D-OGS Newsletter – August 2023

News & Articles of Interest to Durham-Orange genealogists

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2023 dues – $20

President – David McCorkle

OUR AUGUST 2ND MEETING WILL BE IN PERSON AND ONLINE: MEMBER SHOW-AND-TELL

If you are interested in presenting, please send an email to vicepresident@dogsnc.org as soon as possible so we can make sure you will have a time slot. All we need to know is about how long you need.

As mentioned in our earlier emails, our August D-OGS meeting will feature … you! We always reserve August for short member presentations, and now that we are doing hybrid in-person/zoom meetings anyone can present regardless of their location. Join us on **Wednesday August 2nd at 7:00PM** at the **OWASA** Community Center in **Carrboro** or online via **Zoom** to view and/or give view presentations. For those who are local, we encourage you to attend in person since this can be a very interactive session.

Members can present information about their research, findings, or anything of interest to our group. We generally give up to 15 minutes per presentation, but will consider longer presentations depending on the response. This is a good way to hone up on your speaking skills, as well as getting comments and suggestions from the audience about your topic.

You will have a variety of options for your presentation – it doesn't have to be a formal Powerpoint although that will work just fine. You can simply share your screen and show us what you want – photos, videos, documents, etc., or bring them to the meeting. You can also just to a "talking head" presentation, or even audio only. For in-person presentations, we will provide the PC or you can bring your own.

WHAT IMPACT WILL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE HAVE ON GENEALOGY RESEARCH?

From an article by Danny Klein, the genealogy librarian at the Jersey City Free Public Library's New Jersey Room and a founding member of the Hudson County Genealogical and Historical Society:

Artificial Intelligence, or AI, has been prevalent in the news, social media, and entertainment a lot lately. But what is it and what does it mean for genealogy? Let's start with what it is. Wikipedia defines AI thusly: …perceiving, synthesizing, and inferring information — demonstrated by computers, as opposed to intelligence displayed by humans or by other animals. "Intelligence" encompasses the ability to learn and to reason, to generalize, and to infer meaning.

We're already used to AI. We have Netflix and Amazon algorithms that suggest new films or products based on what we've watched or bought previously. We don't tend to think of that as AI, but it certainly fits the description.

And it's also been used in genealogy. It used to be the case that optical character recognition, or OCR, software could only read printed documents. But last year the National Archives and the big database companies used AI algorithms to help transcribe handwritten 1950 Census returns when they were released.

But what can we as researchers do with AI?

You can read the full article in the *NJ.com* web site at: https://www.nj.com/hudson/2023/07/what-impact-will-artificial-intelligence-have-on-genealogy-research-tracing-our-roots.html.

MONTHLY BACKUP REMINDER

It is the first of a new month. Don't forget to backup your data files.

A NEW APPROACH TO GENETIC GENEALOGY SHEDS LIGHT ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ANCESTRY

Traditional measurements of genetic ancestry rarely offer information on specific ancestors in a family tree. A new approach to genetic ancestry developed by Stanford researchers yields insight into African American history by providing estimates of the number of African and European genealogical ancestors in typical family trees.

