

HOW THE “INEXPERIENCED” GENEALOGIST GOT HER WINGS

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In the November/December 2007 issue of Toronto Tree, we included the first part of this article. It reappears here as Part 1: How I Caught the Genealogy Bug. Now we add Part 2, which tells us how Cathy McNamara found her “research buddy” and developed her skills as a genealogist. Read on!

PART 1 HOW I CAUGHT THE GENEALOGY BUG

It all started when my husband was offered a job exchange with a Fire Department in England. The plan was that we would swap houses/cars and lives with a family in England. They would live in our house in Toronto and we would live in theirs for one year. What a great opportunity for our family! Our kids would get to experience living somewhere else in the world; we could travel and see Europe; and then we’d get our home back in Toronto when the year was up.

Now, most of you genealogists would say, “Wow, and you can research your family tree while you are over there!” Well, I wasn’t bitten by the genealogy bug yet, so that thought never occurred to me. You see, I’m a quilter so I thought I would make a beautiful quilt of all our travels and, what the heck, I’d make a quilt for the Exchange Family all about Canada and leave it on their bed.

So here I was, living in Newcastle, Northern England. My children went off to school each day and my husband went off to work, and I had nothing but time on my hands. But we planned to travel, so I was constantly researching our next trip. Also, I was trying to find a decent fabric store and to get started on a quilt. I didn’t anticipate that fabric in England (like most things) was so expensive.

While I was searching on the Internet one day for a cheap flight, Easy Jet had a seat sale to Belfast for £2. I quickly booked four seats for my family and booked accommodations for four days. Then I remembered that my grandmother was born in Belfast, and my grandfather (who died before I was born) was also born in Belfast. He died at 39 years of age, leaving behind six kids (one of whom was my father). I realized that I knew nothing about him. So I thought, while I’m in Belfast, maybe I’ll just go to the record office and try to get his birth certificate.

I checked out the General Register Office of Northern Ireland (GRO) Web site and found out that there was a speaker coming in the first night that I was there and the topic was “How to Find Your Ancestors in the Workhouse.” Well, what the heck, . . . I’ll sign up for that. Now, this is how “*ungenealogist*” or “*naive*” I was. I thought that a workhouse was the place where family members would go to research their roots—like a big warehouse with records—and this would help me in finding my grandfather’s records. Upon arriving in

Belfast, I went to the seminar and quickly found out that a workhouse was not at all what I thought. To boot, I dragged my 15-year-old son to the seminar and he thought his mother had lost it.

The next day I went to the General Register Office, where you pay about £6 for the day and you could search their database online. Well, I found his birth registration information in about ten minutes, and found the birth registrations of all of his brothers and sisters, and much more. Now I was excited. You see, I keep saying that I’m a quilter, but I am also a “spy,” and that is what I think genealogy is all about. Genealogy is also a lot like quilting because you spend oodles of time piecing together bits and pieces that create a big picture like a family tree.

Now my appetite was whetted, and my family got on the bandwagon with me. While in Belfast, we ended up finding my grandmother’s childhood home and the church she was married in. I felt like I was walking in her shoes as we walked the streets as she would have done years ago as a young girl living in Belfast.

When I returned to England, I was hooked, and I really knew nothing about family history research—but I did know everything there was to know about a workhouse. I was an “inexperienced” genealogist, so I had to make a plan to figure out how to become an “experienced” genealogist. The first thing I did was ditch the quilt project because who had time for that now? Then I signed up for a beginner’s course on genealogy and started taking classes. Next, I needed to focus on research that I could do while in England, so I decided to research my husband’s ancestors (the Taylor family), who came from London, England. And next I thought I would try to connect with someone else living in England who was researching the same family. This was going to be fun!

So this adventure of living in England on an exchange for one year became a new adventure for me. I stepped outside my comfort zone of quilting and threw myself into the wonderful world of genealogy, and I have not looked back.

PART 2 HOW I FOUND MY RESEARCH BUDDY AND BEGAN TO DEVELOP SOME FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH SKILLS

I started researching the Taylor family using the Internet, checking out Web sites like genuki.org.uk, familysearch.org, 1837online.com (now findmypast.com), genesreunited.com, and freemdb.org.uk, etc. The second week into my genealogy course, I asked my teacher the following question: “I’m here for a year and I would love to connect with someone who is researching my family. How would I go about that?” She suggested that I join a family history society in the town/parish where my ancestor(s) came from. So I went home that night and tried www.genuki.org.uk which directed me to a Web site for the Suffolk Family History Society. They had a Surname search where you could see who was researching your family name. I registered my

name (at no cost) and e-mailed some of the people who were listed as researching the Taylor name in the Ipswich area. I got an e-mail back the next morning from one of the researchers, and we were a fit. We compared notes and realized that we were indeed researching the same family. We were researching the family of William Taylor born about 1819 in Ipswich, Suffolk, and Elizabeth Dearsley Lovell born 1845. We also knew that William Taylor had been widowed prior to his marriage to Elizabeth.

