



## Timelines, Summaries, and Research Logs: Tools for More Effective Research

by Terry Moore, CG

Time. It marches on. It's the essence of life. Time is an equalizer for all men. We each have the same amount to do with as we wish. Or do we? People, work, school, and schedules as well as local and world events all influence what we can really do with our time. Most of us keep track of time on a calendar, but a timeline is the tool of choice to keep track of what our ancestors did with some of their time. When I was a teenager, I owned a 1955 Chevy that I paid \$150 for. It was a beautiful car with a flawless paint job and perfect interior, owned by an old lady who never really drove it. I found out why after my check cleared. My father was so proud that I paid for the car myself until we discovered it could get me anywhere I wanted to go, it just wouldn't start to get me home again. My dear old dad would have to drive to wherever I ventured and at whatever time I needed him to jump the battery so I could get home. A timeline does for research what my dad did for my Chevy—it provides a jumpstart.

Timelines can help us see gaps in our research and which additional records need to be consulted. They can help us distinguish between individuals of the same name and they help us easily keep track of the details in an ancestor's life along with those of his or her family, friends, and associates. A timeline becomes a quick reference tool. Although timelines

can be hand written, typing them on a computer is highly recommended because a new event can be added, deleted, or moved around easily. Although most examples of timelines are too sparse and don't have enough detail to be very useful, the extra effort needed to add a little more information is well worth it.

Before creating a timeline, read each record created by your ancestor and write a summary of it, including all the details but excluding the legal terminology, unless it is unusual. By reading and writing what is in each record, details will become clearer in your mind. Label each document with its source and give each one a unique number. If the documents are in digital form, include the document number in the file names so they can be quickly located.

From the summaries, create a timeline.

- Use a Word table in landscape layout to maximize the space.
- Choose the "Autofit" option for the columns and the size will adjust to the amount of material in each one.
- Label the columns.
- Add a header with your ancestor's name, such as "Timeline of John Dingee."
- Add a footer with page numbers and the last date changes were made to the timeline.

### Example of a Timeline

| Date       | Place             | Name                      | Event | Associates & details  | Comments   | Source   |
|------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------|---|--|--|
| 1 May 1735 | Bertie County, NC | Charles Ricketts, grantee | Deed  | William Bryan of Pasquotank Precinct to Charles Ricketts, adjacent William West, witnesses were Lewis Bryan, & John Padgett | Deed book D: 193, 430 acres in St. John's Neck on east side of Cypress Swamp | Mary Best Bell, <i>Colonial Bertie County, North Carolina, Volume III, Abstracts of Deed Books D &amp; E, 1730-1739</i> (Windsor, NC: By the author, 1964), 153. |

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- From the last cell in the last row of the timeline press “tab” to start a new row. Continue entering information from each source in chronological order.
- To insert a row between two others, place the cursor on the outside of the table on the row above where the new row should be inserted and press “enter.”

Include dates in the timeline that counties were formed or abolished as this will help direct research in the correct jurisdiction. A list of North Carolina county creation dates is on the NCGS website, <http://www.ncgenealogy.org>, under Resources. County creation dates for other states can be found in *The Handybook for Genealogists* or in *Redbook: American State, County, and Town Sources*, edited by Alice Eichholz. Also, it may be helpful to include historical events. Google “historical timelines” to find numerous examples or purchase a copy of *History for Genealogists: Using Chronological Timelines to Find and Understand Your Ancestors* by Judy Jacobson.

The third research tool, in addition to timelines and summaries, is a Research Log. (I heard that

groan!) It is best to organize research logs by the county in which the record was found. Cut and copy the source from your timeline or vice versa and put it in a research log under the “Record” heading. Add a few details and this becomes a list of all the records searched in that county. Keep state records and federal records on separate research logs. But if the preference is to keep only one log, group each county, state, and federal records together. Include a header with the name of your research along with the county and state. You can pick up a log for a certain county and tell within a minute what records have already been searched. No more going in circles, no more realizing you have searched the same record several times, no more wasting time.

As summaries are written and events are added to the timeline, you will experience “ah ha” moments. My Dad didn’t want to come and get me each time the car failed, but his extra effort got me home at night. And the extra effort expended to create a timeline, summary, and research log will jumpstart your research again.

### Example of a Research Log

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Record</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>                      | <b>Results</b>  |
|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| 15 Mar 2010 | Cumberland County, North Carolina, Tax list 1767, North Carolina State Archives file box, T&R box 3. | <u>Martinleer</u> or any associates | Yes, Attachment 25, <u>Hunsacker</u> , <u>Keagel</u> , <u>Duckmaneer</u> listed too |

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