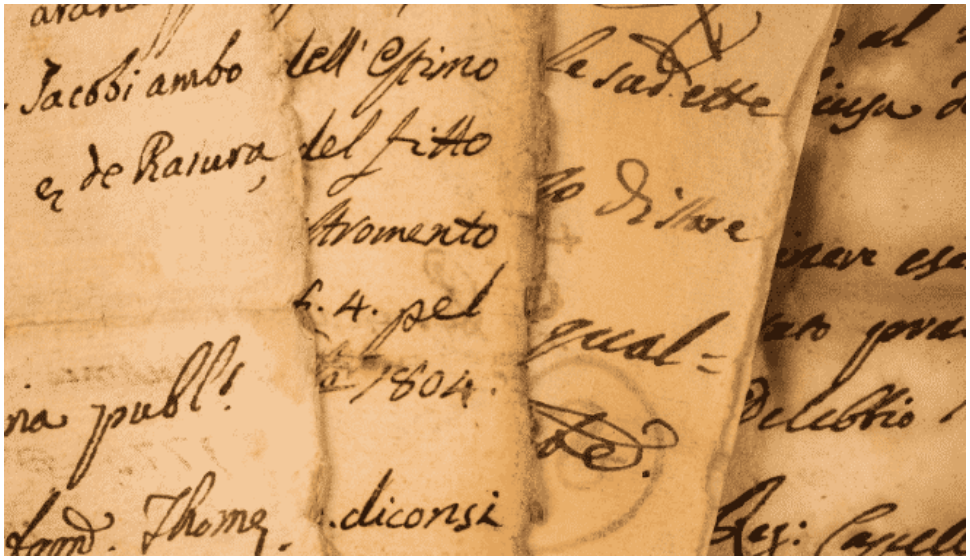
Family trees, photo albums, and grandparents are often the go-to sources of information for people curious to know who their relatives were. Genetic ancestry is also a useful tool, but these measurements typically provide data on percentages of different populations in a person's ancestry, not on specific people. Now, a new study led by researchers from Stanford and the University of Southern California introduces a new way to think about genetic ancestry, revealing information that approximates the number of people from a source population.

The researchers apply this new approach to the genetic and genealogical history of African Americans from the 1600s to the present to estimate the number of African and European ancestors who appear in a randomly chosen African American person's genealogy. The authors provide context for their results by using a historical book written about several generations of the family of Michelle Obama, the former first lady of the United States, as an example.

You can read more in an article by Holly Alyssa MacCormick published in the *Stanford.edu* web site at: https://news.stanford.edu/2023/07/10/new-genealogy-method-helps-fill-gaps-african-american-ancestry/

5 STRATEGIES FOR DECIPHERING OLD HANDWRITING ON DOCUMENTS

By Danny Arsenault



The state archives finally got back to you. At last, the copies are in your hands. Or maybe you were rifling around in the attic and uncovered a box of letters nobody knew about. It's the document that could blast through that fortress-like brick wall you've been banging your head against. You'd feel like you just won the genealogical lottery, except for one minor detail: You can't read a word of it.

Fortunately, it's possible to decipher old, illegible and oddly spelled documents. By employing a few tools, a little knowledge and these five tricks, you can read almost any document.

1. Make a Photocopy

The first thing you'll need to do is get cozy with modern technology. Don't try to decipher the handwriting directly from the original document, especially if you're looking at it in an archive or courthouse. You'll need to take plenty of time to examine the writing, so make photocopies, take digital pictures or — best of all — scan the document. If you're viewing a microfilmed record, make a printout.

Even if you're the owner of the original record, it's a good idea to work from a copy. First, you can avoid repeatedly handling and possibly damaging the document. Second, it's a lot easier to read photocopies, since the black letters stand out better against a white background than against the tan shade of old paper. Plus, you can write on photocopies — as you'll see, making notes on the document is an essential part of the decoding process.

Best of all, photocopying and scanning give you "zoomability," an essential for some deciphering jobs. A copy enlarged to 1,000 percent lets you inspect pen strokes closely enough to see where they overlap and change directions, giving you a better idea of the letters the writer intended to form.

If you're looking at a scan on your computer, you can get ridiculously close — enough to tell if the quill pen tip had a tiny split. Years ago, I made a full-page photocopy of a single word in a letter from famous ringmaster P.T. Barnum, who was infamous for his horrible penmanship. I hung the copy at my desk and stared at it every once in a while. Eventually, the word revealed itself: Jumbo, Barnum's famous elephant.

Signature of PT Barnum (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Not only can you use a photocopier to enlarge a document, but you also can play with the density controls to enhance the contrast and make the writing stand out more.

Photocopy a document on several settings, since different ones might work best for different parts of the document. You can get even more sophisticated if you scan your document, take a digital photo of it or download it from the Internet: Use a photo-editing program, such as Photoshop Elements, to adjust the contrast, brightness and color levels (look under Enhance > Adjust Lighting in Photoshop Elements).

