

Pinpointing

Where Your Ancestors Lived

by Jeffrey A. Bockman

The tombstone in Cambridge, NY reads “Jannet, wife of William Stevenson a native of Gallway in Scotland died April 7, 1834 at age 92.” It is too bad that there are no clues to her maiden name; and in 1742 Galloway was an even larger region of Scotland than it is today.

Where a person was born can be found in U.S. Census records after 1850; and starting in 1880 they also tell where their parents were born. Unfortunately the answers are often only a clue. The 1920 Chicago, Illinois census shows that my grandfather, Alvar Bockman, was born in Central America. The 1850 LaSalle County, Illinois census for George Coleman gives his birthplace as the “Atlantic Ocean.” How many census records tell that a person or their parents were born in Virginia, Prussia, or Germany?

Knowing the state is fine if there are statewide records or indexes but you usually need at least the county. In New England and Europe you really need the town name. Even having a town name in some European countries is not enough since there can be several towns with the same name. There is a difference between finding a place and finding the place.



Why Do I Need To Know The Exact Location?

A person doing genealogical research is like a reporter or a detective and should be concerned with obtaining the same basic facts for any event: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How. Knowing where and when an event took place will let you determine the correct jurisdiction at the time the event occurred. You can then determine what records might have been created and where they can be found.

Using the USGenWeb site www.usgenweb.org/index.html or Everton's *Handybook for Genealogists* you can find out when a jurisdiction started keeping birth, marriage, death, and probate records and where the records are located. Farms don't move but the land records for the property could be in a variety of different locations since the jurisdiction has probably changed over the years.

Once you know the exact location you can then look for the closest schools, churches, cemeteries, settlements, transportation routes, etc. Knowing the exact location may also allow you to differentiate between several people with the same name.

The "Where" Can Change!

In the 1920 census Alvar said that his parents were from Denmark. Did he mean that the town where they were born was in Denmark when they were born, or that it was within Denmark's current boundaries? Were they born in an area that was in Denmark and then became part of Germany, or were they born in Germany and following border changes the town is now located in Denmark? What would have been the best answer to give shortly after WWI?

How many people who came to the U.S. in the 1850s listed their birthplace as Germany on the 1880



The map shows the town of Rockville in Section 31, in the SW area of Rockville Twp.

census even though Germany did not exist until after they left? The "when" and "where" are interdependent and possibly subject to interpretation.

Regions like the Alsace in France have changed countries several times. The records that were kept and the language of the records will also change. Archived records will be found in both countries. Another example is found in the printed forms for the family records of what is now Prelesje, Slovenia, formerly in Austria and then Yugoslavia: they are written in either Slovene or Latin. The town's name is shown as both Prelesje and the German name, Gerdenschlag.

Since counties in the U.S. are artificial divisions, based upon being able to provide services to their population, the boundaries kept changing as the population grew. Below is a quick look at the

Jurisdictional history of two farms on the Kankakee

Starting Date	North side	South side
Feb. 11, 1853	Kankakee	Kankakee
Jan. 12, 1836	Will	Iroquois
Feb. 26, 1833	Iroquois	Iroquois
Jan. 15, 1831	Vermillion	Vermillion
Jan 18, 1826	Putnum	Vermillion
Jan 13, 1825	Putnum	Edgar
Jan. 28, 1823	Fulton	Edgar
Jan. 31, 1821	Pike	Pike
Mar.22, 1819	Clark	Clark
Dec. 3, 1818	Statehood	Crawford



The two farms were located across the Kankakee River from each other in Rockville Township, in the SW quarter of Section 31.

jurisdictional history of two farms in Will County, Illinois, that are across the Kankakee River from each other in the SW quarter of Section 31 in (Rockville Twp.) Township 32 North and Range 11 East of the 3rd Principal Meridian.

All of the children, born in the same bed in the same farm home during the period 1818 to 1831, could have been born in different counties. The probate records for anyone dying in the home during this period could be at a variety of different courthouses.

The key to any type of research is to “Work from known to unknown.” You use whatever clues you have to find other clues. If you know where

look for death, burial, obituary, or probate records. Census records give the state or country of birth. A child’s birth certificate may give the parent’s state or city of birth and possibly their current address. Many records give at least general clues to the location of prior events.

One of the best sources for finding location clues is a biographical sketch. These were often contained in county histories published in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The person will often tell where their family came from, how their family came to the area, and what happened to them. The following excerpt is from the entry for Granville Johnson on page 228 of *The Biographical Record of Bureau, Marshall & Putnum Counties*, published in Chicago, IL by S. J. Clarke Publishing Company in 1896.

county, Ohio where he made his home for about four years. There he wedded Miss Margaret Long, a native of Greene county, in January 1841. She was the daughter of Henry H. and Mary (Walden) Long. In 1842 he removed with his wife and child by wagon to Bureau county, Illinois, settling upon a thirty-six acre tract of wild land in Selby township. . . . In 1880 he removed to Grundy county, Iowa, residing in Morrison for five years after which he returned to Princeton.

