

People Are More Than Names: Techniques for Differentiating Identities

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When family historians assume records apply to one person based only on the same name, they may incorrectly conflate or combine the identities of multiple people. Other genealogists may neglect to prove that an individual in one location is the same as a person in another area, resulting in missed opportunities for research.

These situations highlight the two most common identity issues: people of the same name whose identities need to be separated and those appearing to be different people whose identities need to be merged. The same skills required to distinguish different identities can help merge identities. Researchers can differentiate people by using the concept of identity characteristics.

This article defines identity characteristics, explains three techniques for differentiating identities, and demonstrates these techniques in case studies.

Why does identity matter?

Each person has a unique identity that can be documented based on individual experiences and family relations. For example, there was only one John Smith who married Mary Jones on 6 March 1850 in Kent County, Delaware.¹ Identity matters because accuracy matters.

Accuracy is fundamental to genealogical research. Without it, a family's history would be fiction.²

When someone's identity is unclear, there is a greater risk of making mistakes in tracing the person's life, family, and story.

Websites cited in this article were viewed on 19 July 2023.

1. Delaware, marriages 90:8, Smith-Jones, 16 March 1850; *FamilySearch* digital film 5099508, image 17.

2. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. rev. (Nashville, TN: 2021), xix.

Smith John, furnisher, Crerar, Adams & Co. r. 223 Hubbard
Smith John, carpenter, Fox & Howard
Smith John, carpenter, r. 40 Oakwood
Smith John, carpenter, bds. 97 Clinton
Smith John, carpenter, r. 140 W. Monroe
Smith John, carpenter, bds. 207 N. Clark
Smith John, carpenter, r. 785 N. Halsted
Smith John, caulker, Doolittle & Bates, r. 413 Mitchell
Smith John, cigarmkr. r. 134 McGregor
Smith John, clk. bds. 163 Wells
Smith John, clk. bds. 278 Sedgwick
Smith John, cooper, r. 103 Main
Smith John, cooper, r. 198 Michigan
Smith John, cooper, r. 78 White
Smith John, dairyman, r. 379 Carroll
Smith John, drayman, r. 294 Division
Smith John, driver, N. C. C. R. W. Co.
Smith John, driver, U. S. Ex. Co. r. N. Franklin
Smith John, fireman, I. C. yards
Smith John, framemkr. r. 116 Catherine
Smith John, horseshoer, r. 179 State
Smith John, lab. C. & N. W. R. W. (Wis. Div.)
Smith John, lab. r. 45 Ruble
Smith John, lab. r. 63 Menomonee
Smith John, lab. r. 89 W. Chicago av.
Smith John, lab. r. 137 W. Liberty
Smith John, lab. bds. 139 N. Desplaines
Smith John, lab. r. rear 355 State
Smith John, lab. r. 463 4th
Smith John, lab. r. 591 Milwaukee av.
Smith John, marblecutter, r. 218 Monroe
Smith John, mason, r. 727 S. May
Smith John, metalspinner, Chicago Mnfg. Co.
Smith John, moulder, Western Star Metal Co.
Smith John, moulder, bds. 157 S. Jefferson
Smith John, moulder, Western Star Metal Co.
Smith John, pianomover, r. 353 S. May
Smith John, plasterer, r. al. bet. Ohio and Indiana, Kingsbury and Market
Smith John, porter, r. 54 Arnold
Smith John (col'd), roomtender, bds. 324 Clark
Smith John, sailor, bds. 17 Dunn
Smith John, sailor, r. 397 Erie
Smith John, sailor, r. 531 Larrabee
Smith John, saloon, 493 Clark, r. same
Smith John, saloon, Chicago av. nw. cor. Carpenter
Smith John, shoemaker, H. Schroder, r. 23 Oakwood

Entries for John Smith in Udall & Hopkins' Chicago City Directory, for 1852 & '53 (*Chicago: Udall & Hopkins, 1852*), 169 (Fold3)

Shannon Green, CG, is a genealogy researcher, writer, and educator. She earned the Certified Genealogist credential in 2017 and renewed her credential in 2022. Shannon serves as a trustee for the Board for Certification of Genealogists and as a trustee for the BCG Education Fund and is a former instructor for Boston University's Genealogy Principles course. Shannon lives in Greenwood Village, Colorado, with her husband and three children.