

# Same Name, Different Person: Effective Record Sorting

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Genealogical research often presents the challenge of dealing with records for individuals with the same or similar names. Without a thorough examination and correlation of the relevant details, it is easy to erroneously attach records to the wrong individual. This mistake can perpetuate further errors, much like the game of telephone. As genealogists, it is crucial to accurately identify records for each individual and ascertain their life events with precision.

Family history researchers need to understand the primary challenges in sorting records for individuals with the same or similar names genealogical research and acquire strategies for overcoming them. By understanding common pitfalls and applying specific strategies, researchers can accurately identify records for the target individual and prevent the misattribution of identities. Your ancestors and your ancestral lines are unique.

## Why it is Crucial to Identify the Correct Records for an Ancestor

- When we link incorrect records to an ancestor, we risk linking facts that do not match the ancestor's experiences, family relationships, and heritage.
- Linking incorrect records can lead to lineage documentation errors.

## The Challenges of Sorting Records for Persons with the Same Names

Common issues include:

Repeated names in groups in a region, a culture, or a time frame.

These names can be repeated in a family branch, a religious affiliation, or a region. In some times and places there is very little variety in first and last names. Sometimes the spouse names and the parent names also match perfectly for two individuals.

Spelling Variations

Names often change over time or are recorded inconsistently.

Name Changes for Women

Records for women in earlier centuries were often linked to the men in their lives. They may have been identified after marriage in records only as a Mrs.

Same or similar birth, marriage, residence, or death locations.

Some records are more easily obtained than others. It is important to match the name and location, but it is also important to make sure this record is not for a namesake.

Shared migration patterns.

Individuals with the same name and approximate birth year and location may have identical migration patterns and settle in the same region. It is easy to confuse records for one with those for another.

Scarcity of easily accessed records and the temptation of those at hand

Researchers may be tempted to latch onto any record that seems to fit a name without regard to time or place if there are no other records readily found to add to or diminish the suggested fit. This can lead to clearly erroneous family units, with parents born after their children, or with marriages and births occurring far from a place of settlement. If it doesn't look right, it probably isn't.

Incomplete Records: Missing or minimal information can lead to confusion.

Research that is false, yet perpetuated and adopted in publications or online

Without a thorough review of the records and correlation of available details for the target individual, it is easy to attach a record for one person to another of the same or similar name, and often the process continues like the game of telephone, with further false verification of the incorrect placement. You may find published support for a family line, or you may see the connections on multiple family trees. That isn't enough. As researchers we understand that it is of utmost importance to identify the correct records for an individual, and to determine life events as accurately as possible. The publications and family trees are good clues to review, but we need to verify the conclusions with strong documentation from sources as close to the original records as possible.

### **Strategies for Accurate Research**

Above all, seek the original images of records wherever possible. They may contain more information than indexes, and you will avoid the errors made by interpretation of the entries by those who have summarized them in secondary research, family trees and genealogies.

Note and Analyze Key Identifiers:

- Dates: Use birth, marriage, death, or census dates to verify timelines.
- Locations: Focus on addresses, towns, or migration patterns.
- Relationships: Cross-check family members, witnesses, or neighbors. Identify persons whose names are unusual to trace a family group over time.
- Occupations: A job title can help differentiate individuals. Note, however, that many individuals changed their occupations often in the past.

Identify Potential Namesakes:

- Identify individuals indicated on family trees or records sharing the ancestor's name and residence.
- Finding key details for this person can be helpful in sorting the records to identify those belonging to the ancestor.
- Census records and tax records can be useful in quickly ascertaining how many individuals with the same surname lived in the same place at the same time.

Build Timelines:

- Create a chronological summary of life events for each person. This can be done on an online family tree or on a spreadsheet or any other relevant organizing format.

- Note gaps, overlaps, or inconsistencies in records. Make sure the issues are resolved before linking generations or documenting an ancestor.
- Maps: Use historical maps to understand migration patterns or to note distances between locations.

#### Correlate Multiple Sources:

- Combine data from vital records, census, land deeds, probate files, and church registries.
- Seek corroborating details to confirm identities. Always key are date and location.
- For years between census enumerations consult tax records, land exchanges, online newspapers, and city directories.

#### Be Aware of Name Variations

- Approach records with flexibility regarding names.
- Account for alternative spellings, abbreviations, or cultural translations (e.g., "Johann" vs. "John"). Use wildcard searches in databases for flexible matching (e.g., "Joh\*" for John, Jonathan, Johann).
- Note that the names of immigrants to North America may anglicize their names for convenience in spelling.
- Account for middle names adopted as first names.
- Note that in some cultures a baptismal name may be an honorary name for an ancestor or other person of significance, and thus seldom used in other records for an individual.

#### Avoid Assumptions

- Question initial conclusions and seek evidence before linking a record.
- Validate family trees or online profiles with primary sources. This can take time, but it is worth it.

#### Study DNA Results (if applicable)

- Identify suggested shared ancestors for a strong DNA match. Verify the lineages using documentary research.
- Verify locations of origin for ancestral family branches. This can provide support for a suggested line but in general does not provide conclusive evidence of identify of an ancestor.

#### Recap: Proactive Steps to Avoid Errors

- Document Sources: Record every detail and source for verification.
- Double-Check Family Trees: Validate connections in public trees with primary data.
- Correlate names, dates, and places.

Remember: Patience and persistence are key to untangling genealogical puzzles. Use strong strategies and tools to ensure accuracy and avoid conflating identities.

### Example

*Two Rachels: Meet Rachel Quackenbush and Rachel Quackenbush*

Rachel 1: Baptized on 22 January 1715/16 in Albany, New York, the daughter of Pieter Quackenbush and Neeltje Marinus: Married Jacob Van Allen at Fort Hunter, Montgomery County, New York

Rachel 2: Baptized on 13 April 1740 in Schenectady, New York, the daughter of Jacob Quackenbush and Gertruuy Van de Werken

#### **The Problem:**

Rachel Quackenbush, who married Jacob Van Allen was born in 1715/16 to a family with heritage from the Netherlands, which matches all records for this family branch. According to a published genealogy, she was taken captive from Saratoga, now called Schuylerville, New York, during King George's War in 1745, to Canada, where some of her immediate family lived in the prison, while Rachel was taken in by a local family. Contemporary reports of her actions were confused with those of older her sister, Machtel, leading to a confusion in identifying her date of birth. When Rachel refused to speak to her mother when brought to the Canadian prison, or to return to New York during prisoner exchanges, it was assumed that she was a teenager, and in fact one suggested interpretation was that her mother should have been kinder in her childhood.

Yet Rachel, born in 1716, was well documented as married and living in New York during this time. One person cannot be in two places at one time.

#### **The Solution:**

Correlating records for two individuals named Rachel Quackenbush in New York, it becomes evident that the story for the supposed teenaged Rachel, captive, does not fit well for Rachel born in 1716, but aside from age, fits for a child born in 1741. Allowing for flexibility of age in seeking records led to identifying a 1746 Catholic baptism record in Canada for a Rachel Quackenbush, age 5, taken from Saratoga in 1745. Thus, two Rachels regain their separate identities and the choices of a child (and not a teenager) to adapt to her new family and culture are clarified.

#### **Main Sources:**

Susan Skilton, "Correcting the Identification of Rachel Quackenbush, Child Captive During King George's War," *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, Volume 148, no. 1 (2017): pp. 165-172.

Adriana Suydam Quackenbush Andrew, *Quackenbush Family in Holland and America* (Paterson, New Jersey: Quackenbush & Co., 1909), p. 35 and p. 46.