On the 8th of September, 1880 was celebrated the marriage of Granville Johnson and Sarah L. Ellis, amiable daughter of Miletus W. and Mary E. (Coleman) Ellis, born July 2, 1862. Mr. Ellis was born in Dover township and was the son of Abbott Ellis, a native of Albemarle county, Virginia. . . . Mrs. Johnson was born in the same house that her father was born in. He died October 27, 1881, at Castle Rock, Colorado. His wife now lives in Boulder,



Old family photographs

Another useful source is old family photographs. The photographer often printed their name and location on either the border or back of the photo. I came across a family photo of an older gentleman. Someone had written Stephen A. Coleman, then changed it to Steven on the back. My grandmother had then written “brother of Mary Coleman Ellis (mentioned above) mother of “Sadie.” On the front border it has the photographer’s name

Left: Steven Coleman

a person was living from census records or a city directory and then they don’t appear anymore you should look to see if they moved or

His father, Henry M. Johnson, was born in Campbell county, Virginia, December 18, 1814 and on attaining his majority walked all the way to the Ohio river, traveling at about the rate of forty miles per day, passing over the Blue Ridge mountains. At Wheeling he took passage on a steamboat down the Ohio river to Cincinnati, and from there he went to Xenia, Green

Colorado. . . . They were the parents of four children Sarah, Frances, Frank and Lucy all deceased. Frank and his wife and child met their death by fire in a railroad wreck at Aspen, Colorado. Four weeks later the young couple started by carriage for Grundy county, Iowa, while they shipped their household effects by rail. (Note: the last line refers back to Granville and Sarah’s [Sadie’s] marriage.)

These two paragraphs give clues for future research in Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, and Colorado. You want to make sure that you note the

While you are probably looking to find records that tie a person to their parents and family you will also find a variety of records that tell where they were along the way.

- ✓ Where they lived (especially during census years)
- ✓ Where they purchased property
- ✓ Where they were married
- ✓ Where they had children
- ✓ Where they died and were buried
- ✓ Where they were born

date of publication since that can be used for date references such as died “before 1896.”

A variety of records created by a

person may include an address. On the next page see a list of records that will help you to find a state or possibly even the city for the person at a given time.

If you only have a name of a place, then use the GNIS Web site (Geographic Names Information System) <http://geonames.usgs.gov> to locate all of the possible places with that name and then start researching to see which is the correct one.

Once you have narrowed it to a particular town or township you can use the following resources to help find a specific address or location:

- City directories list everyone in the town and give their occupation, address and sometimes relationships. (See example on next page.)
- Telephone Directories - Will only list those families with listed telephone numbers.
- Land Records - Start with the Grantee and Grantor Indexes then

review the actual transaction. Some records will even tell when and from whom the land being sold was purchased. Young couples often purchased a part of a relative’s property so look for familiar names.

- Tax and Voter lists
- Naturalization records: Declaration of Intention & Petition for Citizenship
- Home sources: Old bills or correspondence - Note both the date and the address.

Locating the Exact Spot

Plat maps are very useful since they show who owned the various land parcels in a township.

Topographical and other land maps can be used to locate a parcel of land by the legal description. As we saw with the Kankakee description you can easily locate a piece of property described with a rectangular

“Fleisher” and the location of “Streator, Ills.” After finding out that Streator is in LaSalle County, I looked for him in the LaSalle County history book and didn’t find anything. I noticed that Livingston County was just a few miles south of Streator so I looked for and found an entry in the *1878 History of Livingston County, IL*. It had “Steven Coleman, farm + stock Sec. 9 Long Point, was born in Muskingum County, Ohio, Sept 10, 1831. He lived in Ohio two years; in 1833

with his parents he went to Illinois, settled in Bureau Co., remained there until 1856 when he came to his present place.” It went on to tell about his wife and children. If you cannot find information about your direct ancestor then try to locate their siblings to see if they left more clues about where they or their parents lived. Remember that people traveled to the nearest “big town,” crossing county and even state lines to obtain services. Expand your search area if you don’t find them locally.



survey system land description.

In the original colonies plus Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Texas they use “Metes and Bounds” descriptions to define a parcel of land. These are not as easy to locate unless they give references to intersections of known roads or rivers.

The following is an example from Washington County, New York, where more research would still be needed:

This indenture made the ninth day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty five between Patrich McGill of the town of Jackson, county of Washington and State of New York of the first part and William Stevenson Jun. of the town of Cambridge county and state afoursaid of the second part. . . . All that certain lot pieces or parcel of land situate lying and being in the towns of Jackson and Cambridge being a part of lot no. described as follows. Bounded north by the highway leaving from the store of the said Stevenson to the dwelling house of said McGill. East by a certin creek crossing said highway. South by a

time period in question are needed if the street names or numbering system have changed. How did people get from point A to point B? They usually traveled by a combination of methods that included: walking, riding a horse, and taking a boat, ship, wagon, railroad, or car. They didn't always go directly. Many biographical sketches often mentioned that someone "tarried a while" in a location. Once they fixed the wagon, waited out the winter, or earned enough money to buy a new horse they were then able to move on their way. Historical maps will show the roads, canals, and railroad lines that existed at the time.