Experiment to see which adjustments help the most — just be sure to work on a copy of the image so you don't have to scan it again if you mess up.

2. Study Spelling and Abbreviation

Your ancestors' unusual ways with words easily can trip you up. Spelling wasn't standardized until relatively recently, and people often wrote words the way they sounded. The further back you go, the more phonetic spelling you'll find.

To make matters worse for genealogists, if s quite common to see different spellings of someone's name. Regional accents, limited education and simple errors all can produce dramatic spelling variations. If your ancestor spoke his name to a town clerk who wrote it down, letters such as c and k may have sounded alike, or the clerk may have omitted silent letters such as the k in Knight, or the c in Schmidt.

Some people even spelled their own names differently from one day to the next. So make a list of the potential mutations you might encounter. In my own case, I've come across Arsenault, Areseneault, Arseneau, Arsenaux, Arseneaux, Arsenalt, Arsenaul, Arsenaulte, Arsenauld, Arsenaud, Arceneaux and, if you include junk mail addressed to me, Arsenabavlt, Arsenaut and Earsneal.

Our ancestors not only spelled names and words in various ways, but they abbreviated liberally. Sometimes you'll see just the first letter or two of a name, with a small last letter tacked on at the end. Or maybe the writer used lines or dots instead of groups of letters. See this page for a list of common abbreviations and short forms of names. See also our guides to male and female nicknames.

Lots of other abbreviations crop up in genealogical documents, too. With each kind of document, each era, and each geographical area, you'll have to become familiar with a new batch of abbreviations. In British documents, for example, Lo means Lord, M means Majesty, and so on. You'll find more of these in The Record Interpreter: A Collection of Abbreviations, Latin Words and Names Used in Historical Manuscripts and Records by C. Trice Martin (Phillimore & Co.).

3. Familiarize Yourself with Letters

When you read an old document, you'll find yourself wrestling with the unfamiliar ways people formed letters way back when. Even these variations have variations: Handwriting experts make the distinction between class characteristics and individual characteristics. Everyone who learned, say, the Palmer Method, a common writing style in the early 1900s or the Elizabethan Secretary Hand, used during the 1500s and 1600s, shows certain class characteristics in his or her letter formation. But within this pool of pen wielders, each person exhibits his own variations, called individual characteristics.

First, as you research back in time, you'll need to become familiar with the class characteristics of each era you work in. See English Handwriting Online for information on when various styles were common. For example, in documents from the 1700s and 1800s, an s may resemble a lower case, cursive f (in a double s, the second s may be written normally — Jesse looks like Jefse). The lowercase as, os and us often appear similar; as do the uppercase S, L and T. In very old texts, you may see an e that looks backward or a thorn — a character resembling a y, it represents th. A ye means "the."

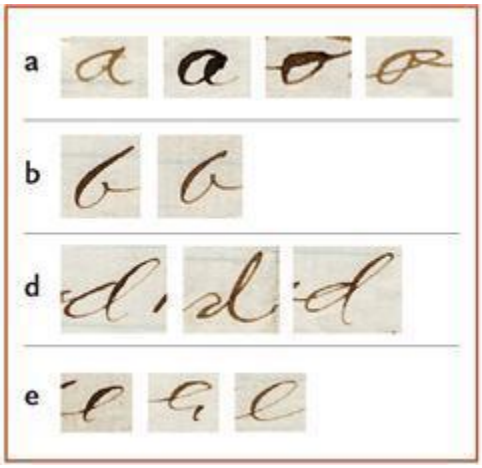
Say you're looking at a handwritten document, and you've uncovered all the class characteristics you can. Now you'll ferret out the writer's individual characteristics. Look for familiar words first — names of months and days, the and and,and archaic phrases such as "Know all men by these presents …" ("Let all know …"), which is used in early American legal documents. By carefully examining these, you can identify idiosyncratic formations of specific letters.

