

location and timeframe for the subject. Find records that name the subject and note other identifying characteristics such as a spouse's name, children, waterways, literacy, neighbors, and witnesses. Put this information in a format that can be sorted—index cards, a word-processing document, an Evernote or Airtable template, or a spreadsheet.

For example, the census comparison for John and Jonathan Easterling suggests they were different men. To evaluate this possibility more thoroughly, the following types of records were gathered between 1800 and 1850 in Barnwell District, South Carolina, for all Easterlings: census, probate, court indexes, plats, deeds, tax, and cemetery records. This is not an exhaustive list of available records, but it can provide enough information to start sorting people into family groups.

For each record or index entry found, note the year, type of record, given name, citation, and any potentially identifying information. Table 6 is a small section of the spreadsheet created for the Easterling surname.

Connect and sort the records

Try to connect one record with another by using identity characteristics as shown in the Mark Parmalee case study. Then try another. Sort them into groups. Highlighting in color and assigning informal labels (such as Mark of Guilford) might make connections and identities more visible.

In the Easterling example, it was possible to connect and sort the gathered records into two family groups based on shared identity characteristics such as waterways, family members, and associates. Connections within these groups indicate that there was one man named John Easterling and one man named Jonathan Easterling in Barnwell District in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Easterling family group 1: Jonathan, William T., Howell, Ann

- Jonathan's neighbors in 1810 included Zeigler and Hickman. Hickman is listed as a neighbor in an 1811 deed for land around the Edisto River. He sold land on Ball Gall Branch to Jonathan. Zeigler was an appraiser of Jonathan's estate in 1846 and a neighbor of William T. Easterling in 1850. These records connect Jonathan to William T. Easterling, Zeigler, and Hickman.

- Howell purchased enslaved persons from Jonathan's estate and land on Ball Gall Branch, the same waterway where Jonathan purchased land previously.
- Jonathan's widow was Ann, who lived next to Howell Easterling in 1850.

Easterling family group 2: Joel, Bennet, Henry, John

- Joel's 1802 plat identifies his land by Crages [Craigs] Pond Branch of Big Saltcatchers River.
- Bennet's 1804 deed lists Joel as a neighbor as well as the location of Craigs Pond Branch. The common location of Craigs Pond Branch connects Bennet to Joel. Henry witnessed the deed, which ties him to Joel and Bennet.
- An 1806 plat for land between Great Saltcatcher River and Turkey Creek lists Henry Easterling and Marmaduke Gardner as neighbors. Gardner was a neighbor of John Easterling in 1806 and 1810. This record connects John to Henry.

These are just a few of the connections that led to establishing two family groups. This type of correlation highlights connections between people which helps to distinguish identities. Additional targeted research can be conducted after gathering and sorting the initial records. For example, studying extant church records and exploring more recent generations can flesh out the Easterling identities more completely.

Conclusion

Focusing on identity characteristics beyond names can help separate, sort, and merge identities, a common concern for genealogists. Rather than using only a name to connect one record to another, use multiple identity characteristics to fully describe the subject as a unique person. The techniques outlined here can help solve the problem of distinguishing same-named individuals and merging different information for the same person. 🌳

Resources

Case studies:

- Green, Shannon. "Two Probates and Three Richards: Who Was Richard Bedell of Hempstead, Queens County, New York?" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 107 (December 2019): 259-270; <https://www.greenwichgenealogy.com/publications>.
- King, Ricki. "Separating the Identities of Two