Wow! That was easy! I was able to connect with someone researching the same name within twenty-four hours. Now I had a research buddy. Her name was Jenny and she lived in England and, as luck would have it, she was an experienced genealogist. She was a member of the Society of Genealogists and had been researching her family for many years. She was retired and was well informed about family history and much wiser than myself in these matters. I'm sure she was thrilled to be connected with someone who had been researching the family for a "big" two months and was very green! We started communicating by e-mail and I started to learn so much from her. We became research buddies—Jenny with her vast experience and me with all the wild assumptions.

We compared notes about what we knew about the Taylor family and started to fill in the pieces missing from our family tree. We both agreed that our family tree pieces were connected by a William Taylor and Elizabeth Taylor and their five children in Mile End Old Town, England, found in the 1871 Census. The children listed in this census were Emma, Henry, Mary Ann, William, and Susanna. (The parentage of these children will be reviewed later.) We also knew that they weren't actually married at the time of this census, but lied and said they were. They actually married in 1872.

All was going well until my inexperience reared its ugly head and I made some outlandish statements. I told Jenny that I was pretty sure I knew the name of William Taylor's first wife. She was astonished and wanted to know how I could know that. I pointed out that I found William Taylor living with his first wife Deborah in Mile End Old Town with their three children in the 1861 Census. I find the next part a little embarrassing now, but remember, I didn't really know what I was doing. The 1861 Census stated that William Taylor and his first wife Deborah had a **daughter** Elizabeth born about 1839. In the 1871 Census, William now had a **wife** Elizabeth born about 1845—only six years difference. (Okay—here comes the outlandish part!) As I said before, I am a spy and I was convinced that I had found a "Woody Allen" scenario with William marrying his daughter, and because I was an inexperienced genealogist I mentioned this to Jenny. As you could imagine, Jenny was dumbfounded that I would make such a claim. She kindly pointed out that the Elizabeth in the 1871 Census was nowhere near William in 1861, as she was living with her family and was only sixteen years old. Okay, I realized I was so wrong about the

"William marrying his daughter," but isn't that a part of learning—making mistakes and then learning from them? However, I still believed that I had the right William and his first wife Deborah on the 1861 Census.

So the debates began—knowledge versus nonsense. But, during this time, I listened attentively to the expertise of an experienced researcher and absorbed everything like a sponge. Jenny, the experienced genealogist, explained that she did not think I had the right William Taylor on the 1861 Census for the following reasons:

- ▶ His age of 42 in 1861 did not make sense because, on the 1871 Census, he was 38, although she did admit that he did have a habit of changing his age from census to census and certificate to certificate.
- ▶ The other thing is he was a sawyer in the 1861 Census. William was a decorator and painter with a brief excursion as a warehouseman. A sawyer is a skilled occupation and it would be unlikely that he would give it up for the relatively unskilled job of a painter.

Then I explained that I had found a death registered on free BMD for Deborah Taylor 52 in Uxbridge in the last quarter of 1872. That would tie in with the marriage of William and Elizabeth, who were married on October 27, 1872. That made perfect sense to me. Jenny would have to be convinced that I knew what I talking about now. Not so much. Jenny patiently pointed out that:

- ▶ It was highly unlikely that Deborah was our William Taylor's first wife because, if her death was registered in the last quarter, she must have died between the first and the fifth of October. As William and Elizabeth were married on October 27, their banns would have been read for three consecutive weeks before that, and they could not have been read until after William's first wife died. So it is unlikely that a death registered in the last quarter of 1872 could be William's wife, unless she died in the first week of that quarter.
- ▶ Also, you have to allow for the news of the death to get from Uxbridge to Mile End Old Town for William to get a death certificate to prove he's a widower, get the banns arranged, etc. . . . all within the very short time scale of a few days. Uxbridge is a very long way from Mile End Old Town. If you look at a map of the London Underground, you'll see that Uxbridge is about as far west as the London Underground goes today, and Mile End is in the east end of London.

Jenny said that she was sorry to pour cold water on Deborah, but she thought the odds were loaded against her being William's first wife. Jenny suggested that the only way I could be sure was to obtain Deborah's death certificate, as it should list William as her husband.

Banns, quarters, timing . . . what the heck did I know? I'm in way over my head.