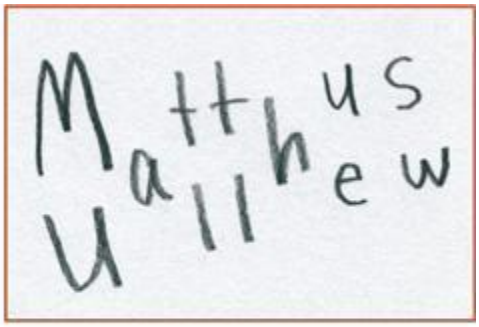
For example, most writers have a characteristic way of forming the th letter combination. Once you find it in a familiar word, such as the, you can skim the document and pencil in a th wherever it occurs in a word you don't know. Then move on, looking for another letter or letter combination you can positively ID. As you work with your document this way and become more familiar with the particularities of the handwriting, you'll find reading it gets easier. Try the example on the opposite page to see how this works.

4. Create an Alphabet Key

For an especially difficult document, you may need to bring in the big guns and make an alphabet. Forensic examiners frequently use this technique. Simply make a key like the one at right by cutting and pasting (digitally using photo-editing software, or on paper with a photocopier) examples of identified letters. Add examples of every letter you know with a reasonable degree of certainty.

When you're faced with a difficult word, compare each letter to those on your key. Write down all of the possible letters of the word in a sort of matrix, such as the one below. According to this matrix, the first letter of this name could be an M or a U, we're sure the next one's an a, the two after that could be ts or ls, there's definitely an h after that, and so on. Then you can scan the possibilities and make educated guesses of the right words. When you're confident you know the word, write it on your photocopy of the document and type it in a separate transcription.





Creating an alphabet key can help you identify individual letters in your document. Use a matrix to map out the possible spellings of a word.

5. More Tricks of the Trade

Even the pros get stumped. Try their secrets when it happens to you:

- **Turn the paper upside down**. The new perspective may jump-start your mind.
- **Read the words aloud**. Hearing them can help with phonetic spellings.
- **Type strange names and words into a search engine**. The alternate spellings Google suggests could be just the words you're looking for.
- **Show the document to someone else**. This person can give it a fresh look.
- **Enhance your view of microfilm**. Lay a sheet of colored paper on the microfilm reader's projection surface. Also try cleaning the reader's glass plates or moving to the darkest part of the library.
- **Keep at it**! When you're frustrated, set aside the document and come back to it later. Stay calm, systematic and meticulous. Decoding that seemingly indecipherable record will get easier as you become more familiar with the writing — and eventually, you'll be able to cash in that genealogical lottery ticket.

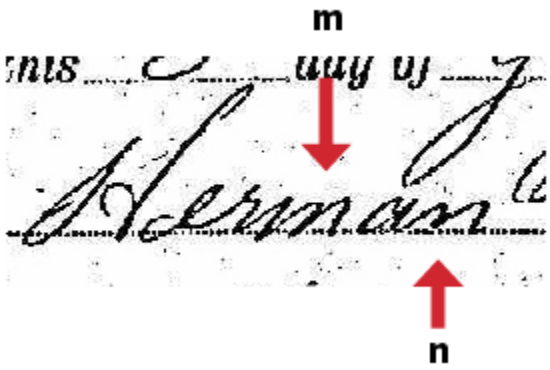
Common Issues to Watch Out For

Old writing styles, unfamiliar characters and abbreviations, fading ink, and individual writers' idiosyncrasies can make the documents extremely difficult to understand.

Here, professional genealogist D. Joshua Taylor highlights tips for understanding these letters and other characters to watch out for.

u, n, w and m; a, o and u; v and r

These letters that can look alike in lower-case form.

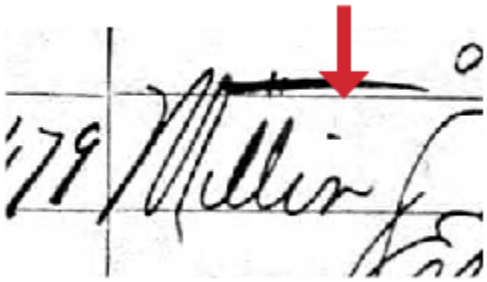


as, os, us

These letter combinations often appear similar in lowercase form.

