It's a Date:
Essential Date Skills for Genealogists

Genealogical Assertions

Regardless of the time period or geography you are researching, nearly all genealogical assertions come down to statements of the form: "<name> does <action> in <place> on <date>."

For example:

"Isaac Miller buys land in Dover, N.H. on 5 Sept. 1819,"

or (more poetically):

"On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world" (Thomas Merton).

Names, actions, places, and dates are the raw material of genealogy. To become better genealogists, we should aim to master these concepts in detail.

Some Date Abbreviations

- Inst[ant] and Ult[imo]. These were common in nineteenth century newspaper articles. Inst. refers to a date in the same month as the newspaper issue. Ult. Refers to a date in the immediate prior month. So, if a newspaper published on 28 Oct. 1879 refers to a marriage that took place on "the 10th inst." it means the marriage was on 10 Oct. But if it says the marriage took place "the 10th ult.," it means the marriage was on 10 Sept.
- Æ, ÆT., or ÆTAT. These can be abbreviations for Ætas ("aged") or Ætatis suæ ("of his age.") This was once common on gravestones. On older gravestones, say before 1820, especially if followed by a single number, this referred to the year of the person's life. So, "Mr. Nicholas Drew departed this life May 16, 1800 Ætat 22" suggests he died at age 21, i.e., in the

22nd year of his life. But on a later gravestone, say one after the Civil War, Æt. generally refers to the person's age, e.g., "Grace daughter of Joseph S, & Delia A. Abbott died Oct. 29, 1892 Æt. 29 yrs. 11 mos. & 9 days."

Laws and Rules of Thumb

Referring here specifically to colonial New England, we can sometimes estimate someone's age based on what actions they undertook. For example:

- 12: Typical biological lower limit for a woman's age at first child.
- 14: Age which a minor orphan could chose his own guardian.
- 16-60: Age which one was considered a member of the militia.
- 18: Typical age at a woman's first marriage.
- 16: Age which one was counted at a poll in tax assessments (with exceptions).
- 21: Age at which one could buy and sell land.
- 21: Age at which one could serve in public office.
- 24: Typical age for a man at his first marriage.
- 40: Life expectancy in colonial New England (though high child and mother mortality distorts this. If one survived childhood and motherhood, one would often live into one's 70s.)
- 49: Typical biological upper limit for a woman's age at last child.

Date Math

It is similar to arithmetic, but slightly modified.

Problem: A Dover gravestone reads, "Asa C. Tuttle Died 11-13 1989 AE, 81 yrs.11ms.2ds." What was his date of birth?

First, arrange the two dates in YYYY:MM:DD, padding with zeros where necessary:

```
   1898:11:13
-
   0081:11:02
----------------------
```

Next, subtract the days:

```
1898:11:13
-
0081:11:02
----------------------
        :11
```

Next, we want to subtract the months, but 11-11 is zero and we cannot have zero (or negative) months, so we "borrow" 1 year (12 months) from the year column and add that to the months column before subtracting:

```
      7 23
1898:11:13
-
0081:11:02
---------------------
        12:11
```

And finally, we subtract the years:

```
      7 23
1898:11:13
-
0081:11:02
---------------------
1816:12:11
```

So, we calculate that Asa was born on 11 Dec. 1816.

There are some online calculators that will do such calculations for you, but it is a good idea to understand how such calculations are done so you can check their work.

One such calculator is: https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~fgris/family/brown/agecalc.html

Precision with Calculations

In a 4 April 1818 court declaration, our subject swore that he was 62 years old. When was he born?

The imprecise answer simply subtracts the two years: 1818-62 = 1756. But this can be wrong. It can be off by as much as 364 days.

A more precise approach uses all the information given. First, ask yourself, what birthdate would make him exactly 62 on 4 April 1818? That would be if his birthday was 4 April 1756. Then ask, what date would make him a year older the day after, i.e., age 63 on 5 April 1818? (In other words, what is the earliest birthdate that would still have him be 62 years old on 4 April 1818?) That would be if his birthday was 5 April 1755. So, that gives us the precise range of possible birth dates: between 5 April 1755 and 4 April 1756.

If we can find another record from another date giving that same person's age, we can combine the two estimates to make an even more precise estimate of his birth date.

For example, suppose we have a marriage record for the same person, from 7 May 1779, where it states he was 24 years old. We can say then use the previously described technique to say that he was born between 8 May 1754 and 7 May 1755.

If both records are correct, then both statements are true:

- He was born between 5 April 1755 and 4 April 1756.
- He was born between 8 May 1754 and 7 May 1755.

The overlap between he two date ranges is: 5 April 1755 and 7 May 1755. We have narrowed down his birth date considerably!

Julian versus Gregorian Calendar

This is "must know" information for anyone researching genealogy in Britian or their colonies (including those in North America) before 1752.