Well, I'm sure most experienced genealogists will say "Why don't you just get William and Deborah's marriage certificate?" According to the 1861 Census, William and Deborah had a daughter Elizabeth about 1839 (you know, the daughter that I thought was in the Woody Allen scenario) so that would make them getting married sometime around the birth. Well, both Jenny and I have

searched and searched and we have never been able to find a marriage registration for this marriage. It could have been before general registration or they just didn't register it, and it isn't on the IGI either. Another strike against my theories.

Jenny's points were all so impressive and she was teaching me so much about down-and-dirty logical genealogy. Call me crazy, but I just knew that Deborah was the first wife. The main reason I believed this so strongly was that there was a young child that appeared on both William Taylor censuses that was born in the same place. Emma, age 2, born in Stratford, Essex, was on the 1861 Census with William and Deborah, and, in the 1871 Census, there is also a daughter Emma, age 11, born in Stratford, Essex, and none of the other children in either census were born there. That made the connection for me.

Jenny patiently pointed out that she could see why the presence of Emma in 1871 might suggest that she was the child of William and Deborah, although she could just be the child of wife Elizabeth (although Elizabeth would have been fourteen or fifteen when she had her and that would be a little unusual). The only way to find out who Emma was would be to order her birth certificate.

Jenny kindly offered to purchase the Deborah death certificate and the Emma birth certificate. Oh no, now this inexperienced genealogist is costing the experienced genealogist money. Maybe I've gone too far. You know, I'm really just a quilter. What about that quilt that I was supposed to be working on?

At that time, Jenny also mentioned that, if she disappeared for a while, it was because she was going into the hospital for open heart surgery. I thought she was just making an excuse to get away from me.

I got a very groggy e-mail a couple of weeks later from Jenny. The certificates had arrived and she had just got out of the hospital from heart bypass surgery. She was anxious to tell me the results.

- ▶ The death certificate for Deborah did not look good. She died in a workhouse/lunatic asylum and there was no next of kin listed. She felt that it was very unlikely that Deborah was William's first wife. She explained that Deborah would only have been in the workhouse if she had no relatives. Even if William had deserted her, the authorities were pretty keen on tracing errant spouses so the deserted spouse's upkeep did not fall on the local authority.
- ▶ To remarry, William would have had to have learnt of her death in the asylum . . . and how would he be told if the authorities had no record of him for the death certificate? The next step would be to get the details of her admission to the asylum; did we think it was worth it? Jenny wasn't so sure.
- ▶ As for the Emma birth certificate provided, it was the wrong one . . . wrong parents—not the Emma with our William Taylor in the census records. Oh no. Poor Jenny. She's recovering from open heart surgery and she has this annoying inexperienced

genealogist bugging her. I told her to relax and take care of herself and get well. I really needed to get back to what I know . . . quilting.

Okay, call me crazy, but I still believed that Deborah was the first wife. So I decided to take a different approach. Jenny had mentioned that, prior to her marriage to William, his second wife, Elizabeth, was married to Henry Lovell. When Henry died, she was widowed with three children (Henry Lovell, born 1861; Ann Elizabeth Lovell, born 1863; and Mary Ann Taylor Lovell, born 1865). She had these children baptized at St. John Evangelist Church, Limehouse, on 9 November 1865. It is interesting to note that the last child had the name Taylor as her third name. Actually, Elizabeth's first husband, Henry Lovell, died while she was pregnant with this child. In fact, William Taylor registered Henry's death with the authorities. William was the landlord of the house in which Elizabeth and Henry were living at the time of his death. So it can be believed that William Taylor was a big part of Elizabeth's life before as well as after the death of her first husband.

I decided to check the IGI for the baptismal records for the Emma Taylor, born 1859, and Charles Taylor, born 1863, who appeared in the 1861 Census born to William and Deborah. (The other daughter, Elizabeth, born 1839, was much older and would have been baptised earlier.) Guess what? They were baptized the same date and place! What are the chances of that? And the mother's name on the IGI was ELIZABETH, not Deborah. This is the proof that I needed to make another connection between these two families. This baptismal information indicated that the children of William Taylor (from his first wife, Deborah) and the children of his future (second) wife, Elizabeth, had been baptized on the same day at the same church. Ahaa!

Here is more interesting and sad information about the children who were baptised that day, just to complicate this story even further. We found out that Charles, born 1861 (on the 1861 census with William and Deborah) was actually the illegitimate son of daughter Elizabeth, born 1839. Charles died in 1863. And Ann Elizabeth Lovell, born 1863, who was Elizabeth and Henry's daughter, died in 1866. This is why they did not appear in the 1871 census. As for Elizabeth, born 1839, she married and did not appear with her father William after the 1861 census.

