



ILLUSTRATIONS: GARY LOCKE

A whimsical illustration of a tree with a large eye in its trunk and a blue bird perched on a branch. The tree's trunk is brown and textured, with a large, realistic-looking eye embedded in it. A blue bird with a yellow beak and large eyes is perched on a thick, horizontal branch. The background is a bright blue sky with soft white clouds. The overall style is colorful and playful.

The Tree Doctor

No one's research is immune to bad dates, faulty facts and even downright lies. Don't let these errors infect your family tree—follow our diagnostician's prescription for curing five common genealogical ills.

BY SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK



“D

ifferential diagnosis, people!” On TV’s “House,” medical sleuth Dr. Gregory House and his team try to get to the bottom of patients’ mysterious ailments—with House testily demanding his colleagues determine every possible disease they could be dealing with. The challenge, of course, is that one set of symptoms can represent a number of different afflictions (hence the reason House’s colleagues usually offer lupus—which has similar symptoms to practically every other malady—as the differential diagnosis).

We genealogists are diagnosticians of a similar nature, except our patients are already dead. Like real-life (and TV) doctors, we sometimes inadvertently overlook or miss the symptoms of a sick genealogy. Then we end up chasing the wrong ancestors or knocking our heads against a brick wall because we can’t find our forebears where we think they should be.

A good diagnostic genealogist knows every genealogy has the potential to be sick and contagious, no matter where the exposure came from: the Internet, a book, Aunt Susie, a journal article or an original record. To avoid spreading research bugs to unwary family historians, you don’t have to become a DGD (doctor of genealogical diagnostics) or enroll in the Online College of Perpetuating Pedigrees. Instead, use this Carmack Manual of Genealogical Diseases to diagnose—and treat—your troubled trees.

GENEALOGIST’S CHOREA

One of the most common Houseisms is “Everybody lies.” House realizes patients either don’t tell him everything, or don’t tell the truth. In family history, we hope

the genealogies others have compiled are accurate, but could your ancestors lie? Certainly. And could another genealogist lie? ‘Fraid so. That’s why I call this disease “Genealogist’s Chorea”—after the medical condition that presents with symptoms of involuntary dancing or writhing of the limbs or facial muscles. (Our ancestors called it St. Vitus’ dance.) It’s the equivalent of tap dancing around the facts.

Unfortunately, intentionally fraudulent genealogies do exist. This was a much bigger pitfall in the past, when someone wanted to join a lineage society or felt his social standing would be improved with a more illustrious family tree. But if you happen to find and use one of those sham

pedigrees, your genealogy is in for a nasty illness. Probably the most notorious family tree faker was Gustave Anjou (1863-1942), who charged his wealthy American clients \$9,000 per pedigree—and fabricated even his own genealogy. The Family History Library (FHL) <www.familysearch.org> in Salt Lake City still has more than 100 of Anjou’s creative ancestral compilations on its shelves. But you can protect your pedigree by consulting the list of Anjou’s works at Fraudulent Lineages <personal.linkline.com/xymox/fraud/fraud223.htm>.

Sometimes our ancestors deliberately lied, too—even on legal documents. For example, if Grandma gave birth seven months after she married Grandpa, she might’ve fudged her wedding date, altered the baby’s birth date or decided the baby was “premature.” Suppose Uncle Tommy wasn’t quite of age to serve in the military but really wanted to enlist. He might’ve monkeyed with his birth certificate or lied about his age. Out of respect for the family, a doctor might’ve listed cousin Melissa’s cause of death as “uterine hemorrhage” or “cancer of the uterus,” when she actually died from a botched abortion. In some cases, you won’t know if your ancestors fibbed, but you may uncover other records

Symptoms of a Sick Genealogy

You can prevent the spread of genealogical diseases in your own family tree by running these diagnostic tests:

- Do all the dates make sense? Did someone accidentally type 1966 instead of 1866?
- Does the chronology for each family group make sense? Is a mom giving birth too young or too old? Is a man marrying at age 12? Are children born at least nine months apart? Is a child born after the mother has died? Or is a child born before her parents?
- When you find research showing a child in his parents’ family group then carried forward as an adult, do the child details match the adult information?
- What sources did the compiler use? Did she consult original records, such as censuses, passenger lists and land deeds? Or did she rely on secondary sources—citing, for example, “World Family Tree,” “Aunt Susie’s notes” or “Uncle Ted’s GEDCOM file”—that might regurgitate erroneous information?
- Does biographical information seem exaggerated and too good to be true?
- Are conclusions faulty? Has a compiler misinterpreted a document because she doesn’t understand the legal terms for a particular time period? What information is the compiler basing a parent-child relationship on?

or details that don't jibe with the questionable source. Then you know you're dealing with Genealogist's Chorea.

