

Who is My Ancestor?

Tracing Individuals with Similar Names

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Searching for individuals with similar names can be a challenging (yet fun) genealogical adventure. Common first names (such as John, Thomas, or William) combined with frequently used last names (such as Jones, Williams, or Smith) often create the most daunting research projects. Thankfully, careful analysis and diligence can assist in telling individuals with similar names apart.

Consider the following five step strategy:

1. Put yourself in the record creator's mindset.
2. Identify specific characteristics and patterns (other than a name).
3. Research and create individual profiles.
4. When necessary, shift the research objective.
5. Write and share your research.

The Record Creator's Mindset

As you work to separate two (or more individuals) in your research, take time to consider how a record creator would have handled the same task. Be mindful of nuances that exist in specific records as you conduct your search. For example, a record creator might employ various tactics if several men with the name Thomas Smith lived in the same region:

- Thomas Smith, Sr.
- Thomas Smith, Jr.
- Thomas Smith, III.
- Elder Thomas Smith
- Thomas Smith, the second
- Thomas Smith, blacksmith
- Thomas Smith, son of John
- Thomas Smith, the younger

As you research, take careful note of these nuances and look for extended patterns that might be used by a specific clerk or other record keeper.

Identify Characteristics and Patterns

In many cases the best way to tell individuals with the same name apart is to consider every other element of their lives besides their name. Be thoughtful and exhaustive in this process and consider characteristics such as:

- Occupation
- Education
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Social clubs and fraternal organizations
- Economic status
- Children's names (especially middle names)
- Evident ancestry
- Residence
- Migration history
- Property ownership (personal and real estate)
- Friends, neighbors, associates, and relatives

Research and Create Individual Profiles

In many cases it is necessary to conduct detailed research on those who might not be your direct ancestor. Create detailed profiles that track the unique characteristics noted in the above step. Specifically seek to identify the **familial, social, and economic circles** of each individual as you build each profile.

Avoid assumptions that might have been made by previous researchers—and especially those who have published unverified information online. Once created, seek to eliminate certain profiles as you focus your research. Gather evidence where necessary to share with others as needed (and use collaborate tools, such as online family trees, to document your findings). With your profile at hand, create a correlating timeline that shows potential overlaps in each individual identified. This step can quickly reveal conflicts that might assist in eliminating some profiles from your research.

Shift the Research Objective (if necessary)

At times it might be necessary to adjust your research objective. Consider focusing on a smaller portion of an ancestor's life (such as a specific decade of their life) or a particular element (such as their landholdings). For example, an exhaustive study of an individual's landholdings might include identifying every transaction related to an individual and their immediate circle over an extended period of time, carefully tracking the acquisition and disposal of each acre. Be sure to use information gleaned from the profile(s) you previously created, patterns used by the record creators that might have been identified, and any other specific details that can aid in your search.

Write and Share Your Findings

As your research is likely to include details about those you who are not your direct ancestors, you can provide a great service to the genealogical community by writing and sharing your findings. As a benefit, the process of writing often helps to clarify your findings, identify any unresolved issues, and solidify your research. Consider publishing your results in a peer-reviewed genealogical journal or a local genealogical society's magazine or newsletter.