



"Sorting Out Smiths and Keeping Up with the Joneses": Ancestors with the Same Names

David A. Norris looks at ways to overcome the hurdles of researching ancestors with the same name

HOW MANY JOHN SMITHS have I run into during this recent spate of genealogical research while "in exile" during the COVID-19 pandemic? That's one problem: I don't know how many! My family tree has three different men named John Smith (not to mention two women named Betsy Smith). On some days of research through a county's deed and probate records, it wasn't unusual to run across half a dozen mentions of John Smith in the same day. Were they one of these three direct ancestors? Were they more distant relatives? Or, were they entirely unrelated people with the same name? A way to make sense of a collection of identically-named ancestors is attaching each of them to unique identifying features, such as family ties; titles or military ranks; ownership of a piece of land; or a number of other genealogical markers that we'll take a look at.

Of course, we're not really talking only about families named Smith here. Besides several Smith families, my own family tree has unrelated lines of Johnsons, Turners, and Powells, not to mention Joneses. Places with significant German immigration might abound with many unrelated families with names like Schultz or Schmidt, just as heavy immigration from Scotland might leave a confusing tangle of McNeills and McLeans and Campbells in land and probate records. Add in the all-too-frequent repetition of given names often seen in families, and one can end up researching lots of people with the same names who were born about the same time, and whose genealogical trails cross and tangle together.



Capt. John Smith of Jamestown was only one of the countless John Smiths one might find in early historical and genealogical records. (Library of Congress)

Nicknames helped cut back some of the generational confusion. In England and the colonial US, the name Mary was so common that the nicknames Polly and Molly, and Poll and Moll, helped individualize children. Alas, early nicknames can also create problems centuries later among family trees. One of my relatives, born Mary Atkins, was sometimes called Polly Atkins. As if that was not confusing enough, she had a cousin who was also named Mary Atkins and sometimes called Polly Atkins who also married into the family.

Thank goodness for middle initials! In the early US, middle names are rare until the generation born about the time of the American Revolution. Take a look at the US presidents, for instance. John Quincy Adams, born in 1767 and elected in 1824, was the first chief executive to have a middle name. After the earliest decades of the 19th century, middle names became quite common, especially for male children. So, a plain John Smith or Henry Thomas in an index of wills or land documents is likely to a member of the earlier generations of your family. A middle name or initial would probably indicate somewhat later ancestors.