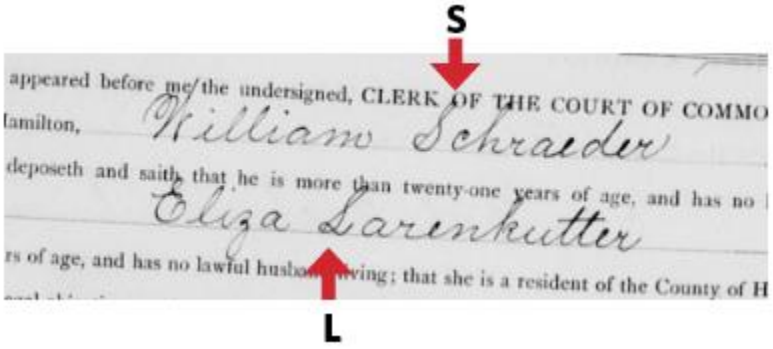
i, t

Undotted is and uncrossed ts can resemble each other, or an e or an l. Also watch for misplaced crosses and dots (in the name below, Miller, the dot is over the e, making it look like an i).



I and J; M and N; S, L and T; T and F; U and V

These capital letter groupings may look alike.



Jno, Elizth, Nics, Geo etc.

Names may be abbreviated (these abbreviations are for John, Elizabeth, Nicholas and George). Here's a link to more common abbreviations for English given names.

A double-letter formation may be abbreviated as a single letter below a horizontal line.

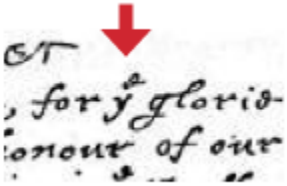
do or "

These abbreviations for "ditto," common in records formatted in rows (such as a census) mean "same as above."

? or *f*

The *s*, especially in a double-*s* formation, may have a long flourish. This "long s" is easily confused with a **p** or an **f**. (This word is "blessing.")

This character, called a thorn, occurs in very old texts and looks like a y. It represents th, so the example here (from the 1620 Mayflower Compact), with an e over the thorn, means “the.”