The Julian calendar was in place from 46 B.C. It introduced the leap year every four years. This was a big improvement from the earlier system, but the Julian year was still 11 minutes too long compared to the sun. The result, over many hundreds of years, was that church festivals were getting out of synch with their traditional seasons.

Pope Gregory XIII assembled a committee of experts to propose a remedy, and in 1582 their recommendations were adopted. In that year, they skipped 10 days ahead in the calendar. They also modified the leap year calculations, so double-zero years were only leap years if they were also divisible by four. So 1600, 1800, and 2000 were leap years, but 1700 and 1900 were not.

These changes became part of canon law and were widely adopted by civil authorities in Catholic Europe. This was called the Gregorian calendar.

Protestant Europe continued to use the Julian calendar, though they eventually all converted over. In particular, Great Britain and its colonies moved to the Gregorian calendar in 1752. Because they switched over at this later date, they had to skip over 11 days, not 10 days, to realign the calendar. This was done by having Wed. 2 Sept. 1752 be followed immediately by Thurs. 14 Sept. 1752.

Orthodox Christian nations adopted the Gregorian calendar at a later date, many only in the twentieth century, e.g., Greece in 192. This table shows the adoption date for various countries: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregorian_calendar.

When Does the Year Start?

It seems obvious to us that the year starts on January 1st, but it has not always been so. In some places the year started on Easter. In others it started on Christmas. In Britian (and in their colonies) the year traditionally began on March 25th. So, 24 March 1712 was followed by 25 March 1713. Yes, the year changed mid-month.

Although Britian changed the start of the year to January 1st in 1752, the same year they adopted the Gregorian calendar, this coordinated change was not the case in many other countries. For example, Scotland switched over to January 1st in 1600, even though they did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752. Even within the American colonies some colonial communities switched the start of the year before 1752. For example, some Dutch communities in New York, some Catholic communities in Maryland, and some Quaker communities.

Be especially careful when dealing with documents that refer to months by number rather than by name. What does "the tenth month of 1740" mean? If the year begins in January, this refers to October. But if the year begins in March the tenth month is December. And, odd to our ears, the eleventh month would be January.

Double Dating

Because of the ambiguities around early dates, especially in communications with those in other colonies or nations that might be using a different start of the year, double dating was used to clarify dates.

The rule: when writing dates before the switch over to the Gregorian calendar (before 1752 for colonial New England), if the dates are in January, February, or March, then indicate both years the date could be in. For example, George Washington was born on 11 Feb. 1731 in Virginia, a British colony where, at the time, the year started on March 25th. But to someone, say, in Scotland or in the Dutch Republic, where the year started on January 1st, it was already 1732 when Washington was born. A correctly double-dated statement would be that George Washington was born on 11 Feb. 1731/32.

Double dating was used at the time in many colonial locations, and it is the norm today for genealogical writing. If the original record did not double date, you, in your writing, can indicate editorial double dating by putting the second year in brackets, like "11 Feb. 1731[/32]."

In another convention, a Julian calendar date can be referred to as Old Style or "O.S." For example, George Washington was born on 11 Feb. 1731 O.S. A conversion to New Style involves both double dating, where needed, but also adding eleven days due to the conversion to Gregorian. So, we could also say that George Washington was born on 22 Feb. 1731/32 N.S. That explains the traditional date of the Washington's Birthday holiday before 1970, at which time the holiday was moved to the 3rd Monday in February.

Three Other Dates Conventions to Know

- Quaker communities traditionally avoided using the pagan names of months, referring instead to the "first month" and so on. But for a document before 1752, is the "first month" January or March? You will need to examine this question carefully when dealing with these records. Not all Quaker communities used the same year start conventions as their surrounding communities. It can help sometimes to look at a series of records, especially in a chronological register, to observe the patterns of date changes.

- Regnal dates, giving dates since the monarch ascended the throne, are common in government documents. "Anno Regni Regis Georgii Secundi Magnae Brittaniae, Franciae Hibernae Vicesomo Sexto…" translates as "Year of the reign of King George II of Great Britian, France, Ireland, the 26th" Since his reign began on 11 June 1727, the 26th year of his reign would extend from 12 June 1752 to 11 June 1753.

- The French Revolutionary (also called the French Republican) calendar was in use in France and territories they controlled, from 1792 until 1805, when Napoleon ended it. This calendar starts counting on 22 Sept. 1792, when the Republic was proclaimed. The traditional month names were abandoned and replaced by new names. We looked at an example, a Parisian marriage dated "21 Messidor an 2." Messidor was the 10th month of the Republican calendar. Since the year began in September, the 10th month would be July. Year 2 would be 1794. A good calculator for translating these dates is: https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/the-republican-calendar/