

A Genealogical Timeline as a Research Tool

By Stephen B. Hatton

A genealogical timeline is a written representation of events in a person's life in chronological order. It may also include relevant historical occurrences and geopolitical border changes. National, state, and local historical happenings can provide meaningful context to personal events by explaining the external circumstances of someone's actions. Border changes may help a researcher locate pertinent records, and also disprove geographic moves in cases where boundaries changed but the person remained in the same absolute location. It is a useful tool for genealogists of all experience levels, and is simple but underused.

Reasons to construct a timeline include:

- Organize information known about someone; this is especially useful if many data have been gathered, because it may make accumulated data management easier.
- Assess information about someone, including data gap identification and discovery of inconsistencies.¹
- Notice patterns leading to deeper knowledge of, and appreciation for, the life of an ancestor.

After briefly summarizing practical approaches to create a timeline, this article

1. An inconsistency may result from using an inaccurate source, including an event of a different person, making a typographical error while recording the data, or inappropriately evaluating evidence.

will illustrate its usefulness for pointing out opportunities for further research. Most of the case study that follows, however, will focus on using a timeline to explain and understand the interaction among researched life events because that is an advantage previously underemphasized.

Formats

There are many formats for timelines. A chart laid out left to right with multiple horizontal bands depicting different categories of events such as residence, occupation, and religion is advantageous because it visually presents the interrelation among types of life events (see Horizontal Band Timeline on page 50).

It may result in quick recognition of a problem or show a connection not noticed before.

Another more common format is a simple list or table presentation, used in the case study to follow. The mechanism for producing a timeline can be genealogy software, specialized timeline software such as Genelines and Simile Timeline Widget, computer-based spreadsheet or word processor table, or simply paper and pen or pencil.²

2. Genelines information is available at <http://progenygenealogy.com/products/timeline-charts/universal-version.aspx> and Simile Widget, Timeline is available at <http://www.simile-widgets.org/timeline/>.

| | 1734 | 1740 | 1750 | 1760 | 1767 |
|------------------|------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------|
| Occupation | tailor | | planter | | |
| Land | Moorfields (1739–45) | | Rumly Creek (1746–) | Richardson’s Prospect (1754–) | |
| | Elizabeth’s Choice (1741–45) | | Caswell’s Venture (1750–) | | |
| | Neglect (1741–45) | | Mate’s Affinity (1750–) | | |
| Children born | Elizabeth (1741) | | John (1756) | Sarah (1766) | |
| | Thomas (1735) | Aquilla (1743) | | Betsey (1767) | |
| | Ann (1736) | Mary (1745) | | | |
| | Cheney (1737) | | | | |
| Children married | | | Ann (1756) | Elizabeth (1761) | |
| | | | Cheney (1761) | Mary (1765) | |
| | | | | Mary (1766) | |
| | | | | Aquilla (1767) | |
| | | | | Thomas (1767) | |
| Estate creditor | Henry Wetherall (1741) | | Joseph Smith (1749/50) | Richard Coleman (1767) | |
| | Nicholas Horner (1741) | | | | |
| | John Crockett (1742) | | | | |
| | John Lloyd (1745) | | | | |
| Surety | Thomas Sheredine (1746) | | | Daniel Watkins (1764) | |
| | | | | Mary Coleman (1766) | |

Horizontal Band Timeline.

The minimal data that should be entered are date, brief event description, and location. Age is also suggested. The advantage of including age is that it may show suspect data, such as a marriage at two years old, a death at 150. The disadvantage is that the birth date may be unknown or inaccurate. In all cases, the event data should be cited, though in the interest of space, they are omitted in the case study below.

A timeline may be used at various stages of research. While research is ongoing, it may highlight research gaps, and thus present opportunities for further research. It may also point out errors.

Once the majority of the source-collecting phase of research is complete, a timeline is helpful to increase biographical and historical perspective; confirm or disconfirm moves; show inconsistencies and suggest possible errors that need to be rechecked; and inform where remaining records may be sought. It can show what evidence answers specific questions, and help build a proof statement or narrative. Lastly, showing a pattern may lead to new knowledge.

