

Dates, Timelines Essential to Family Research

by Dee Gibson-Roles

There is probably no one to whom dates are more important than genealogists. Birth, marriage and death dates are critical when tracing one's ancestry, but other dates can be just as important.

One event many researchers fail to recognize is that of the formation dates of the counties where ancestors may have lived. Many a forefather lived in three, four or even more counties but never physically moved. He simply found himself living in the new county when it was formed out of the former county.

For example, a family may have lived in Buncombe County in present day Madison County near the town of Mars Hill. When Yancey County was formed (from Burke and Buncombe counties) in 1833, they were suddenly residents of that county.

Then in 1851, when Madison County was formed (from Buncombe and Yancey counties), the family again found themselves in a different county, yet they were living in the same house on the same land the entire time.

This happened quite often and resulted in family records such as deeds, marriages, etc. being in all three counties. Researchers need to first become familiar with the area in which their ancestor lived, when these counties were formed and the counties from which they were formed. This can save countless hours of frustrating search for records, only to discover the records could be in the "old" county.

County formation dates for some Western North Carolina counties are:

- Buncombe from Burke and Rutherford in 1791.
- Haywood from Buncombe in 1808.
- Macon from Haywood in 1828 (this was land that was ceded in the Treaty of 1819 and was Haywood County from then until 1828).
- Yancey from Burke and Buncombe in 1833.
- Henderson from Buncombe in 1838.
- Cherokee from Macon in 1839 (again this was land that was ceded just before the removal of the Cherokee to Oklahoma in 1838).
- Jackson from Haywood and Macon in 1851.
- Madison from Buncombe and Yancey in 1851.
- Polk from Henderson and Rutherford in 1855.
- Transylvania from Henderson and Jackson in 1861.
- Clay from Cherokee in 1861.
- Graham in 1872 from Cherokee.
- Swain from Macon and Jackson in 1872.

Dates as clues

Sometimes birth dates can resolve the issue of which wife was a child's mother when the father has been married more than once. If the family has a number of children, some of whom are almost as old as the present wife, this is a clue that the older children are the offspring of the first wife.

Another giveaway of the possibility of a second wife (and thus a second family) is a wide span between the age (and birth date) of two of the children.

In many families, the children were born between one and three years apart. When a wider time span appears between two children, it indicates the possibility of the older one being the youngest child of the first wife and the younger one being the oldest child of the second wife.

Of course, it may also bring up the sad possibility of the death of a child or children between the two in question. For those children who were born and died between two censuses, this gap may be the only clue to the existence of those children.

Another vital event is the death of a parent. When a household with only one parent appears in the records, it is possible the other parent died (or left) about the time of the birth of the youngest child.

For example, one family appears in the 1850 Census in Haywood County with the mother as head of the household and no father present. The family is living among other families of the same surname, all related, so it is likely this family is related to all the others, although no documentation to prove this has been found.

The probable date of the husband/father's demise is most likely close the birth of the youngest child. In this case, the child was 7, so it would appear that the father died/left around 1843.

Defining 'infants,'

Family historians can investigate events occurring around this time such as war, epidemics, etc., as well as county court records and other county records for an event that could explain the disappearance of the husband/father from the record.

In most cases, a guardian was appointed to handle the affairs of the minor children, especially after the death of the father. This does not mean the children did not continue to live with the mother, but simply that another person was appointed guardian.

In addition to county court minutes, guardian or apprentice bonds may be found in county records. The dates on these can provide further clues as to the date of the birth of the child or the death of the parent.

We should note that children who were younger than 21 were referred to as "infants" no matter their age. It can certainly be a shock to a new researcher to find his great-great grandfather referred to as an infant, when in fact he was almost 21 years old and possibly married with children.

It bears mention also that children whose father was deceased were referred to as "orphans," regardless of whether the mother was still living. Thus, finding the children referred to as "orphans" should not be considered as evidence of the demise of the mother.

Two of the most common events resulting in the death of ancestors are the Civil War and the flu epidemic of 1918.

If a man appears on the 1860 Census and cannot be found on the 1870 Census, it is wise to check the Confederate and Union service records to see if he served in either army. These should also indicate if he died in battle or of wounds or illness or in a prisoner of war camp.

A person who died around 1918 very possibly died in the Spanish influenza epidemic that occurred at that time or from complications of the illness.

Creating a timeline for the ancestor or family being researched is essential. While there are many formats for a timeline, the basics are the same: begin with the birth of the ancestor and record all significant dates known for him/her during his/her lifetime.

Also insert dates of significant events such as wars, epidemics, natural disasters, etc. Creating a timeline will bring the life of the ancestor into focus, making the research much easier and results more meaningful.