DATEITIS

Bad dates. We've all been on 'em, including me. But I've discovered a date condition to which genealogists seem predisposed. In this disease, the dates don't make any sense and seem to get inflamed each time they're repeated. In other words, they're "rash" dates—hence the name Dateitis.

Once you start looking for the symptoms, I bet you'll find many genealogies afflicted with Dateitis. Be careful: It's really contagious, and usually involves massive regurgitation. I've seen cases where Mom gave birth at age 12, or she's having more menopause babies than she did in her child-bearing years. Dad got married at age 11. Kids were born before their parents, less than nine months apart, or long before the couple wed. Boys enlisted in the service before they reached puberty. Twins were born on different days, and in one remarkable case that could win the Incredibly Ill Genealogy award, I encountered twins who were born in different counties. Unbelievably, unsuspecting genealogists have regurgitated these sick genealogies over and over again online. No one bothered to check the dates to see if they made sense.

Here's an example of Dateitis from a real genealogy I consulted on. (In fact, all the cases presented here are from real genealogies, but I've changed some names to protect patient privacy.)

■ **Presentation:** Susannah Ormsby was born Dec. 31, 1842, in Wilkes County, NC; died June 8, 1874, in Wilkes County, NC; married Jan. 15, 1867, at the home of her father, Henry Evans Drummond. Her children, all born in Wilkes County, were:

- i. William, b. Sept. 5, 1867
- ii. Clara, b. May 5, 1869
- iii. Anna, b. Sept. 9, 1870
- iv. Thomas (twin), b. June 22, 1874
- v. Henry (twin), b. June 22, 1874

■ **Symptoms:** Look at the dates carefully. Do you see any problem here? If you pay close attention, you'll see Susannah gave birth to twins two weeks after she died.

■ **Diagnosis:** It's not lupus. It's Dateitis.

■ **Treatment:** How do you heal this sick genealogy? Go back to all your sources to make sure you've entered the information

Test Your Diagnostic Skills

Can you identify the symptoms of these three ailing family histories? (You'll find the answers on the next page.)

EXAM ROOM 1

Sarah Dawson was born April 30, 1704, in Stratford, Conn. She married Ephraim Franklin Jan. 15, 1729. He was born in 1693, the son of Stephen and Sarah (Nelson) Franklin. He had been previously married to Mary (Brogan) Fitzmaurice, who died Aug. 18, 1729. Ephraim and Mary had two children: Eunice, born Oct. 27, 1722, and Martha, born June 11, 1724.

Sarah and Ephraim's children:

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| i. Mary | b. May 16, 1729 |
| ii. Ephraim | b. Sept. 24, 1730 |
| iii. Sarah | b. Feb. 2, 1732 |
| iv. Edmund | b. Oct. 20, 1733 |
| v. Elizabeth | b. May 20, 1734 |
| vi. Stephen | b. Feb. 14, 1737 |
| vii. William | b. April 12, 1739 |
| viii. Abel (twin) | b. Nov. 3, 1742 |
| ix. Lewis (twin) | b. Nov. 5, 1742 |

EXAM ROOM 2

Abraham Judd was born Oct. 4, 1735, in Colchester, Conn. He married Louise Reynolds Aug. 15, 1765. She was born Aug. 16, 1754, in Colchester, the daughter of James and Sarah Reynolds. Louise died Jan. 25, 1774. Abraham moved to Springfield, Vt., with his son about 1792, where he died July 18, 1808. Abraham and Louise had four children: John, b. Mar. 20, 1765, m. Nancy Oliver Nov. 23, 1803; Fanny, b. April 29, 1768, m. Leonard Kenny; Sarah, b. May 3, 1770; Jane, b. 27 Jan. 1774.

EXAM ROOM 3

William⁴ Larsen (William³, Benjamin², Thomas¹) was born Jan. 9, 1736, in Colchester, Conn. He married, but his wife's name is not known. In February 1760, he asked for 100 acres of land on Lewis and Barrington Creek near his father, William³. In 1762, he sold his stock to his brother, John. The one known child of William and his wife was William⁵, b. ca. 1722, who married first Susan Martin on Aug. 22, 1802, d. 1808, no children. William⁵ married second Drusilla Winters, b. 1781, d. August 1829. William⁵ d. Jan. 31, 1828, in Midway, Ga.

correctly. In this case, it was a simple typo: The month of Susannah's death should've been July, not June. But what if you double-check your sources and find you didn't mistype anything? Then you have to wonder whether the source is wrong. Certainly, errors do occur in records, even when dates are carved on a tombstone. If this is the case, you need to explain the problem and discrepancy in your notes.

Suppose you've found this genealogy online—on several family historians' Web sites, in fact—and they all list the same facts without any sources. The Center for Genealogical Disease Control recommends

you contact each person to see if you can discover where the condition originated, so you can help treat the illness before it becomes an epidemic.