Seeing patterns and explaining an ancestor’s actions are perhaps the greatest benefits of a timeline. One must be cautious, however, to ensure that sufficient data and background understanding are gained to soundly attribute

motive or reason for an event. One should learn about the time period and culture of the ancestor’s era so that one can make appropriate hypotheses, and avoid using one’s present-day values to judge historical events.

Recognition of patterns will result in a deeper understanding of the ancestor. Patterns may enable the researcher to highlight direct or indirect evidence for family relationships. It is important to note associates because they may help substantiate conclusions about relations, migrations, character, and most important, identity. Financial transactions are particularly revealing: following the money trail applies to genealogy as it does to other kinds of investigation.

Case Study

A case study will help illustrate the power of a timeline. John Hatton immigrated from England to America in 1726, and almost immediately went to Baltimore County, Maryland, where he spent the rest of his life, and died in 1770.³ With the exception of the first event, the data will be

3. More on John Hatton is found in “The Origin of John Hatton¹ (Died 1770) of Baltimore County, Maryland,” *The American Genealogist* 87:1 (2014), 66–74.

limited to Baltimore County, so for this case study, a location column is not included. His age is also omitted.

During the early stages of research, the following two events are discovered.

| Year-Month-Day | Event |
|----------------|--|
| 1761-12-29 | Daughter Elizabeth married Daniel Scott Watkins |
| 1766-05-26 | Gave surety for Mary Coleman to administer the estate of Richard Coleman |

These two events suggest ideas for research. Can anything more be learned about Daniel Watkins that is relevant to John Hatton's life? Who was Mary Coleman? Subsequent research provides answers that lead to an expanded timeline (newly discovered events are in bold).

| Year-Month-Day | Event |
|-------------------|---|
| 1761-12-29 | Daughter Elizabeth married Daniel Scott Watkins |
| 1764-03-10 | Gave surety to Daniel Watkins, administrator of Elijah Watkins' estate |
| 1765-08-22 | Daughter Mary married Richard Coleman |
| 1766-05-26 | Gave surety for Mary Coleman to administer the estate of Richard Coleman |
| 1766-12-23 | Daughter Mary Coleman married Jeremiah Croney |
| 1767-03-10 | Was "great" creditor of the estate of Richard Coleman |

As a result of the additional research and expanded timeline, the researcher can better understand the events. The previously located marriage record of his daughter Elizabeth explains why John Hatton gave surety to Daniel Watkins. By finding that his daughter Mary married Richard Coleman, the researcher now knows that the previously discovered surety involved the death of John's son-in-law. This leads to the otherwise undiscoverable second marriage of daughter Mary, and to other records not listed here. Also, that John Hatton was a creditor of Richard Coleman implies an event perhaps involving a loan of money to the Colemans, for which no dated direct evidence

has been found, but which is nonetheless grounded in strong indirect evidence.

A reasonably exhaustive search for original and near-original records yielded an expanded timeline. See a selection on page 52.⁴

Timelines Establish Associations

Space does not permit the inclusion of all relevant data in this article, but some associates' names are listed to show their usefulness for genealogical understanding. Many observations may be made upon careful study of these data. For sake of illustration, three important conclusions are made based on data in this timeline, besides the family connections observed in the set of events listed.

1. John Hatton interacted much with neighbors. This is not unusual, but seldom do researchers take the time to examine these closely to comprehend the implications. Doing so may lead to insights not otherwise possible. A close examination of the 1737 Gunpowder Lower Hundred tax list shows the names of William Dallam, Henry Wetherall, Mary "Crockett," and John "Loyd." Transactions with those neighbors are noted in 1741, 1742, 1745 (two events), and 1750 (see relevant timeline rows below).

| Year-Month-Day | Event |
|----------------|---|
| 1737 | Taxed in Gunpowder Lower Hundred |
| 1741-07-01 | Received payment from estate of Henry Wetherall |
| 1742-06-11 | Received payment from estate of John Crockett, administered by Mary Crockett |
| 1745-05-07 | Sold part of Moorfields and all of Elizabeth's Choice and Neglect to William Dallam |
| 1745-08-14 | Received payment from estate of John "Loyd" |
| 1750-08-18 | Bought Caswell's Venture and Mate's Affinity from William Dallam |

4. Only some of the associates are included to introduce the value of this technique. A detailed timeline should include a brief description of the role of each associate in the event.

