

Too Many Daves: Methods to Tell Your Ancestor Apart from Others of the Same Name

Presented by Anna Hopkins-Arnold, PhD (Bio.)

Rootfinders Genealogy Research
www.RootfindersGR.com (970)946-4876 aha@RootfindersGR.com

It is often a surprise how many people born in the same state and sometimes the same county bear the same name as your ancestor. What is a descendant to do? Learn methods to objectively distinguish your ancestor from others of the same name. See how to evaluate sources and form proof arguments to establish which “Dave” is yours.

The problem is collecting enough information on each candidate to be able to distinguish or differentiate all the candidates that are NOT your ancestor from the one candidate who IS.

Identify Candidates

The Genealogical Proof Standard tells us to explore all reasonable possibilities so, in order to narrow down the field, we first have to collect all the players. We can do this either in writing or using a computer database.

Quarantine: Separate this Ancestor from the Rest of my Family History Database

When I realize I have to differentiate between different candidates, I export a small family tree database file or GEDCOM that includes the ancestor in question along with any close family members. I also print any relevant documents.

Identify Genuine Documents

First, do you have any documents that were handed down through the family and are believed to be genuine documents of this ancestor? If so, pay particular attention to these documents. Make a copy, then on the copy, highlight the facts that the document shows; dates, locations, names of other family members. List these facts.

Identify Essential Information

Next, I take a close look at the information I have for this ancestor paying close attention to ensure that I have not already merged information from two or more candidates. If it looks like I have

merged information, I start with just a name and identify those characteristics that absolutely define MY ancestor. For example, in the case of a Grandmother, two defining characteristics could include:

1. Married my Grandfather
2. Mother of my Father

Secondary characteristics might include: being the mother of my aunts and uncles, dying on the same date that my family lists as our grandmother's date of death, living in the same state, county, and city where other evidence shows our grandmother lived.

Next, identify which documents you have that provide evidence of those essential characteristics.

If the documents do not support your essential characteristics, then sort them into groups that apply to different people.

If you are merging virtual documents into a family history program, then for each new document, create a new person. You can always merge the people later, if they turn out to be the same person.

Make a Table of Facts Shown by the Documents You Have Found

Compare Facts on different documents and group the documents that appear to apply to one person.

Build a table of characteristics, comparing the different candidates.

Use vital record facts including:

- full name including middle initial &/or middle name
- date of birth, location of birth
- date of baptism, location of baptism
- parents names
- siblings names
- birth order
- marriage date, location, spouse's name
- children's names, birth order
- occupation
- physical description

You won't have all of this, but every little bit helps, so get all the documents you can & copy and highlight to extract all useful info from each document. Get to know both your ancestor AND the others of a similar name who lived and worked near him.

When you get a new document, put those characteristics in a new column (assume the new document applies to a new and different person until the evidence is compelling enough to merge them)

Sources for Detailed Information Vary by Time Period

For learning middle names of early 20th Century men, try checking the WWI and WWII draft registration forms. These have middle names for men whose other records show just an initial. Furthermore these have birth dates, occupation info, person who will know where you are at all times, and physical descriptions. These can help separate different men from each other.

Match these up with census data by comparing the birth dates given with the birth month & year given in the 1900 US Census and matching spouse or children with the “person who will always know where you are.

Passport applications also provide birth dates & locations, occupation, physical descriptions, and sometimes next of kin.

Occasionally Civil War enlistment or discharge papers include physical characteristics.

Some voter registration records included physical characteristics in certain years.

Do not be surprised when an ancestor with a common name has a sibling who also has a common name, too. In researching California Flynn families, I found two families both with similarly aged sons named William and Frank. Both the Franks were Frank J. All four sons were born within 4 years of each other in the same state. The differences between them included: the Williams did have different middle initials (but one was S and the other L – letters that could be confused in transcriptions), and one set of parents were born in Ireland and the other pair in two different states.

Make a Time line for each Candidate

Try to find series of census records tracking different candidates back in time. Try to show where the different candidate go separate ways. But keep in mind that occasionally the census enumerators caught one person twice in the census. Usually the person will give the same answers both times making it fairly easy to tell that it is the same person, but occasionally they will not.

Remember that different spouses and children may or may not eliminate a candidate. I found a Revolutionary War era woman who married three times and had children by all three husbands. Originally we thought there were three different Keziah's with three different families, but time lines

and wills showed that the same Keziah married all three husbands.

For another early colonist, the opposite was true. A military man and a minister both shared the same name, but their descendants merged the stories of the two men to create a colonial renaissance man who excelled at both war and peace, built both forts and churches, lived off and on in two communities and had two different wives and two different families in two different communities.

Compare Objectively the Facts and Time lines for each Candidate

There was a time when people, given a choice, picked the candidate most likely to provide an ancestral line that they found desirable. Today we try to objectively consider all candidates and pick the candidate who most closely fits the essential facts defined in step one. If you are working on an ancestor who is new to your family history stories, this may be easy. But if you are sorting out a line where the traditions somehow didn't add up. Occasionally we end up having to let go of a tradition that our family has held dear for decades (centuries even). That can be difficult. Whatever your choices document them carefully and explain which facts and documents led you to your conclusions.