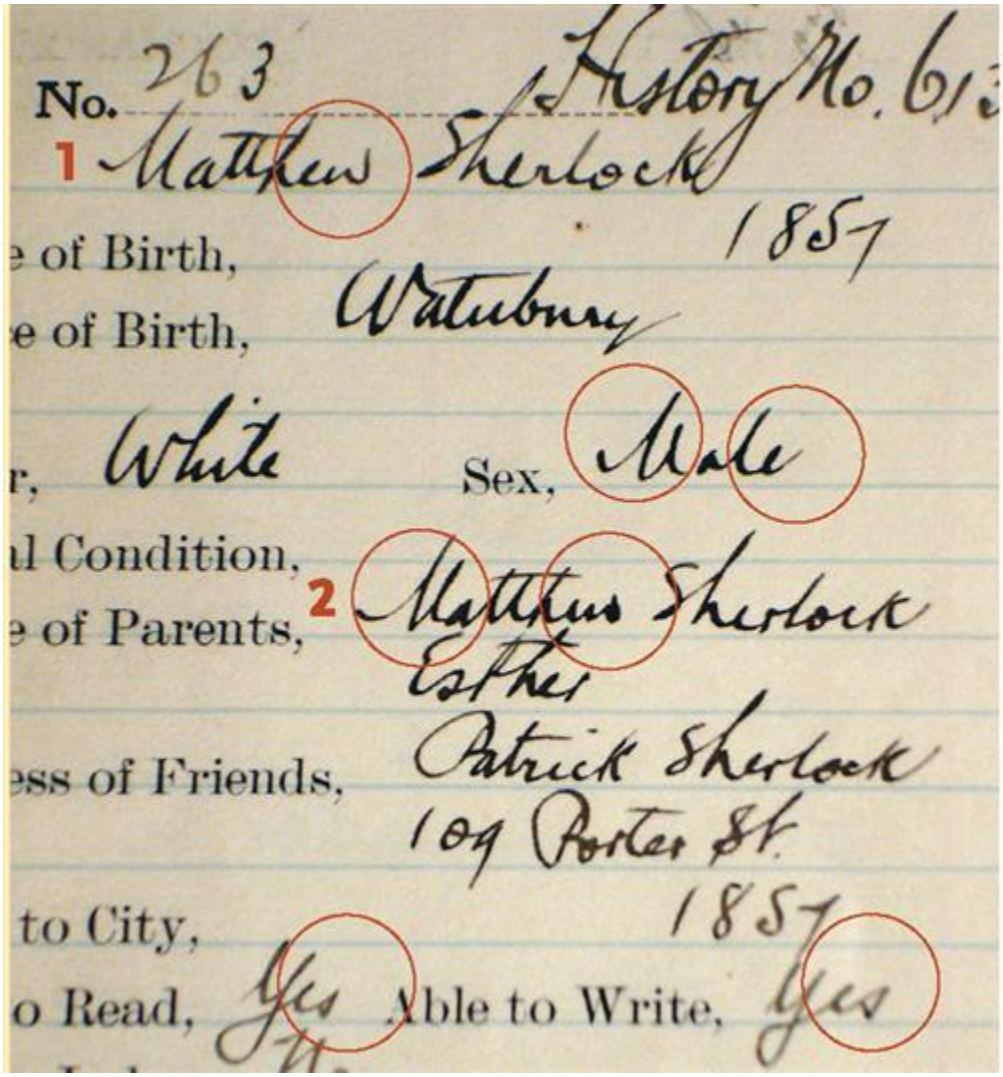
3, 6, 8

These numerals may look alike. If the record has page numbers, copy pages one through 10 to use as reference samples.

Diane Haddad

Case Study: Deciphering a Prison Register

This Waterbury, Conn., prison register almost certainly belongs to someone named Matthew (1). But what’s his father’s name (2) — is it Matthew, too? Could it be Matthus? Malthus? Are you sure the first letter is an M? Looking at just one word in isolation can be dangerous, but when you use words you know to identify individual handwriting quirks, the focus gets sharper.



Prison register from Waterbury, Conn.

Watch this theory in action:

1. Take a look at the line for Sex and compare the M in Male with the first letter of the father's name — I'm sure you'll agree the name starts with M. Now look at thee in Male. It's an up-and-down line, like a modern cursive lowercase i, but without the dot — quite similar to the mystery letters at the end of the father's name.
2. Then study the w in the name Matthew at the top: See how it curves back toward itself, and the right arm extends a wee bit above the rest of the letter? Compare it to the last letter of the father's name — it looks like a w with an inkblot at the end.
3. We can bolster our case against Malthus and Matthus by comparing the two instances of Yes at the bottom of the document. Note how each s is angular, not at all like the last letter of the father's name. We can be pretty sure the name in question is Matthew.

(Reprinted from the Family Tree Magazine blog)

CEMETERY ETIQUETTE FOR GENEALOGISTS

In this article, Gena Philibert-Ortega suggests common-sense rules for something genealogists love to do: visit cemeteries. Gena is a genealogist and author of the book "From the Family Kitchen."

For family historians, summer is a time to travel to cemeteries to document our ancestor's final resting place. Preparing to visit begins with locating the cemetery and the burial. Once you're at the cemetery, you need to consider cemetery etiquette as well.

What is cemetery etiquette? Cemetery etiquette reminds us how to behave at the cemetery and that cemeteries have rules for visitors.

Photo: Resurrection Catholic Cemetery rules, Los Angeles County, California. Credit: Gena Philibert-Ortega.

Cemetery Etiquette Guidelines

It's difficult to provide an all-encompassing list of cemetery etiquette since cemeteries vary greatly depending on where they are located and who maintains them (if at all). The following are some generic guidelines.