2. A better understanding of Hatton’s character may be reached by noting that John Hatton provided surety to Thomas Sheredine to administer the estate of John Frederick. This is of great significance because Sheredine had been the sheriff responsible for carrying out the public whipping of Hatton in 1728 for his crime of theft (see timeline rows below). This points out the importance of noting associated people and their roles in the events in which one’s ancestor participated.

| Year-Month-Day | Event |
|----------------|--|
| 1729/30-03-01 | Tried and sentenced for theft; punished at public whipping post |
| 1746-10-18 | Gave surety for Thomas Sheredine, administrator of John Frederick’s estate |

3. His economic position improved beginning in 1739. This is determined by noting that he bought, sold, and leased land (1739–54), that he was a creditor of several estates (1741–62), and that he served as surety (1746–66). The primary reason for this prosperity was his career change from tailor to planter. That switch appears to have happened soon after his 1728 crime occurred, which was an apparent “wake-up call.”

| Year-Month-Day | Event | Associates |
|----------------|---|--|
| 1726-10 | Arrived in Annapolis; indentured to Jonathan Hughes | |
| 1728-11-14 | Stole from Aquilla Hall | Jonathan Hughes, John Atkinson, Aquilla Hall, Johanna Hall, Thomas Sheredine |
| 1733-05-17 | Married Sarah Cheney | |
| 1737 | Taxed in Gunpowder Lower Hundred | William Dallam, Henry Wetherall, Mary “Crocket,” John “Loyd” |
| 1738-06-06 | Tried and sentenced for theft | Richard Caswell, William Dallam, William Cook, John Copeland, John Bond |
| 1739-04-03 | Bought Moorfields from John Armstrong | |
| 1741-11-13 | Received payment from estate of Nicholas Horner | |
| 1741/2-03-03 | Bought Elizabeth’s Choice and Neglect from John Isham | |
| 1746-07-17 | Leased land on Rumly Creek from Thomas White | |
| c 1756 | Son John born | |
| 1761-12-31 | Son Cheney married Keziah Bayley | |
| 1765-11-16 | Married Unity (Coffee) Willshire | |
| 1770-11-29 | Dead (died between 14 and 29 Nov 1770) | |

Selected events from an expanded timeline.

Conclusion

A timeline can help organize data, point out information gaps, reveal inconsistencies or improbabilities, and help pinpoint areas for further research. It may also lead to deeper understanding of an ancestor, provided one takes the time to reflect on and analyze the data one has collected and presented chronologically with much effort. It is this analysis that can potentially yield the greatest benefit from use of a timeline.

A timeline may reveal involvement in the community, show interactions with friends and associates, point to genealogical relations, clarify migrations, help establish identity, disclose errors, and give a deeper picture of the behavior, character, and skills of an ancestor. It helps one to discover the influences, factors, behaviors, and trends that played a role in the life path of an individual.

A timeline can show an event that was occurring at about the same time, or shortly before or after, and that, in turn, can explain reasons for the event or participation in it. It may also show financial changes, religious conversions, and many other interesting changes or consistencies. Again, it must be emphasized

that one should exercise caution not to read too much into the data. When unsure, seek to learn more about the external factors related to religion, politics, history, the law, finances, topography, medicine, the military, etc., or consult with those knowledgeable about such matters. A timeline is a simple tool, but will often expand one's research, and lead to a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, an ancestor.⁵ 🌳

5. For a general discussion of timelines, see Amy Johnson Crow, "A New View: Using Timelines in Your Research," *NGS Magazine* 28 (September–October 2002), 276–77; and Chuck Knuthson, "Timelines: A Chronology of Life Events," *NGS Magazine* 34 (July–September 2008), 38–42. For the use of timelines to solve genealogical problems, see Marya C. Myers, "One Benjamin Tuell or Two in Late Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island? Manuscripts and a Timeline Provide the Answer," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 93 (March 2005), 25–37; Thomas W. Jones, "Logic Reveals the Parents of Philip Pritchett of Virginia and Kentucky," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 97 (March 2009), 29–38; and Thomas W. Jones, "Misleading Records Debunked: The Surprising Case of George Wellington Edison Jr.," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 100 (June 2012), 133–56. For a starting timeline template, see "Life Stages Worksheet," page 2 of Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Quicksheet Genealogical Problem Analysis: A Strategic Plan* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2010).



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