

Is that one person or two?

How to identify and separate people of the same name

It is very easy in genealogical research to combine two or more people of the same name. Likewise, one person can also be mistakenly separated into multiple people. Paying careful attention to the details will help you prevent this from happening or help you correct the mistakes that you find.

One of the most common places to find merged identities is in online trees at websites such as Ancestry.

Sorting out merged identities in online trees

How to identify merged identities:

- There are multiple locations that don't seem to fit into a normal life timeline
- There are potentially too many spouses or too many children
- Careful look at life event dates don't make sense
- Often no sources attached

Sorting out merged identities in your own research

Merged identities are often created by us in our own research because of:

- Finding two people with the same name
- Father and son with the same name
- Same named children (in one family)
- Thinking a name is unusual when "back then" it was more common

How to prevent merged identities or separate people

Use differentiators. These include:

- Name – middle name or initial, nickname, prefixes (Dr), suffixes (Jr/Sr) or post nominals (Md/Esq)
- Age, Dates of birth and death
- Place of birth/death
- Occupation
- Location/address
- Race
- Family – identify parents, siblings etc
- Economic status
- Literacy
- Land ownership
- Military service
- Signature/Handwriting
- FAN Club
- Immigration Status
- Religion

Preventing or separating merged identities

Step 1 - Use multiple documents/records in your research.

Step 2 – Look at the original document/image

Step 3 – Carefully read all your documents

Make use of:

- Census records
- Vital records
- Land records
- Probate records
- City directories
- Gravestones
- Military records
- Church records
- Court records
- Yearbooks
- Newspaper articles
- Passenger lists
- Immigration records
- Land ownership maps
- Passport applications
- Published County/Family Histories

Resources

Books

- Anderson, Robert Charles. *Elements of Genealogical Analysis*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014.
- Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof*. Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013.
- Rising, Marsha Hoffman. *The Family Tree Problem Solver*. Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2011. Especially chap. 8.

Legacy Family Tree Webinars (\$) - <https://familytreewebinars.com>

- Fonkert, J. H. "Genealogical Fingerprints: Merging and Separating Identities in Family History Research."
- Green, Shannon. "Separating & Merging Identities of Same-Named Men"
- Koford, Rebecca. "Are You My Grandpa? Men of the Same Name."
- Koford, Rebecca. "John Jacob Kramer: Case Study of Mistaken Identity among Revolutionary War Soldiers."
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "What's the Evidence? How to Probe Documents Beyond the Obvious"
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "Samuel Witter vs. Samuel Witter: Separating Same Name Men, War of 1812"
- Smith, Robyn. "Proving Identity: Not Matching Names"

Articles

- Nancy A. Peters, CG, CGL. "Hiram Cochran, Freedman of Abbeville County, South Carolina," *NGS Quarterly* 106 (September 2018): 165-180 (<https://bcgcertification.org/learning/skills/genealogical-work-samples/>)
- Stephen B. Hatton, "Thinking About Genealogical Identity," *NGS Quarterly* 104 (September 2016): 215-28.
- Kay Haviland Frelich, "Was She Really Alice Fling? Righting a Wrong Identity," *NGS Quarterly* 88 (September 2000): 225-28.
- Thomas W. Jones, "The Three Identities of Charles D. McLain of Muskegon, Michigan," *NGS Quarterly* 96 (June 2008): 101-120.

National Genealogical Society Quarterly - <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/>