LINEAIRES DISEASE

Another symptom of a sick genealogy is when a researcher links a child to parents who can't possibly be his—although the surnames are the same, and the purported parents show up in the same locality as the adult child. These faulty lineages have been stricken with Lineaires Disease. Let's look at one from Ancestry World Tree <ancestry.com/trees/awt>.

■ **Presentation:** William Hillman was born about 1748 in Somerset County, Md. He married Sally Perkins, who was born about 1752. They had a son, also named William Hillman, who was born about 1764 in Somerset County, Md., died about 1835 in Scott County, Va., and was buried in Moore Cemetery, Dungannon, Scott County, Va.

■ **Symptoms:** Sons are often named after their fathers, and both men live in the same county and state. So what's the problem with this lineage? William Sr. would've been 16 and Sally 12 when their son was born. Though this is physically possible, how good are the odds it's true? Yet this diseased genealogy is online, and many genealogists will simply copy and paste it into their family tree files—without thinking to look for the symptoms.

■ **Diagnosis:** No, it's not lupus. This genealogy has Lineagaires Disease, with Dateitis as a contributing factor.

■ **Treatment:** This genealogy will require several tests and theories to arrive at the

best treatment. Not all diseases have black-and-white cures. Just when you think you have the right antidote, you still might need to run other tests to be sure you're on the right track. This is one of those complex problems that will require research into original records such as land deeds, tax records, probate files and court cases.

ACUTE FAULTY LOGIC SYNDROME

Let's stay with William Hillman Jr. a moment longer, because all of a sudden, he's presenting with more symptoms. Another genealogist reported that William served in the Maryland Regiment in the Revolutionary War. If William's birth year of 1764 is correct, he would've been 11 when the war started in 1775. The Revolution lasted until 1783, so it's possible he served toward the war's end—plus, youngsters did serve as drummer boys and tend to the horses.

Index to Revolutionary War Service Records by Virgil D. White (National

Historical Publication Co., out of print) shows that a William Hillman served in the Revolutionary War from Somerset County, Md., but this William was born about 1753-1754 and died in Somerset County Aug. 16, 1822. None of the other family information matched, either—that is, the wives and children had different names. Clearly, someone must have found this other William and because the name and place were the same, assumed it was the "right" William. Clearly, this patient is suffering from Acute Faulty Logic Syndrome.

In another case for which I was the attending physician, the patient advocate (researcher) was trying to explain why Stephen Masterson (not his real name) would jump from North Carolina to Pennsylvania. Stephen served in the October 1780 Battle of King's Mountain in North Carolina, but the advocate found records stating Stephen's first child, a daughter, was born in Pennsylvania a year later, on Nov. 18, 1781. Then Stephen appeared in a 1782 tax list that placed him back in North Carolina.

Initially, you might think the record giving the daughter's birth in Pennsylvania must be wrong. That's a lot of movement for a man during the late 1700s and over such a short time span. So what's the differential diagnosis? In other words, what else might've caused this man to jump to Pennsylvania and back?

The first symptom I identified: gender bias. Instead of trying to figure out Stephen's movements, the advocate should've been trying to determine where Mrs. Masterson was during this time. This researcher assumed Stephen would be with his wife when she gave birth—but it doesn't really matter where Stephen was on that date.

That's where Acute Faulty Logic Syndrome comes in. Some women, if able, went back to their mothers' homes to have their first babies. If the daughter was born Nov. 18, 1781, Mrs. Masterson would've conceived around Feb. 25, 1781. (For a handy conception-birth date calculator, go to <healthlink.mcw.edu/article/923526833.html>. Where it says Estimated Due Date, type in the ancestor's month and day of birth. Don't worry about the year—you'll have to mentally figure that. Then click Calculate Backward for the probable date of conception.)

Answers to "Test Your Diagnostic Skills"

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EXAM ROOM 1

1. Ephraim married his second wife before the first one died. He might've divorced the first wife, but this symptom needs to be ruled out before you can make an accurate diagnosis.
2. The child Mary, born May 16, 1729, is a tad premature: She arrived just four months after Ephraim and Sarah married. That's certainly possible—not all of our ancestors waited until after they'd walked down the aisle—but given this genealogy's other problems, it's suspect.
3. Edmund and Elizabeth are born too close together. If Sarah gave birth to Edmund in October 1733, it's physically impossible for her to have another baby seven months later.
4. Rarely are twins born two days apart. Abel and Lewis should have the same birth date.

EXAM ROOM 2

1. Son John is born five months before his parents married. Again, it's possible—but is it likely?
2. Louise was only 11 when she married Abraham and gave birth to John. She was 14 when she gave birth to the next child, and 16 when she gave birth to the third child.
3. Daughter Jane was born two days after her mother died. This seldom happens (even on "House").

