

Terms from the Past

by Dee Gibson-Roles

Sooner or later most family researchers encounter terms which are not in everyday vocabulary. By the same token, some terms in common use today had a different meaning in the past. It is important to know both the terms and the meaning of them in the context of the time period in which they were used when researching any family history.

Probably one of the most confusing terms is "junior." Today we know that if we see "Jr." after a person's name, he is the son of a man by the same name. This was not necessarily so in the past. The term junior simply meant that there was another (usually older) man by the same name in the community, but the other man was not necessarily the father of the person identified as "junior" and the two might not even be related.

Another often misunderstood term is the word "infant." In earlier days, children were called infants until they were of legal age. It is not unusual to find a married woman referred to as an infant in a legal document, as many women were married well before they reached the age of majority. Today we think of an infant as a babe in arms, but obviously the term had a much different meaning in early documents. By the same token, the term "orphan" meant that the father was deceased, but not necessarily the mother. It can be very confusing to find a child or children described as "the orphan(s) of" a deceased man, when we know that the mother was alive and well and actually physically taking care of the child/children.

Speaking of children, a child born out of wedlock might be referred to as a "base-born child." Another term used here in the mountains for such a child was "woods colt."

The word "consort" meant a wife and could be used to mean husband also. A "relict" was a widow, and was sometimes referred to as "relicta" (a widow) or "relictus" (a widower.) A "feme" was a woman and a "feme sole" meant an unmarried woman or a married woman with property independent of her husband.

Most researchers know that "sic" following a word or phrase means "exactly as written" or "exactly as the original," meaning that the words are exactly as spelled or written and that the original may be in error. It needs to be stressed, however, that there was no standardized spelling until late in the 1800s, so what we construe today as an error would not have been so in the past.

Dower was the legal provision for land and support made for a woman after her husband's death. In many states, a widow was entitled to one third of her husband's estate. Often when land was sold, a woman would "relinquish her dower right," meaning that she was giving up any future rights to the land her husband was selling. This is often confused with "dowry," but has an entirely different meaning. (A dowry, of course, was the land, money, personal property, etc. brought to the marriage by the bride.)

We often see "inst," "instanter," or "instant" referred to in dates. This term means "of the present month." For example, the second day of the present month might be written "on the second inst." By the same token, "ultimo" referred to the previous month. The second day of the previous month would be written "on the second ultimo." The month following the present month would be referred to as "proximo."

Another source of confusion arises in common nicknames for given names. A woman named Mary was more often than not referred to as "Polly" or "Molly" and "Patsy" was a very common nickname for Martha. "Betty" or "Betsy" usually referred to a woman named Elizabeth, and a person named "Sarah" was usually informally called "Sally." "Nell" or "Nellie" was often a nickname for Eleanor or Cornelia. "Hattie" often referred to Harriett, but was also used in its own right as a given name. "Peggy" is a nickname for Margaret.

On the male side, a man called "Ted" or "Ned" was probably formally named Edward or Edmond. "Dick" usually referred to a man named Richard, "Bill" to a man named William, and "Jack" to John.

These terms and nicknames are just but a few of many. If you know of an interesting term or nickname that you'd like us to print, please let us know at info@obcgs.com or 828-253-1834.