

HEY THERE, GOOD LOOKIN', WANT A DATE? *

TIP 1: Remember that, just like time zones, calendar dates vary from place to place and from year to year.

Genealogists are inundated with dates: When was someone born, baptized, in school, in the military, married, arriving on a ship, in a new residence, in a grave? Finding those dates may be tricky, especially when revolutions and time warps happen.

Everything on Earth literally revolves around the sun. We typically think of a year as 365 days. Julius Caesar added an extra day every four years—hence Leap Year. His Julian calendar for the Roman Empire lasted from 46 B.C. until 1582 A.D., when Pope Gregory XIII learned that a full revolution of the Earth around the Sun is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 47.8 seconds—not 365 days and 6 hours, as Caesar thought. The discrepancy of 11 minutes and 12.2 seconds a year, times 1,600+ years, prompted Pope Gregory to eliminate 10 days in October 1582 and adjust leap year calculations every century.

QUIRK nos. 1 and 2: The Gregorian calendar went into effect in all Roman Catholic countries in 1582, but not in places that had other timekeeping systems. Great Britain didn't adopt that calendar until 1751. But, not only did the days shift by 11, New Year's Day changed from March 25 to January 1. Double dating (no, not you and a friend going out with two buddies) was a year written with a slash, such as 1734/5, to accommodate a tradition of the first of the year being January 1 but March 25 by the Anglican Church. So, between October 5, 1582, and December 31, 1751, and between January 1 and March 24, dates can get confused and miscalculated, especially when determining a birth date from an age on a tombstone or death record. Some records have abbreviations of O.S. ("Old Style") or N.S. ("New Style") to distinguish dates.

Julian calendar to Gregorian calendar conversion for Great Britain and its colonies:

from October 5, 1582, through February 28, 1700 – add 10 days to an Old Style date

from March 1, 1700, through December 31, 1751 – add 11 days to an Old Style date

QUIRK no. 3: The Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, did not use any names for months but instead used numbers. Prior to 1752, the eleventh and twelfth months were January and February. Because Quakers controlled the Pennsylvania legislature, their dating system may be found in early colonial records (before to the American Revolution), in addition to their religious records elsewhere.

EXAMPLE OF DATE CONVERSIONS

Old Style (Julian calendar)

Quaker style

New Style (Gregorian) equivalent

January 4, 1723/4

11th month 4th 1723/4

January 15, 1724

* Condolences to my friend's parrot, killed in a house fire in the 1970s, which surprised visitors with "Hi, good looking, want a beer?"

QUIRK no. 4: The Latin month names of September, October, November, and December—for the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth months—became the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months under the new system, but old records sometimes show them as 7bre, 8bre, 9bre, Xbre (or –bris), X being the Roman numeral; the other numbers may also have been in Roman style.

TIP 2: *Watch out for inaccurate readings of numbers, transpositions of numerically written days and months, misinterpretations of names of months, and other generally sloppy and stupid dates.*

Any record—handwritten, typed, or inscribed in stone—is subject to error. A mistake in one document can be compounded when someone inaccurately transcribes it, and it gets repeated ad infinitum on public genealogy tree databases. On the other hand, a record can be amended or clarified by affidavit or notation. One of my great-grandfathers, for example, was born in 1824, but his tombstone shows 1842. The website of the historical society in the town where he is buried includes a correction for his marker, as well as corrections for other inaccurate markers in the local cemetery.

While people in the United States typically show dates as month/day/year, Europeans record dates as day/month/year. If you see 2.5.1876, you may think it is February 5, 1876, but in Germany or Norway it would be 2 May 1876. Dates entered numerically as year-month-day (2017-07-15) make more sense for sorting by computer, but may be harder for “old-school” human brains to comprehend. Speaking of which, old newspapers cited dates with “inst.,” referring to *instant* (happened this month) or “ult.,” referring to *ultimus* (happened last month).

COMMON ERRORS IN GENEALOGICAL RECORDS

<i>a century typo:</i>	A date in the 1800s shown as a date in the 1900s, for example.
<i>a decade typo:</i>	An event shown in, say, the 1850s actually occurred in the 1840s or 1860s.
<i>an annual typo:</i>	A January date written with the previous year, out of habit, instead of the number of the new year. For instance, I have discovered a few ships listed in published books that arrived in January actually came a year later than shown.
<i>mixed-up months:</i>	Jan/Jun, Mar/May, Aug/Oct.
<i>“heard it wrong”:</i>	It sounded like someone said age 60, but they were actually 16.
<i>“read it wrong”:</i>	The age of an infant was recorded on a census or passenger list in months, but someone misinterprets it in years; the 16-month-old toddler suddenly becomes a teenager, hence the year of birth is off by 14 or 15 years.
<i>wrong numbers:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* written number 1 looks like 7 (or vice versa).* written number 4 looks like 6, 7, or 9 (or vice versa).* written number 6 looks like 8 or 0 (or vice versa).* a two-digit number is missing a digit, e.g., 23 transcribed as 3, or written number 1, for January, actually 10 (October) or 11 (November).

Next Month: Second Date (is it getting serious?)

This fact sheet is a public service by Evelyn Roehl to help people find records about their ancestors. Contact her by e-mail, kinhunters@gmail.com, or phone 206-634-1709.

Please feel free to share this with friends, fellow kin-seekers, and family history and genealogical organizations.