To finally confirm the parentage of Emma, born 1859, I decided to try ordering another certificate. The birth certificate came in, and Emma was born in 1859 in a workhouse with William Taylor, Sawyer, as the father and Deborah as the mother. Bingo—I hit the jack pot! Emma's mother was Deborah and her father was our William. *Note:* At some point, I also ordered the birth certificate for Elizabeth, born 1839, and it did confirm the same parentage, William and Deborah. It is interesting to note that Elizabeth and Emma were born twenty years apart, which is quite unusual.

I had a feeling that maybe Jenny was getting a little annoyed at me (not to mention she was recovering from open heart surgery and didn't need any stress). As always, I asked Jenny for her opinion on the Emma birth certificate. She couldn't understand why Emma would be born in a

workhouse. She felt that we needed some more facts before we could accept Deborah as William's first wife.

I knew that I was totally green at the family history stuff, and I so respected Jenny's opinion and I was lucky to have her to bounce ideas off. I knew my crazy ideas always have to be backed up with proof. Jenny taught me that. I must drive her crazy sometimes with my inexperience. But I was hoping that maybe my inexperience could lead us to an aspect of this family that might have been overlooked. I explained all this to Jenny.

Jenny responded to me with such kindness. She said not to worry and to please don't think that I was driving her crazy—it's good to have someone to bounce ideas off. The cardiac care nurse had told her that her moods could be a bit erratic for a while so please forgive her if she got a bit scratchy and to not take it personally!

Jenny pointed out that she was sorry to keep sounding a word of caution, but that she would be the pessimist and I could be the optimist. Jenny decided to commission a researcher at the London Metropolitan Archives who would investigate Deborah in the workhouse and find out once and for all. I think she wanted to shut me up *once and for all*.

Oh no, now I'm costing Jenny the big bucks (or I should say pounds). Oh, I hope I am right because, if I'm not, she will never speak to me again. It's one thing to think crazy ideas, but another to incur costs because of these crazy ideas. That's it. I'm going back to quilting. It's less dangerous.

At this point, Jenny got quiet for a while, and one day I received an e-mail from her husband stating that she was rushed back to the hospital as she had a relapse in her recovery. Oh no, I've sent her over the edge! It's probably all my fault. Jenny did recover nicely and came home a few days later with strict instructions to take it easy. So genealogy took a back seat for a while. And I got back to making my quilt for a while.

Finally, the big day arrived and the postman delivered the package from the London Archives to Jenny's house. She e-mailed me the following message:

"I have the record of Deborah's stay in Hanwell Asylum including the daily observations on her condition, the record of her admission in 1866 and death in 1872, and the identification of her next of kin who is—our William Taylor of 4 Ebenezer Place! [Note: This address was earlier identified as where William and Elizabeth were living at one time.] So I take my hat off to you—she is ours, as you said! What's best of all is that included with the documentation is a letter from William Taylor to the Asylum in 1866 detailing the history of Deborah's condition and why he couldn't look after her. Rather touching."

So we had established that William Taylor's first wife was indeed Deborah. We had always thought that if William Taylor had deserted his wife at the workhouse/asylum and taken up with his future wife Elizabeth (even having children with her before Deborah died) that he must have been a real heel. But, as it turned

out, he was actually a very kind man who had a wife who had a severe medical condition, and probably epilepsy and the resulting seizures which probably had caused brain damage. William became her caregiver and took care of the children as well. So we learned more about the character of William, and we had it in his own handwriting.

Jenny and I became very good friends. We continue to e-mail each other, send Xmas gifts, and have formed a great bond with her living in England and me in Toronto. She became a mentor and a wonderful research buddy, and we've found that we have many other things in common, like crafts and stitching. Jenny just recently paid another consultant to take a look at another stay that Deborah had spent in an asylum at an earlier time in 1858, which gave us more insight into Deborah. At the time, they did not know she had epilepsy. She even attempted to kill William by setting the house on fire while he was asleep. Poor William Taylor really had no choice but to put his wife in an asylum because he was worried about the safety of his children and his own life.

This is what I learned from all of this:

1. Please be gentle with someone who has just had a bypass operation.
2. Sign up with the local family history society where your ancestors are from and you may be lucky enough to connect with someone who is researching the same family.
3. Learn all that you can from the more experienced genealogist because they have a wealth of knowledge.
4. Sometimes it is worth it to keep pursuing a hunch, rather than disregarding it because it is not perfect. Listen to your gut.
5. And, most of all, maybe an inexperienced genealogist has something to offer because they are untainted and they could possibly move the family history research to another level.

I'm still passionate about quilting and I'm totally hooked on genealogy, and I'm now merging my two passions together. I'm creating quilts with family history stitched into the blocks to pass down to future generations. Who knows, maybe they'll learn something from me.
