

Curse of the Common Surname

John M. Hoenig shows us how to handle overwhelmingly common surnames

I AM FORTUNATE that most of my surnames of interest are rather uncommon. According to www.placesnamed.com, the name Peller is the 19,008th most common name in America. In other words, it's quite uncommon! However, I found that many of the Peller males were named Max, Moses or Morris, names which are often used interchangeably. So, like most everyone else, I've had to develop strategies to deal with dozens of people with the same name.

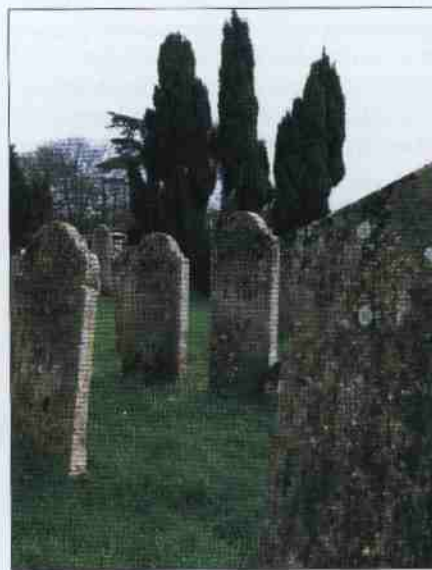
The solution to this problem is something you won't want to hear: use the Extra Principle. You have to work extra hard, pay extra attention to details, be extra organized and be extra clever. Fortunately, there is a general strategy for determining concrete ways for this advice to be implemented.

Uncommon Aspects

The basic idea is to focus on the uncommon aspects of the common. Here are three simple examples. Suppose John Smith married Mary and had four children: Robert, David, Susan and Abigail. Which name is the least common? If you're searching through an every-name index, as is often available for federal censuses, I'd search for Abigail Smith rather than Smith or John Smith. Suppose, further, we know that John Smith married Mary Jingleheimersmith. I would focus on studying the Jingleheimersmiths because that name is so uncommon that most Jingleheimersmiths are probably related. You might find members of the Smith family boarding with the Jingleheimersmiths, or living in close proximity, in federal censuses; Smiths might be mentioned in probate papers of members of the Jingleheimersmith family. As a third example, suppose that John Smith was a dentist. That's a reasonably uncommon profession. An efficient way to wade through all the John Smiths looking for the dentist is to contact the archivists of the American Dental Association and have them look through their records.

Look for Family Clusters

You may find Smiths in almost every cemetery you investigate. However, your Smiths may be localized. To put it another way, unrelated Smiths may be rather uncommon in the cemetery where your Smiths are located. Therefore, when you locate a cemetery with a grave of a known Smith relative, be sure to look at all the Smith graves in the cemetery. Similarly, look for possible relatives in the censuses in



When you find one relative's grave in a cemetery, you should look around for other relatives. Relatives are often buried in close proximity to other relatives, as these Smith gravestones show.

the neighborhoods where you know your Smith relative lived. Relatives often joined the same church and social clubs, so searching a particular church's records is likely to turn up several relatives, if it turns up any at all.

Relatives often went into the same profession. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many of my wife's relatives were roofers in Belgium. So, if you search city directories and find many Smiths, follow up first on the ones listed as having the same profession as known Smith relatives. Also, follow up on names that might follow cultural naming practices.

Efficient Searching

With common surnames, the most efficient research technique is to focus on personal sources and heirlooms. Two minutes of conversation can save you hours of research time in the archives. Your great-aunt Tillie might tell you there were Smith relatives who lived in a big house on a hill in the east side of town. Looking at a map will tell you what streets were on the east side and a topographic map may identify the hill area. Then, when you search the census for Smiths, you can focus on the right part of town. The clue about a house (rather than an apartment) may also be helpful. As valuable as interviews, is the photographic legacy. Photos often have names, dates and locations that can be helpful. Instead of finding Smiths and then determining if they're relatives, you can find the names of known relatives and then search for them in the records.

It is generally a good idea to start with computerized databases before going to paper and microfilm records. The reason is simply that computerized searching is much faster than manual searching. Here is where attention to detail and organization can pay off big time. You want to categorize all the Smiths you find as being either known relatives, unrelated Smiths, or persons of unknown status.

Furthermore, you want to compile profiles of all Smiths, but especially those known or suspected to be relatives (see article on Matching Records to People in the May/June 2004 issue of *Family Chronicle*.) Then, when you find a record, you have a means of determining quickly if it's of interest.

Compiled genealogies are always helpful but are perhaps even more so for common surnames. A book about Smiths that are not relatives might save you a lot of hard work determining that a bunch of records are not relevant.