a date falls between 1 January and 25 March before 1752; the date should be recorded to reflect both the Julian and Gregorian calendars (1731/32). The Julian calendar was 10 days behind the Gregorian calendar from 1582 through February of 1700 and eleven days behind from March 1700 through early September 1752. To make up the difference in the calendars, eleven days were dropped from the calendar in September 1752. You may find references to the first month, second month, etc. Remember that the first month was March before 1752.

Part 2: A Tool for Solving Genealogical Problems

I'm hooked on Pinterest, a website where you can choose topics of interest to you. Then once a week Pinterest sends an e-mail suggesting many wonderful ideas, pictures, blogs, and websites to explore based upon the topics you have chosen. An abbreviation I often see on Pinterest is *DIY*. Not understanding this lingo, my first thought was to call my daughter and ask her what it meant, but I knew her answer would be to Google it. She always gives me the same answer, so, I just googled *DIY*. It means *do it yourself*. It made so much sense and as we continue to understand our ancestors' lingo, the records they created will make sense, too.

Relationships

Relationships can always be difficult, but reading about our ancestors' relationships can be downright confusing. In-law and step relationships can be

misleading if judged by today's standards. Any relationship created by a legal means, including step relationships, was often identified as in-law. A stepchild therefore could be referred to as an in-law. Cousin could apply to any relationship outside the immediate family and can also be a confusing term. Most frequently, cousin meant niece or nephew and that should be your first guess, but if it does not work, try proving the relationship was cousin according to today's definition of the word. The words niece and nephew are derived from the Latin *neptis* and *nepos*, which mean granddaughter and grandson. In most cases niece and nephew will have the same meaning as they have today; however, sometimes they will mean grandson and granddaughter.

The terms *relict* and *consort* apply to females. "Lydia, relict of Alexander" means Lydia was living when Alexander died. "Lydia, consort of Alexander" means Alexander was living when Lydia died. Don't confuse the word consort with concubine as I naively did. I thought my ancestor had a harem for a while.

Now wife did not mean a man was married before. He could have been, but this was legal terminology that put limits on the inheritance of any future wife.

Base-born means a child of an unmarried woman or a child of low social class. The term is often used in court records and on bastardy bonds.

Dr on financial papers means debtor, not doctor.

Then there is the thorn, an Anglo-Saxon letter that resembled the letter *y* and was pronounced as a *th*. Thorns are often found in early wills: ye means the; y^m means them; y^t means that; y^r means their.

Legal Terms
Some wording and abbreviations found in legal records, such as wills, can provide clues to our ancestors' former homes or religions. "In the Name of God, Amen" is frequently found as the first words of early North Carolina wills. If it is not found, the will may have been written by a New Englander or a Quaker. If the date does not include the name of the month but was written as "the 6th day of the third month in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred & sixty-five," the will could have been written by a Quaker because Quakers did not use the names of the months. If both of these clues are in the same North Carolina will, my first impression is that the will was written by a Quaker.

Next friend was a person who would act for the benefit of either an infant (under the age of majority) or another person unable to look after his or her own interests—it could be a relative and this term is most often found in a will. An *infant* was not a baby but a male under the age of twenty-one years or a female under the age of eighteen years.

When giving a list of heirs or other individuals, the terms *viz* or *vizt* are frequently used and mean *to wit* or *namely*.

Deeds also contain language that, at first, is unfamiliar to genealogists. *Heirs and assigns* means that property was being transferred in fee simple. *Fee simple* means the grantee was given complete unlimited interest in land and could dispose of the land any way he wished. *Heirs of my body* means property was being transferred in fee tail. *Fee tail* means the land descended to or through certain specified heirs under terms of the tail and could not be disposed of as the grantee wished. The word *jurat* after a witness's name is frequently confused with Junior or Jr. When jurat appears after a witness's name it means the witness came into court and testified to the signature on the document. *CC* or *CB* or *SCC* mean chain carrier, chain bearer, or sworn chain carrier. The chain carriers carried the chains of measurement for the surveyor of land. Their names were recorded on land grants and can be clues to relationships. The chain carriers were usually sixteen or older, but not too old. They had to be strong enough to carry the heavy surveying chains and traipse through the woods for long hours. They were often the sons, nephews, or

neighbors of the grantee. *Et al.* means *and others*. *Et ux* means *and wife*. These two terms are used in deed indexes. Whenever *et al.* appears next to a name you may be interested in, be sure to read the deed, as your ancestor may be included with the *and other*.

Conclusion

Language is more meaningful when we understand it. This article, as well as part one of this article that appeared in the March issue of the *NCGS News*, touched on the more common language usages; there are many more. But remember, if you come across a term you don't know, you can always Google it.