

What To Do When Facts Conflict

According to Donna Murray, savvy researchers don't rely on one source for the truth.

IF YOUR MOTHER says she loves you, check it out. That old saw from my newspaper reporting days may seem callous, but confirming essential facts by using more than one credible source applies as much to genealogy as it does to journalism.

As a genealogist, you must question what you read and what you're told. That's why each significant event — birth, death, marriage — should be supported by three different sources whenever possible.

Why three? Because even the most reliable documents often contain incorrect data. Just because birth and death certificates and marriage records are considered official documents doesn't mean they're accurate.

Take the case of Elijah and Sara Leichter Murray. Sara died on 27 October 1891. Or did she? That's the death date Elijah Murray gave for his first wife on the marriage license application for his second, Addie Mills.

But family Bible records show that Sara gave birth to three children during the eight years following her purported demise. A neat trick if you can do it. So which documents are wrong? Was someone else really the mother of those kids? Sara's actual death date is a key piece of information.

Sara's appearance on the 1900 census rolls prompted a look at the county's Death Books — death certificates were not required in Pennsylvania until about 1905 — which gave Sara's demise as 27 October 1902. Since she's buried in an unmarked grave and the cemetery's files were destroyed in a fire, no other official corroboration exists.

A lengthy search through microfilmed newspapers for 1902

showed that Sara is listed as a survivor in a March 1902 obituary for her daughter and Sara's own death on October 27 was recorded in a gossip column published on 31 October 1902. Further research revealed that Sara's father had died on 1 January 1891, so maybe Elijah Murray simply merged the two dates in his mind.

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The most accurate documents are generally financial ones. Follow the money should be every researcher's mantra, human nature being what it is.

That's how Robert Mills' curious situation came to light. When Mills died in 1904, his obituary hailed him as a Civil War veteran. He must have served because he collected a pension. Right?

Not so fast, says the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). It was actually Robert's son, Amos, who fought in The Rebellion. Amos was killed in action on 15 May 1864. Twenty-five years later, Robert Mills applied for a hardship pension as a dependent father based on Amos' military service.

Mills contended that Amos had helped him financially prior to and while he served in the military, and would have continued to support him in his old age had he not been killed while serving his country.

Robert Mills did receive \$12 a month for the remainder of his

life, but at no time did he serve in the military.

These examples illustrate why it's a big mistake to simply accept the accuracy of the first document you encounter without verifying the facts with additional credible sources.

Obtaining documents can be difficult. Prior to the mid-1800s, records are sparse. Federal census records didn't start until 1790 in the US and only listed heads of households until 1850. Most states didn't require birth and death records until the early 1900s. And, marriage license applications didn't become routine in most places until the late 1800s.

So what to do? Wills and probate records date back hundreds of years. Military pension papers, tax rolls and records of land transactions may help fill in some gaps, as do church and cemetery records.

In more recent times, it's possible to confirm a birth date with a baptismal certificate, Social Security card application, school records, a marriage license application or military records. Funeral home, church and cemetery records, obituaries and epitaphs bolster evidence of death dates. Prove a marriage with census records, land transactions, pension papers, death certificates and their progeny's birth certificates.

What you don't want to do is to assume that all records, even official ones, are completely accurate. If the facts on the first document conflict with those on the second source, it's essential to confirm which one is correct. Dig a little deeper. You might be surprised at what you uncover.