

GSP RESEARCH TIP

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR GENEALOGICAL QUERY

By Marion F. Egge

One of the most valuable tools at the hands of genealogical researchers is the opportunity to seek help from other interested researchers. A service provided by most genealogical societies is the offering of space in their publications-usually free to members and for a nominal fee to non-members-for queries about individual family ancestors.

While there are probably no established "rules" for writing and submitting queries to your Society, certain fundamentals should be observed. The responses you receive (or fail to receive) often depend on the clarity with which you provide any information you already have documented, and your specific needs concerning the unknown.

Don't Be Too Hasty- A primary consideration, often ignored, is the necessity to exhaust all obvious genealogical resources before seeking help. You must have reached some sort of bottleneck or impasse!

Before asking others for information, you should already have checked various vital records, census records, church records, property transactions and tax records, wills and probate records, as well as all available family histories and miscellaneous files relating to the surname in question. You cannot expect others to take care of these basics for you. And even more important, in doing so you cheat yourself from the real joy of genealogical research: the quest!

Pre-Query Resources- Genealogical researchers of generations past had a difficult task obtaining the most basic information. They had no choice but to travel to repositories, dig through papers in various states of preservation, make hand notations of data, and maintain a filing system that allowed for easy retrieval of essentials. This time consuming form of research, still practiced by many of today's genealogists, is certainly legitimate and should not be discouraged. In fact, some obscure information is available *only* by digging through unpublished manuscripts, out-of-print books, or closely-guarded original documents. Researchers can reap significant satisfaction from having spent a day in the Philadelphia Register of Wills, the GSP and HSP library collections, the Philadelphia Free Library, the Philadelphia City Archives, or the National Archives, and being able to leave with a previously unknown gem. In addition to this traditional method, research tasks have been simplified by the phenomena of electronic communication. For years the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) has done a magnificent job of microfilming and making available to the general public all sorts of important genealogical records. Those records not immediately available at the local LDS library can easily be obtained on loan from Salt Lake City for a period of time that allows for a thorough search through thousands of records. The scope and variety of available records is virtually endless. And the current goal of the LDS to digitize their entire microfilm collection is nothing short of astounding and benefits the entire genealogical community.

The miracle of the CD-ROM and the availability of online record collections have also made child's play of previously tedious drudgery and with your own computer, or a visit to any computer-equipped library, you can enjoy a remarkable if not invaluable experience. A computer with online access connects you with the Internet's treasury of library resources and genealogical web pages, and you will find countless computer-literate genealogists, eager to exchange information, just a few keystrokes away. Most of the larger websites, such as Ancestry.com and Rootsweb.com host message boards and forums where genealogists can share their family information with each other. Also, the CD-ROM component added to your computer provides access in your own home to the storehouse of

The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania

inexpensive retail CD's containing genealogical data: church records, state and local government records, as well as complete issues of many genealogical journals, also including the publications of the GSP, volumes 1 through 39 of the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*.

Too Little- Moving from general basics to more specific research information, let's consider individual family searches. A query worded such as "Seeking any and all information on Zachary Zilch and his descendants" will be virtually ignored by a serious genealogist. To submit such a query sends a clear message that you have not done your homework. Although you may believe that your ancestor's name is unique, you might be surprised at the number of persons-throughout the world over several centuries-who share an unusual given name/surname combination.

Can you provide a date-any date: birth? death? marriage? will? property transfer? Even approximate dates are helpful. In written queries, a date followed by "(?)" means that you are probably very close, possibly right on, but uncertain or undocumented. A date indicated "ca." (meaning "circa" or "about") provides a window of possibility, but the range must be limited. For example, to specify "ca. 1750-1800" is virtually meaningless because 50 years is too long a period of time for isolating the "right" person from a list of many sharing the same or similar name. The bottom line: any documented or approximate date for a vital statistic always helps to narrow the search and improve your chances of receiving a positive response about *your* ancestor rather than about someone who will prove to be unrelated.

Can you identify or specify a location? It is most helpful to be able to "zero in" on a geographical area where your ancestor can be known to have lived or worked. To say "found in Mifflin Co., Pa., census (1830) and Juniata Co., Pa., census (1840)" not only rules out the rest of Pennsylvania and all other settled areas of the country, but also introduces the possibility-considering the dates involved, and if you don't already know it-that the person may never have moved during that ten-year period (Juniata Co. having been formed from Mifflin Co. in 1831).

Similarly, if you can document that a person was listed as a "shopkeeper" on "Chestnut Street" in *Gopsill's Philadelphia City Directory, 1888*, you improve your chances of getting pertinent additional information. If you were merely to state that the person lived in Philadelphia in the late 1800's, someone responding to your query might provide you with the *City Directory* information, which you already know but failed to state. In short, be as specific with date and place information as you possibly can.

The Hidden Factor- Sometimes a query can be worded so as to express a need for information without having to be explicit. This "hidden factor" most often appears in seeking maiden names of wives or data about children. For example, a query might state: "Seeking marriage place and date for Zachary Zilch and his wife, Zelda (ca. 1860, Lehigh Co., Pa., probably Roman Catholic)... ..' Do you happen to know her maiden name? Possibly you do, in which case you should provide it. But you might learn what it is, if not already known, by simply adding a line to your query, thus: "Seeking marriage place and date for Zachary Zilch and his wife, Zelda ____." This form clearly expresses your need to learn her maiden name without you having to ask specifically.