EXAM ROOM 3

1. William⁴'s son, William⁵ (the superscript numerals indicate the generations of descent), can't have been born about 1722: That would mean he was born before his father!
2. If William⁵ was indeed born in 1722, he would've been 80 when he first married in 1802.
3. Further, he would've been 106 when he died in 1828—it's possible, but not probable.

We know the couple had to be together on the conception date, assuming Mama was behaving herself. But to figure out the daughter's birthplace, the patient advocate needed to determine where Mrs. Masterson was and where her family resided. Stephen could've been anywhere; in fact, he may never have left North Carolina.


INFLAMMATORY BIOGRAPHY DISEASE

Our next case is a tricky one. We're attempting to settle a long-running debate about Abraham Riggs—did he serve in the Revolutionary War? Online, you'll find many references to his service, including this glowing biography, which has been repeated over and over again with various wording (and naturally, provides no source):

At the age of 18 [Abraham Riggs] joined the American Revolutionary Army, serving with great distinction throughout the great war for America's independence or until 1781. He was badly wounded in the battle of Brandywine in 1777 and carried scars of this conflict up to the time of his death. At the age of 85 he was offered a pension by the U.S. Government and more from family pride and lack of necessity, than haughtiness, he refused same. He died at the age of 86 and was always considered one of the great lights of the Revolutionary War.

■ **Symptoms:** The government didn't just "offer" someone a pension for war service. The veteran had to apply for it, and usually because he needed it. Given that, if Abraham applied for a pension, why would he then turn it down?

■ **Diagnosis:** What do you think the differential diagnosis is? (No, it's not lupus!) First, we'll order several tests, but it's usually best to start with the obvious—that is, to look at Abraham's 1835 Revolutionary War pension application file. Abraham claimed he'd served in the Battle of Brandywine from a regiment in Virginia. He also named the commanding officers, as well as a friend and two cousins who were killed in the battle. Abraham stated he was "three times drafted from sd County of Accomack in to the Continental

 CONTEST

Ailing Ancestry Alert

We bet you've seen some seriously sick genealogies yourself. What's the shoddiest, phoniest or most ridiculous family tree you've encountered? Expose that faulty family history in our **Diagnostic Genealogy Contest**, and you could win a "Family Tree Examination Kit"—that is, \$100 in how-to books to help you build a healthy family history.

To enter, register for our online forum at <www.familytreemagazine.com/forum>, and post your example in the contest area (under Exclusives for Registered Users) by **Nov. 30**. Include a brief summary (300 words or less) of the problematic pedigree, along with a link to or the title of the source where you found it. (Bonus points if you identify the diseases it's suffering from.)

We'll examine all the entries and reward the submitter of the sickest lineage. Winners will be contacted by e-mail, so be sure to register with a valid e-mail address.



line of the Virginia troops on tours of nine months each."

Also in the file was the War Department's decision. It rejected his application, stating that "our records afford no evidence of his alleged service in the Virginia line nor has the applicant statement given with such precision as to the period of service or the regiments to which he belonged or the service performed by him as to enable the Dept. to arrive at a correct decision in his case. If he was present at the battle of Brandywine it is probable that he served under one engagement in a regiment belonging to the continental establishment. It is doubtful whether all his service was as a regular soldier. The militia were not drafted to serve as long as nine months as alleged." The War Department also wanted to know why Abraham had waited so long to apply, and why he hadn't applied under the pension act of 1818. Abraham's file contained no further response from him.

Let's move on to the next tests. We'll check all the sources relating to Revolutionary soldiers we can think of, from printed publications to microfilmed rosters to anything we can find online. The results: still no proof of Abraham's service. Interestingly, the regiments commanded by the men Abraham named never served at Brandywine, nor did any other Virginia regiment, according to *Virginia Lineages of Revolutionary War Regiments* by John

W. Lynn (Lynn Research, out of print). Further, the friend and two cousins killed in battle seem not to have left any record of Revolutionary War service, either. They weren't listed in *Known Military Dead During the American Revolutionary War, 1775-1783* by Clarence Stewart Peterson (Genealogical Publishing Co., out of print), or the other Revolutionary War rosters or sources I consulted.

■ **Diagnosis:** Now do you know what you're dealing with? That's right: This patient is suffering from chronic Inflammatory Biography Disease (IBD).

■ **Treatment:** Sadly, there was little we could do to treat this case of IBD, except to document our findings in our files and in the information we share. The legend of Abraham's service is too widespread and—like any epidemic—impossible to eradicate unless everyone is treated and inoculated.

So now you have a greater understanding of diagnostic genealogy and how diagnosticians work. Unfortunately, in the course of identifying all these diseases, I realized I was catching something: I was becoming more like Dr. Gregory House, dressing in wrinkled T-shirts. As he would put it, "I don't have time for laundry, I'm saving genealogies here!" 🐾

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