Consult the cemetery website before you go. Some, but not all, cemeteries have a website. Cemetery websites include information about visiting the cemetery and may include a section listing rules or cemetery etiquette. Aside from some of the guidelines I've listed below, they may have rules and restrictions about photography in the cemetery and publishing photos. If the cemetery does not have a website, consult any rules posted at the cemetery.

Don't stand on graves. This is probably the one "rule" most of us first learn about cemeteries. As I perused numerous online cemetery etiquette lists, this was one of the requests consistently made. Walk between graves. Pay attention to where the grave is and do not walk over it. Also, do not enter family mausoleums that have been broken into or that have been left unlocked.

Don't touch gravestones or memorials. It can be tempting to touch or lean against a marker or memorial. But in one word, don't. Even if a memorial is made of marble and looks sturdy, touching, leaning, or sitting on it can cause damage. I know that many of us in the past have done gravestone rubbings in an effort to "preserve" and take home our ancestor's marker. It's best to skip the rubbing and take a photo instead. Markers and memorials weigh hundreds of pounds and take very little force to tip over, which can injure you and destroy the marker. So be respectful.

Don't use gravestones as props for your social media posts. I admit that I use gravestone photos for my articles and social media posts. They can be a powerful learning tool. But in this instance, I'm referring to leaning, sitting, or standing on markers or graves. I also don't photograph more recent burials or markers unless they are my family. As I mentioned previously, the cemetery may have rules about photography and using photos that you take. Finally, don't take photos of people or funerals.

Don’t clean memorials without permission. Some people are cleaning markers to help make them more readable. This can be a wonderful service but remember not to do this unless you have the permission of the cemetery. They may have rules against it, or they may want to verify that you know what you are doing. In some cases, people have done irreparable harm to markers despite their good intentions.

Don’t leave items at graves. Each cemetery has different rules, but in general be mindful of what you leave at a burial. Some items may not be welcomed, such as food, balloons, or plastic flowers. Each cemetery is different so consult their rules available on their website or posted at the cemetery.

Watch kids. Cemeteries are not playgrounds. That may seem obvious – and I am a believer in taking children to cemeteries. Cemeteries can be a tool for teaching children their family history, but first go over cemetery etiquette before you get out of the car. Explain to them the importance of not yelling, running, and touching markers. Gravestones, even those that look stable, have been known to fall and injure children.

Pick up litter. Don’t leave trash (or items not allowed) at the cemetery. Trash bins are sometimes provided but if not, take with you any items you brought into the cemetery.

Visit only during daylight hours. Most cemeteries are open from dawn to dusk. Respect those hours. Cemeteries can have all kinds of hazards that are not visible during nighttime, such as uneven pavement, holes, debris, and sinking graves. Consult their website or onsite posted hours.

Don’t bring pets unless it’s allowed. A cemetery may seem like a great place to walk your dog, especially memorial parks with their fields of grass and trees, but make sure the cemetery allows pets before you go. If they do, keep your dog leashed.

Watch where you drive. I’ve visited all types of cemeteries. Memorial parks can have paved streets and obvious places to park. Some rural cemeteries may have burials that are right on the edge of thinly defined roads. Make sure as you drive in the cemetery that you pay attention to where the burials are. If there is grass, keep your car off the grass. I have visited cemeteries where it was best to park the car outside the cemetery gates and walk in, to avoid accidentally disrupting any burials or markers.

Watch your noise. Cemeteries are places where people are mourning. Be respectful of those who are grieving. It can be tempting to excitedly yell when you finally find your ancestor’s burial but think twice. Also, don’t approach people. Visitors to cemeteries are there for a variety of reasons including mourning. Lastly, keep clear of funerals. If there is a funeral being conducted near where you need to take a photo, consider coming back when it’s over.

