

Peering Around Those Brickwalls

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I love working on big projects. Some of my favorites involve using prosopography which is the study of groups of people. This process looks at the common characteristics of an historical group to understand the relationships among the individuals. Two huge prosopographical studies emerged in the 1970s – one amassed the names of all of the people who could be identified from Late Antiquity (British Academy) – another study detailed all of the identifiable people in Anglo-Saxon England around the time of the Domesday assessment (King's College, London and the University of Cambridge). These studies are more than just the amassed data, but the amassed data is vast, and helped greatly by the invention of the computer. The Great Migration Study (New England Historic Genealogical Society) is also a vast project, closer to home, and one many of us have probably used to gather information about our early European immigrants. Another example of prosopography you may have used is Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (1989) written by David Hackett Fischer. There are many other examples. (See Further Reading)

As genealogists and family historians, we can use the study of prosopography to see around the brickwalls. However, our studies don't have to be huge undertakings. We can focus our own projects to make them manageable by crafting good research questions to get us started and by remembering that we can *modify* our questions as we progress. I've written about one of my prosopographical studies, the marriage relationships of olde Newbury (Descend-O-Gram Winter 2010, Vol xxviii, No. 4, page 4), where I was asking the question: "Were all of the people in Newbury related by marriage?" This was my biggest project to date but it taught me that I didn't need to include every bit of data available- I just

had to include the data that illustrated the story and answered my question. I was able to modify the scope of the study many, many times as I had an overwhelming amount of data.

I have three other on-going prosopography projects which are helping me to understand my own family's relationships. I think they provide a structure to organize my family's stories and enable me to use a lot of genealogy skills and have provided some great stories to share. On my mom's side I've been looking at the pallbearers at her grandmother's funeral. I was hoping that finding the home towns of these six men from Quebec, Canada, would lead me to the hometown of Vitaline (Lantagne) Perusse (~1850 – 1903) who had died in the explosion of the US Cartridge Company in Tewksbury (now Lowell), Massachusetts, in 1903. I'd been looking at hundreds, maybe thousands, of entries in French language sources but never came close to finding her baptism notice. Her pallbearers all had French surnames so I thought that perhaps one or more of them could have been from Vitaline's home town, and therefore if I could find them I could find her. It was obvious one pallbearer was her brother Louis but his birthplace was not her birthplace. By examining the records for the other men, I discovered eventually that one other man was her son-in-law and a third fellow was a nephew by marriage but their birthplaces were not Vitaline's birthplace. I haven't found family relationships for the others but did find, through the use of the Lowell City Directories and period maps that for a time just before 1900, all these men were living in a small, densely settled section of Lowell, across the Merrimack river from the Boott Mill. Most of them were carpenters as was Vitaline's husband and sons. So relationships did emerge showing that these men were connected by family, by being friends, by working together, or by being neighbors. But, Vitaline's birthplace and actual birthdate have not yet been discovered.

On my Dad's side, a second prosopography project which keeps me entertained for hours at a time was created in part to answer the question: why did my grandmother Florence (Schofield) Plummer (1899 – 1984) describe her childhood on a farm? The family story was that she lived with her father in the Saco, Maine, jail – he was the jailor not an inmate. She told my sister that she remembered leaving a farm and the woman she thought was her mother when she was 6 years old (in 1906) to go with a beautifully dressed woman who actually told her she was her mother. Her life after that was familiar to me, Florence lived in a boarding house on Middle Street, Saco, Maine, where she had to make pies for the residents before she left for school. After 8th grade, school was over for her but she still made pies every morning before she went to work in one of the factories on Factory Island in the Saco River. The 1900 census entry for her showed a different start to this journey. She was enumerated along with her mother May Alice (Potts) Schofield (1880 – 1915) and her grandmother and grandfather (Minnie (Dickerson)(1852 – 1905) and John W Potts, Sr. (1849 – 1927)) on Deering Avenue in Saco, Maine (around the corner from Middle St). So where did the farm story come from? One other piece of information which didn't really fit in anywhere was the entry in the 1906 Saco Directory which showed that Florence May was listed under her father's name, John William Schofield (1875 – 1911), but she resided at RFD #3. Interesting.

I can't say when I started keeping track of the people who lived in the boarding houses at 12, 16, and 32 Middle Street but I did and then I started keeping track of the neighbors who showed up on census records indices. At first, I looked at the 1900 and 1910 US census index but later, after I'd been presented with new data, I needed to search as far back as the 1870 census to reveal family ties and friends and neighbors. I did put the data in a spreadsheet at one time but the document was lost when a hard drive crashed two laptops ago. It wasn't a

terrible loss as I had transcribed most of the information into the notes section of my grandmother's entry in Family Tree Maker (which has been backed-up frequently on floppy disks and later portable drives). After the laptop crash, I made sure that I transcribed the information in the personal entries for most of the folks who lived on Middle St.

