

Who is that? Why Your Ancestor Associated with Apparent Strangers

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Unknown individuals can appear on various documents and other locations listing your ancestors' information. Researching these “strangers” may break down genealogical brick walls. These can include, but are not limited to:

- Census records (as unidentified individuals living in the household)
- Probate records (as heirs, appointed guardians, or witnesses)
- Military pension records (as affiants or as witnesses)
- Tombstones in family plots
- Vital records – witnesses, informants, possibly others

Census Records

Female (different surname) – most likely possibilities (use age to help narrow it down):

- Mother or aunt of the wife
- Sister of the wife
- Widowed (or separated) sister of the husband

Male (different surname) on a census record – most likely possibilities

- Brother of the wife
- Uncle or nephew of the husband or wife
- Father of the wife

A sister-in-law of the head of household can be

- Wife's sister
- Husband's brother's wife

Document Witnesses and Informants

Vital records

Marriage witnesses can be family members – research the names as you would any known family member

Christening witnesses and/or god-parents are likely to be family but are not always related to the child or parents

Death record informants are often non-family; research the individual to be sure

Probate records

Read the text carefully for relationship clarification of heir(s)

Witnesses may be friends but can be family members

Military pension records

Affiants are often family members even when the relationship is not clarified

Witnesses may be family members

Individuals Interred in Family Plots

Tombstone inscriptions for unknown individuals

May be a family member

Can be a friend of the family

Check with the Cemetery office, if there is one

Research the names using

death, census, and probate records

local histories (check with the library and/or historical society)

Check all graves around your ancestors', even if the names are unfamiliar

Take photos of the neighboring graves

Diagram the plot and positions of stones in relation to each other

Use a GPS to record exact grave locations

Basics to remember

- Use all records at your disposal to unearth the identity of the stranger (research the person as if he/she was one of your ancestors . . . that just might be the case!)
- Do not be married to one particular way to spell a name (given or surname)
- Create timelines and do periodic reviews of the people and your findings
- Use maps to search relationships between locations
- Consider browsing census records and check the neighbors
- Don't get lost: always work from the known to the unknown
- Cite your sources!

General References

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Always good to check/double check with:

- Ancestry.com
 - Various databases (beyond the census)
 - Military
 - Immigration & Naturalization
 - City Directories
 - Family Trees posted by others (evaluate very carefully)
 - and more
 - Census records: Federal ● State ● Special
- FamilySearch.org
 - Search – Records
 - Vital records
 - Census records
 - Court records
 - and more (updated almost daily)
 - FamilySearch Catalog (even if you can't rent films)
 - FamilySearch Wiki (includes what resources are online – all sites – with a search qualifier: e.g., "England ancestry")
 - Trees (evaluate very carefully)
- Historical Societies in the areas where your ancestors lived
- Fold3.com
 - Military records
 - Census records
 - Immigration & Naturalization records
- Find-a-Grave.com
- Newspapers (obituaries, announcements, advertisements, news stories) on
 - Ancestry.com
 - Fold3
 - Godfrey Library
 - NewsBank/GenealogyBank
 - Freenewspaperarchives.us
 - Google News Archive search
 - NewspaperArchive.com
 - Newspapers.com
 - Chronicling America
 - Individual websites for Counties of your ancestors
 - and more – (Check Cyndi's list for more ideas)
- USGenWeb.com: state and county sites
- Social Media sites (e.g., Facebook genealogy groups)