For More Information

To give you some ideas about the diversity of cemetery rules and etiquette, consult the following websites:

- Arlington National Cemetery – Visitor Rules and Etiquette
- Congressional Cemetery – Rules & Regulations
- Inglewood Park Cemetery – Cemetery Etiquette
- National Park Service – Cemetery Etiquette (PDF)
- Princeton Memorial Park and Mausoleum – A Guide to Cemetery Etiquette: How to Respectfully Visit and Pay Your Respects

Related Articles:

- It's Not All Online: Cemetery Research
- Genealogy Tips: Lessons Learned from Writing a Cemetery Book
- Genealogy Tip: What Does a Gravestone Tell Us?
- Genealogy Tip: What a Gravestone Tells Us – Grave Markers
- Genealogy Tip: How Accurate Is That Gravestone?
- Cemetery Language: A Glossary for Genealogists
- Genealogy Tip: White Bronze Markers at Cemeteries
- Genealogy Tip: Gravestone Porcelain Photos

WEBSITES OF POSSIBLE INTEREST

Our State Knows Best: Tracing Your Family Tree

Find out what three North Carolina genealogists have to say about the best strategies for discovering your family history, some of the most interesting stories they've encountered — and the pitfalls of researching the past.

Take some time to dust off the old photo albums and boxes in the attic, and you might just find out that you had a distant relative who signed the Mecklenburg Declaration — North Carolina's version of the Declaration of Independence — or who migrated to the western part of this state when it was still wild and unsettled. Every handwritten letter and folded-up document found here just might lead to a bigger story.

"When my parents began doing their family trees, that gave me my first peek into genealogy," says Lynn Bancroft, vice president of the Mecklenburg Genealogical Society (Olde Meck) in Charlotte. "I'm just the kind of person who likes doing detective work, and it fits into the idea of solving a puzzle — finding out who all of your ancestors were and putting it together into a story is really fascinating."

We asked Bancroft and two other experts — Diane L. Richard, a professional genealogist and proprietor of Mosaic Research and Project Management in Raleigh, and Elizabeth Hayden, a reference librarian at the State Library of North Carolina's Government and Heritage Library — to share how our state's history plays into North Carolinians' family trees, plus their best tips for delving into genealogy research and where to find help along the way.

https://www.ourstate.com/our-state-knows-best-tracing-your-family-tree/

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

SEDALIA FRESH MARKET - Sat, Aug 5, 12, 19, 26, 2023, 11am - 3pm - *Bundrige Athletic Field 6136 Burlington Rd. Gibsonville NC 27249* -

The Sedalia Fresh Market at the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum is a food, artisanal goods, and wellness market with vendors from the Town of Sedalia and the Triad! Join us on the Bundrige Athletic Field from 11am-3pm to shop and share with the community.

Bring school supplies for our drive and get a free sno-cone! School supply drive info on the flyer linked here.

HEAVY THUNDER: BENTONVILLE SUMMER ARTILLERY AND INFANTRY PROGRAM - Sat, Aug 19 2023, 10am - 4pm – *Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site 5466 Harper House Rd Clayton NC 27524* - Hear the roar of cannon fire! Learn how cannons were loaded and fired during the Civil War. See how infantry maneuvered in the field. Reenactors will portray infantrymen and artillerymen to show what life was life for a Civil War soldier. Firing demonstrations and historical discussions will occur throughout the day. Concessions will be available.

LABORS OF HALIFAX – Sat, Aug 26 2023, 10am - 4pm - *Historic Halifax 25 Saint David St. Halifax NC 27839* - Come learn about the traditional crafts and trades that helped make Halifax, "The hub of the Roanoke". See traditional crafts being made, talk with the tradesmen and women of the era, and discover how people lived and labored in early Halifax. ***Fee for building tours. Free Outdoor Activities.***

HUMOR

A senior citizen in Louisiana was overheard saying ... "When the end of the world comes, I hope to be in Louisiana."

When asked why, he replied, "I'd rather be in Louisiana 'cause everythang happens in Louisiana 20 years later than in the rest of the world."

PARTING THOUGHT

"Funerals seem less about comforting the souls of these dearly departed than about comforting the people they leave behind."

- *Rin Chupeco*

If you have any items of interest that you would like to submit for future publication, please contact Richard Ellington at mailto:richard_ellington@unc.edu or 919.932.0516 (voice/text)