

How can a genealogist be sure that a record pertains to the correct person? Aside from the name-is-the-same, there must be a valid reason to associate records with a particular individual.

Many researchers have made the error of conflating same-named people. Days, weeks, and even years can be spent tracing the genealogy of the wrong person who happened to have the same name as the subject, which results in researchers having to cut off entire branches of their family tree when they eventually discover their mistake. On the other hand, the inability to see the parallels in the identity of two people in different locations (or in the same place with different names) could result in brick walls blocking progress.

A name alone is not a reliable indicator of identity. Names that sound unusual to a modern ear might not have been unique historically. For example, five men named Preserved Fish were enumerated in 1800.³ Cultural naming conventions might result in many people with the same name in a single location. In Ireland, more than half of all people born in the 1800s had one of twelve given names.⁴ Historically, women changed their names upon marriage. Amy Smith, born in the 1600s in Connecticut, married three times and therefore had four names throughout her life.⁵ Many immigrants Americanized their names upon arrival in the United States.

Identity characteristics defined

Genealogists can use identity characteristics, also called identity markers, to distinguish one person from another. The most common identity characteristic is a name, but many more aspects can help identify people uniquely in their time and place. Try to determine as many identity characteristics as possible for each person under study.

- **Names:** All parts of a name can fluctuate for one individual at different times. Record all names used throughout the person’s lifetime. Sometimes people consistently used their middle initials to stand out from another person in the county with the same name.
- **Age or birthdate:** If one person is twenty years older than another with the same name, use the

age disparity to distinguish them. One could be noted as “Jr.” and another as “Sr.” This usage does not necessarily mean that “Sr.” is the father of “Jr.”; historically, these suffixes reflect relative age rather than relationship. Try to approximate ages if not known, based on life events, to place people in the appropriate generations for differentiation.

- **Family members and associates:** People interact repeatedly with the same individuals, whether kin or neighbors. Track the family members and associates to distinguish people from others.
- **Geography:** Pinpoint residences and the periods of time for each, as precisely as possible, since simultaneous events for a person of the same name in different places usually indicate more than one individual. Note land descriptions and waterways. Try platting them, if possible, to see the person in the context of the neighborhood.
- **Occupation:** If one man was a farmer and another was a cooper, use his occupation as an identifier. Many records note occupations, such as censuses and deeds.
- **Economic status:** Tax assessments and land ownership might reflect relative wealth as a factor for comparison.
- **DNA:** This is the identity characteristic that most uniquely identifies a person.
- Any other factors that set the person apart.

Some identity characteristics are listed in table 1. This list is not exhaustive, and not all of these markers apply to all research problems. The combination of identity characteristics and life events is what makes each person uniquely

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|---------------------------------------|
| Name: nicknames, middle name, initial |
| Title or post-nomial |
| Dates and locations of vital events |
| Signature |
| Occupation |
| Physical description |
| Literacy |
| Military service |
| DNA |
| Family composition |
| FAN club names, places, and dates |
| Religion and church membership |
| Economic status |
| Property ownership |
| Residence |
| Citizenship status |
| Immigration date |
| Ethnicity |

Table 1. Examples of identity characteristics

3. “1800 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7590>). Search for “Preserved Fish.”
4. David S. Ouimette, *Finding Your Irish Ancestors: A Beginner’s Guide* (Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 2005), 18.
5. Thomas Painter, *Autobiography of Thomas Painter, Relating His Experiences during the War of the Revolution* (printed privately, 1910), 8.