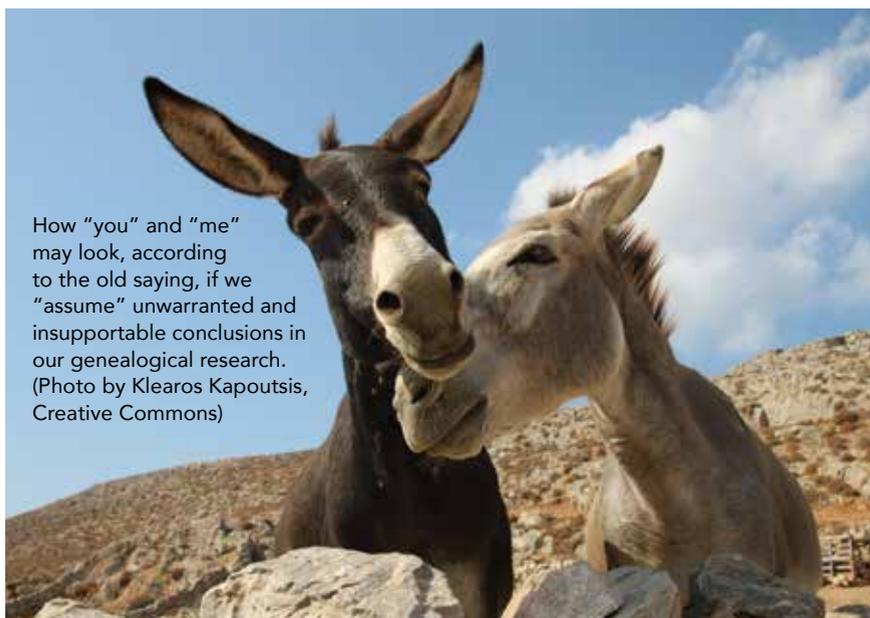




Avoiding the Perils of Assumption

by Robbie Gorr



How “you” and “me” may look, according to the old saying, if we “assume” unwarranted and insupportable conclusions in our genealogical research. (Photo by Klearos Kapoutsis, Creative Commons)

“WHEN YOU ASSUME SOMETHING, YOU MAKE AN”...YES, WE all remember how the old adage goes. It plays on the fact that the letters of the word ‘assume’ may be separated into three smaller phonemes sounding like words, and is intended to suggest that one should not make assumptions because they may turn out to be wrong and cause those involved to appear foolish. And that may be some valuable advice. In genealogy and family history, making assumptions could be devastating to your research, leading you astray down wrong roads, stalling your progress and wasting months, and perhaps years, of your time, effort and resources.

Everyone does it. We assume even the simplest things based on common experience, a likely possibility or what seems to be a logical idea. We assume that our ancestors were all married, that all their children were born afterwards, that missing family members must have died and that people of the same name must be related. We assume that the family immigrated all together, that they settled in just one place and that familial stories and traditions are true, having been passed along unchanged.

An assumption is the belief that some event or circumstance can be accepted as true even though there may be no proof. And even when we find actual evidence, it is still possible to assume that the proof is correct and accurate without correlating that information with other corroborative records. After all, it is possible that an original record might be mistaken in its information because the people who documented it may have misremembered or inadvertently erred. And, knowing the frailty of human behaviour, they may also have lied, denied or possibly even fabricated the facts.

So how, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of presumption and conjecture to discover the truth in our genealogical research? Thankfully, there are some

other, more useful, maxims and mottos that can help you to avoid the perils of assumption.

Don't Be Complacent

It's just too easy to accept new information at first glance. We assume that whatever we have discovered is correct and must be the final word and often make no further efforts to prove or disprove it. That is usually the first misstep.

It might be hard to imagine that any official record or document we discover could possibly contain some erroneous or misconstrued data. But a mother might provide incorrect information on a child's birth certificate to protect her reputation or her child's. A grieving son or daughter might not correctly recall information for their parent's death certificate. Registrars, clerks and other municipal employees could make spelling mistakes, omissions, typos and even use illegible handwriting on official documents. That's why one record is never enough. Multiple sources and different kinds of sources that corroborate the same details are needed.



Being complacent and accepting any new information as fact can be the first misstep that will hinder your research progress. (Photo by spcbrass, Creative Commons)