Serendipity is a concept which genealogists can appreciate. Once, while I was looking at anyone named Schofield in the census Index, 1900, one entry caught my eye. I saw that a Horace Schofield lived in Saco, Maine, in 1900. This was a new name to me and worth a look. When I opened up the census image, it was absolutely clear to me that the baby listed in the index was Florence, not Horace – (several months old and female). So not only was there an entry for Florence with her divorced mother, there was also an entry for Florence with a farmer on the Buxton Road, Saco, in 1900. The farmer, Orin Grace, was a member of a large extended family which lived on the Buxton Road for nearly 100 years. I turned my attention to his housekeeper Sarah J Chase. Her married name didn't impress me but I did find her marriage information on-line. Her birth name, Nason, set off all sorts of processes in my mind. I knew her name had some connection to the Middle Street folks and so I dug into that information (which prompted me to look at the neighbors in the 1870 and 1880 census indexes). There she was in 1880: a resident at 32 Middle Street. Knowing that I had something significant here I kept looking at the farmer and the housekeeper. Sarah J (Nason) Chase had a child in 1882 who was named Florence May; my grandmother born in 1899 was named Florence May. In 1910, Sarah's brother Charles Nason, a widower, was a boarder in the same boarding house where my grandmother lived and worked – this was the connection which I knew I had seen somewhere. In 1870, the Nasons were enumerated on the Buxton Road near the enumeration for Orin Grace's family. All of this was of course, circumstantial but very

interesting. Then, in 1906, Mr. Grace and Mrs. Chase both died. A small child living in that household had to go somewhere, why not back to her mother? I still have no idea why Florence was fostered-out, or if the Nasons, Chases, or Graces were related to the Schofields or Potts. That information is still out there somewhere waiting to be discovered.

My last illustration is another on-going prosopography group study. I needed to determine whether or not I had a Revolutionary soldier, sailor or patriot – a relative who would allow me or my sisters and nieces to apply to the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). I've known for quite a while that I had a Revolutionary War soldier in my Dad's line: Ephraim Lindsey (1738 – 1778) who died in White Plains, New York, October 5, 1778. He is well documented. However, the Reverend Gad Hitchcock noted in the church records for Pembroke, Massachusetts, that Ephraim's posthumous child, Ethelbert (b. 1779), was a girl. He was not; he was my 7th great grandfather. I now have the proof of his birth and gender from another source but for a while I seriously needed other ancestors for a provable line. I knew that on my maternal side Mom's Irish ancestors had not yet arrived and her French-speaking relatives in Canada did not fight for the cause (although there are Canadian Patriots). On my Dad's side, his mother's people (the Potts and Schofields you met earlier) had not yet arrived and wouldn't until the Industrial Revolution. So that left the appropriate generation on Dad's paternal side for me to examine. I used a very helpful tool for this project: a fan chart. I could see immediately the other ancestors in the same generation. I discovered 12 men who were in the right age group who needed to be researched.

My method of narrowing this search was a bit different from other searches I've done. Instead of sitting at the computer and 'googling' or using a genealogy program, I went to a local library genealogy room and chose 6 books at

random which had Revolutionary War information. I hadn't done this type of approach before but got some good results and picked up more snippets of American history. I did of course get around to the on-line resources to augment what I found in the library. The DAR search engine was extremely helpful. In the end, of the dozen men identified as probable, eight were revealed to be possible, provable ancestors.

So I hope you are inspired to jump into your own prosopographical investigations. You can modify your research questions, add new data at any time, or work on a project until you have completed it to your satisfaction. You can also try new ways of gathering information. Don't overlook histories, biographies, maps, or even navigation charts. Examine compiled genealogies, church records, library books as well as internet sites. Look at photographs - maybe you'll be very lucky to find that a relative noted the names of the folks in the picture on the back of the snapshot. Sort the information in different ways – build a fan chart or fill in an 8-generation or 10-generation pedigree. Read the entire census page and, maybe, the one before and after your targeted person. Look at the ads in the City Directories and not just the address listings. The ads might give you a lead on business connections. Check out spouses or children and the spouses of the children. Check for every misspelling that you can imagine. Most of all have fun while you are compiling information and share, share, share. Your family is secretly happy that you do.

Further Reading

Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (database): Website:
www.pase.ac.uk/jsp/index.jsp

Domesday Names: An Index of Personal and Place Names in Domesday Book, compiled by KSB Keats-Rohan and D. Thornton (Woodbridge, 1997).

The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire.
J. R. Martindale, AHM Jones, J. Morris. A work
in three volumes published from the 1970s to
the 1990s.

Medieval Prosopography (Journal), Medieval
Institute, Western Michigan University.

Portal to the prosopography projects of the
History Department at the University of Oxford:
<http://prosopography.modhist.ox.ac.uk>