

Family Myths and Traditions

FAMILY MYTHS: These are NOT true of ANY family.

- ✓ My surname has always been spelled the same way.
 - Be aware that names were spelled according to the ability of the person recording the names before reading and writing became more common and standardized. Many individuals also changed the spellings of their names for various reasons.

- ✓ Everyone with my surname is related.
 - For example: When people started making up last names, there may have been two people from the same town who moved away, and became known as "John" from "That Town" ... and they weren't related.

- ✓ Our family tree has been traced back to Adam.
 - The idea that some family lines could be traced back to biblical times is based on the false claim of some early European royalty to have done this. In fact, these genealogies were simply invented as a way of impressing on commoners that the rulers derived their right to rule from God. In these genealogies, the earliest remembered real ancestors of oral traditions were said to be the offspring of some character in the region's re-Christian mythology and the mythological lineage was then arbitrarily connected to some biblical character to enhance the rulers claim to having a special divine mandate to rule. Pedigrees are very rarely proven as early as AD 800.

- ✓ My ancestor was an Indian Princess.
 - Sorry, Indian tribes don't have princesses. For more information see: <http://gen.culpepper.com/historical/indian.htm>

- ✓ There are no illegitimate children, "early babies, or shady stories in my family tree."
 - If you do genealogy, you will discover illegitimate ancestors, and rogues and villains. All families have them. Love them anyway.

- ✓ Our name was changed at Ellis Island.
 - An immigrant ancestor's surname was changed by officials during processing at Ellis Island. During its operation as an immigrant receiving station (1892-1954), Ellis Island was staffed with hundreds of interpreters who spoke more than thirty different languages. Inspectors compared the names the immigrants told them against what was recorded on the passenger lists that were actually created at the ports of departure. Immigrants themselves changed their names after they settled in America to avoid prejudice and to blend more easily into American society.

FAMILY TRADITIONS

You should treat family traditions with a certain amount of healthy skepticism. These stories - often embellished from generation to generation - are great clues for further research, but they shouldn't be accepted until they can be documented. There is generally a snippet of truth, but it may be a different generation or a different family side, or maybe a friend's family. Just keep digging!

Traditions

There are some traditions that seem to pop up in nearly every family. If you encounter one of these, don't disregard it - but be careful how you use it.

- ✓ The "Three Brothers." There were three brothers with the last name of [Take your pick] who came to America. We descend from the youngest (oldest, middle, tallest, smartest, etc.). If this story was always true, then the number of families who had three sons is beyond statistical expectations.
- ✓ My ancestor served with Washington, Lee, Grant, etc. There are lots of these stories. You often will hear of some ancestor's association with famous people or events. Stories like these may have some foundation, but they often are impossible to document. However, if the facts seem to fit, you will want to continue researching the tradition. If true, a family tradition can lead to the eventual proof of an ancestor's participation in an interesting historical event and added illuminating details about his life.
- ✓ My ancestor was Native American so I am entitled to benefits from the Government. Unfortunately, not all traditions of Indian ancestry are true. And many that are true cannot get LEGAL proof. If your ancestor hid their status from the federal government, then they didn't sign up on the federal rolls. Only descendants of Native Americans whose names are on the rolls can get LEGAL status as member of a Native American Tribe.
- ✓ "We're Related to Nobility." Our relationship to someone important with the same surname. This tradition also is common but often not true. Unscrupulous promoters have played upon people's desire for wealth or status. The strange thing about these con games is that the more you try to tell "Aunt Bessie" she's being taken, the more she is convinced that there's a giant conspiracy aimed at depriving her and her relatives of their just inheritance. If it turns out to be true then you have an interesting addition to the story of your family.
- ✓ All early Germans immigrants weren't Hessian who fought in the American Revolution. All early French immigrants weren't Huguenot. All Irish immigrants didn't come because of the potato famine, etc. Search for the real reason your ancestor came to America.

- ✓ My ancestor was a stow-a-way on board ship. This really didn't happen very often. Even when it did, the person was usually found and their name was added to the last page of the passenger list.
- ✓ We located our Family Coat of Arms. Coats of arms were used to identify individuals, not families. So unless you have actually traced your family back one generation at a time to that specific person, (or you just like the artwork), it probably doesn't have anything to do with your family.

Other common problems with family traditions you should watch for.

- ✓ An incident often will be credited to one side of the family when in fact it happened to another side, or to a person in a different generation. Your grandmother may tell you a story she heard as a child about something that happened to her paternal grandfather and later you discover that it was her maternal grandfather who was involved.
- ✓ Mistakes about national origin can confuse a family's history. Your great grandmother may have denied a particular nationality because it was not "the thing to be" in her day. Consequently, your grandmother might pass on to you what she believes to be the truth; in reality, though, your great grandmother "withheld evidence."
- ✓ Don't be surprised if, while you're interviewing Aunt Bessie, she suddenly has amnesia after having displayed a remarkable memory about the family tree, complete with names, dates and places. Suddenly - when you ask her about a particular ancestor - she can't remember a thing. That's a sure sign you've found a family "black sheep" - we all have them!
- ✓ Just because it's in print it must be right. Just because someone gave you a lot of research they did, check it out yourself. Just because it's in print, it can be WRONG - anyone can jump to a conclusion. Asking them to cite their sources, asking for copies of their original documents, and rechecking a sample of their work helps you decide if they are valid, ... and it also helps you learn how to do research yourself.

Now that I've shattered your favorite family story, how do you tell Grandpa? Or should you? And how do you handle ancient family legends that you've discovered through your research are false?

Family legends are part of your family history and should never be ignored or taken lightly. As mentioned earlier, there is usually a kernel of truth to the family story. Rather than bursting Grandpa's bubble with the facts, try to find out how the story originated. When you write your family history, include the family story as it was told to you, noting it as family "tradition" or "lore" or "legend." Then explain, if you can, how the story originated, followed by a discussion of your research findings. You may reveal that some elements of a story were true and some were false, or that a story was totally false. Even if you have not been able to prove or disprove the story, acknowledge the lore and say it has yet to be proven. These family stories give color to your family history, so record and share them as what they are.