Once you have the exact spot

A Check-list for Records that May Give a Person's Address

- ✓ *Birth Certificates give the parent's current location and often their birthplaces*
- ✓ *SS Death Index - the last zip code where benefits were mailed*
- ✓ *Statewide Death or Marriage Indexes will name the county*
- ✓ *Marriage Applications, if available, often have addresses and birthplaces*
- ✓ *Death Certificate - will usually list a last known address and the place of death. Birth information may be accurate depending upon the informant.*
- ✓ *Obituary - older ones often gave the address of a family member where the service will take place. It may also list other cities where they or their family lived.*
- ✓ *Cemetery & Funeral Home records - may have an address or birthplace*
- ✓ *Census Records - Use the every name indexes for 1930 & 1880 and the Head of Household indexes 1900-1920 to find the records that will give: their current address and the birth place, usually just the state, of the person and their parents*
- ✓ *Earlier census indexes will give the township or city and Enumeration District. Use ED maps or descriptions to narrow the area down to a ward.*
- ✓ *County History & Biographical Sketch - gives family relationships along with when and where they lived.*
- ✓ *Family Lore - Can use it to narrow down where you start searching if you do not have any real known clues.*
- ✓ *Church records - The Society of Friends (Quakers) had removal certificates to show that they were in good standing when they moved from one meetinghouse to another. Other churches had similar types of records.*
- ✓ *Immigration Records - The "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival" asks for the name and complete address if going to join a relative or friend.*

City Directory Abstracts for the VanKirk Household from 1901-11

The following is from the Columbus, OH city directory search for information on Frank VanKirk, the son of Mahlon and Sarah, his wife Nettie or Nellie and their three daughters: Hazel, Lena, and Neva May. You can see the time periods when Sarah died, Frank died, and when Hazel either got married or moved away. This lets you narrow the time frame for future research.

- 1901 Frank A. baker 1422 E Main h same • 1901 Sarah (wid Mahlon) b 1422 E Main
- 1904-5 Frank A. mach, h 1126 E. Mound
- 1904-5 Hazel, clk, h 1126 E. Mound
- 1906-7 Frank A. cutter h 1109 E. Mound
- 1906-7 Hazel pressfeeder b 1109 E. Mound
- 1906-7 Lena pressfeeder b 1109 E. Mound
- 1907-8 Frank A. mach h 1109 E. Mound
- 1907-8 Hazel pressfeeder b 1109 E. Mound
- 1907-8 Lena pressfeeder b 1109 E. Mound
- 1908 Lena pressfeeder b 1109 E. Mound
- 1909 Lena pressfeeder b 64 S. 4th
- 1910-11 Nellie A (wid Frank A) h 1107 1/2 Mound

board fence erected by said McGill running parallel with the highway and west by lands of William Stevenson containing by estimation about three quarters of an acre of land.

You would already need to know where they lived in order to identify this property. If you didn't then you would need to look for other land records that describe exactly where Stevenson's store was or where the McGill's lived.

Historical City Maps from the

you might be able to figure out where they worked, went to school, church, shopping, and carried on their lives. If the census record said they worked at a foundary or automobile plant then look for the closest one. Maybe there are school, church, or business records available.

Locations were often used to help distinguish between people with the same name, as is illustrated in the three quotations that

follow. They are taken from the *History of Albemarle* (County, Virginia):

“There being for many years simultaneously three John Watsons in the county, this John was described as of the Little Mountain.”

“In 1779 John Watson purchased land in the northwestern part of the county on Rocky Creek. He was succeeded by his son, John, who was distinguished as John Watson, of High Top. The latter died in 1833.”

“About 1790 John Waston, known as of Milton, came to the county from Amhurst.”

Knowing where your ancestor lived can help you find other records. Another benefit is that you might be able to visit the place. In rural parts of the country you can drive around using a 100-year-old plat map to find the family farm. Just remember that the school at the corner may not still be there. When you visit the cemetery, be sure to note the nearby graves and visit the cemetery office to see what records they have. You can also see the area where they lived and possibly figure out why the next generation didn't or couldn't stay. Seeing or visiting the house where your ancestor was born or lived is a unique experience. You can take pictures of the house that was once you ancestor's home, hotel, store, or tavern. It is helpful to see a map

and photographs of a place but it does not replace experiencing the place first hand. None of this would have been possible if you had not already answered the question, “Where did my ancestors live?”

Jeffrey A. Bockman, MBA, was a three-term President of the DuPage County (IL) Genealogical Society and a four term Vice President of the Illinois State Genealogical Society. He has been doing genealogical research since 1987 and has been active in societies, teaching classes, and giving lectures since 1994. He has lectured at several FGS and other conferences. He has had numerous articles published in the *FGS Forum*, *Heritage Quest Magazine*, *UK Family Tree Magazine*, and in the Internet publication *Missing Links*. He is the Webmaster for the DuPage County ILGenWeb Project. E-mail: jeffb@anet.com. Home Page: www.JeffBockman.com.

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