Regarding information about children, you may believe that you have found all children of your ancestor. Your query may read: "3 children: Zoro, Zaphron, and Zidorah." If a reader can tie into the ancestor's name, but that person had 6 children, this potential provider of new information might rule out a relationship and not respond to your query. If, however, you were to state "Known children: Zoro, Zaphron, and Zidorah," the reader might be able to update your records to include your previously unknown half-generation. Another hint about information on children: Don't ignore or underestimate the value of providing anything and everything you know about the known children:

The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania

birth and death dates, spouses, etc. There may be someone out there who can tie into your collateral ancestral lines and thus be able to provide the exact formula needed to unblock arteries of your direct blood lines.

Too Much- Readers who submit genealogical queries sometimes provide unnecessary information. A word to the wise: It's superfluous to write "Seeking information on my great-great-grandfather, Zachary Zilch...." Your relationship to your ancestor may be interesting to you, and possibly to others; but because this tidbit has no direct bearing on the information you need, most editors will delete the comment. Excessive word count takes precious (and expensive) printed space, so be sure to eliminate irrelevant data before submitting your query.

A second form of "too much" information can be found in some queries when unrelated families are tacked together. Potential respondents will be misled if Zachary Zilch (though your father or mother's line) is linked in a single query with Xavier Xanderovich, who happens to appear in your wife's family tree. Though these persons are both related to your family, they are probably not related to each other except through your own 20th-century marriage. So be sure to limit each query to a single family group. Do not mix queries for paternal and maternal lines. Two families = two queries.

Clarifying Relationships- When providing information using "he," "she," "his," "her," "they," or "their," be sure that the persons referred to are absolutely clear. Consider this example: "Seeking marriage date for Zachary Zilch (b. 1832; d. ca. 1875), son of Zed and Zula (Zunovich) Zilch, and Zelda Zermony (b. 1835; d. 1889). They were probably married in a Lutheran church...." Who are "they"? Zachary and Zelda? Or Zed and Zula? This entry is wordy, ambiguous, and assumes a church wedding when only "probably" is the known factor. All these problems can easily be corrected: "Seeking marriage date and place (probably Lutheran) for Zachary..., and Zelda..."

Before publicizing your query, check your wording for every usage of the indefinite pronouns listed above. If the reference is not perfectly clear, then reconstruct your sentences to eliminate the ambiguity.

Organizing Your Query- Most queries contain information about a number of people: the subject of your inquiry, that person's husband or wife, their children, their parents, dates, locations, occupation, etc. One of the most prevalent problems in queries received for publication in PGM related to the manner in which information is organized. Readers too often submit what appears to be a first draft detailing facts in random order.

Although various forms of queries are acceptable, of course, anyone who is unsure might do well to follow this pattern:

1. List the surname (printed in capital letters) of the primary ancestor, followed by all other known surnames (maiden surnames and spouse surnames) also printed in capital letters.
2. Make a clear and concise statement of your needs.
3. Clearly summarize all known documented information about the primary ancestor and known documented related persons.
4. Additional information sought about the same ancestor(s) may be added following the stated known facts-but only if the questions relate to the same family group. For example:

ZILCH. Seeking parents, birth place, and marriage details for Zachary Zilch (b. Ca. 1800-1802; d. 1875) and wife Zelda (d. 1880) who mar. (ca. 1820; Lutheran; probably Northampton Co. or Lehigh Co., Pa.); both bur. Union Cemetery, Allentown (Lehigh Co.); owned a 72-acre farm outside Emmaus (Lehigh Co., Pa.) in 1827. Also need info on Zachary's sibling (if not an only child) and birth details for Zelda.

The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania

Help the Editor- As stated earlier, there are no established rules governing genealogical queries, but you would do well to read and follow detailed instructions unique to each journal. These requirements may vary slightly, so don't try to make one form fit all. Try to construct your query similar to those that already have appeared in the publication.

1. Each query should relate to a single family group (See "Too Much" section above).
2. Do not write a cover letter and then add the query to the same page. A query sheet should include only the information to be published.
3. If you send more than one query in the same mailing, each should be submitted on one side only of a single 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of paper. And avoid using odd-sized paper. While this request might seem unimportant, please understand that published queries usually appear in alphabetical order and must be so arranged for input. Using separate sheets for each entry help to eliminate the time and expense of making extra copies.
4. Please type (double-spaced) or hand print each query. Computer-printed queries are preferred. If you must hand print your query, please try to be as neat as possible. More errors result from careless handwriting than from any other cause.
5. Include your full name, mailing address, and e-mail address (if you have one) at the bottom of each query. Don't force an editor to retrieve this information from your cover letter or from the return address on your envelope. Sometimes the envelope and its contents become separated.

Document, Document, Document! Finally, one cardinal rule is imperative: NEVER FORGET TO DOCUMENT! Provide documentation when sharing your own work, and be sure to request documentation from anyone providing you with new information. A fact is not really a "fact" unless you know the source and can verify its reliability.

Originally published in *Penn in Hand* v.19 no. 1 (1998)

Revised and updated, December 2009, Anita Sheahan Coraluzzi