

The Mystery of the Missing Days

by Bob Brooke

On September 2, 1752, an odd happening occurred that's still keeping genealogists on their toes. On that day, the British Isles and all the English colonies, including America, lost 11 days--September 3 through 13. People went to sleep and when they awoke the next morning, the date had changed to September 14. There were riots in rural villages since the people thought the government was trying to cheat them out of 11 days of their lives. Though these days disappeared in English lands in 1752, a number had already vanished in other places--France in 1582, Austria in 1584, and Norway in 1700.

The British were among the last countries in the world to accept that fact they were using a flawed calendar. The Julian calendar--named after Julius Caesar, who adopted it around 45 B.C.--declared March 25 New Year's Day and added that the year would be 365 days and 6 hours long. The Nicene Council officially adopted the calendar in 325 A.D. As it became possible to measure the length of the solar year more accurately, astronomers found that the Julian system exceeded the solar year by 11 minutes, or 24 hours every 131 years, and three days every 400 years. This excess amounted to 10 days between 325 A.D. and 1582 A.D.

Pope Gregory XIII ordered a new calendar, called the Gregorian calendar in 1582, when most of the world jumped forward by 10 days on October 5, thus restoring the vernal equinox to March 21. To prevent the recurrence of this error, he ordered that, in every 400 years, leap year's extra day should be omitted three times. To accomplish this in an orderly fashion, he omitted the last day of February on centennial years of which the first two digits couldn't be divided by four without a remainder. Thus, it was omitted in 1700, 1800, and 1900, but won't be omitted in 2000.

All Catholic countries, following the edict of the Pope, adopted the new system. But England, then in difficulties with the Church of Rome, refused to go along with the new calendar until the mid-18th century and by then the difference had grown to 11 days. All British lands except Scotland, which changed its calendar 100 years before, now celebrated New Year's Day on January 1. In Russia, the Julian calendar continued to be used.

Despite the official calendar, people in England and the colonies began to use the Gregorian system as early as the 16th century. Thus, many early colonial records include double dates, written as "12 February 1661/1662," indicating that, although it was officially 1661, some considered it to be 1662.

Genealogists, especially those just starting out on their quest for ancestors, need to double-check dates found in English-speaking countries between 1582 and 1752. Are these dates listed as O.S.(Old Style) or N.S.(New Style)? Is there a date listed as 1750/51? That means it would have probably been between January 1 and March 24, which means that 1750 is the old-style notation and 1751, the new one. These double dates occur only in January, February and March--never in any other months and never after 1752.

In addition, dates in the 17th century frequently have the month indicated by its number rather than its name. This was because most of the months had Roman or "pagan" names and the Puritans and Quakers disliked them. Since March was considered the first month of the year before 1752, a date before that might read like this: "13th, 2nd mo:1683." This becomes "13 April 1683." Generally, the day came first and the month second, but to be sure, genealogists make sure by comparing the date with others in the same record.

Frequently, this change in the calendar will explain the birth of two children apparently within too short a period. Thus, if a researcher finds that Joshua and Rachel Smith had a daughter Mary, born 22 March 1638, and from another record a son, Henry, born 27 February 1639, it would seem that they were born 28 days apart, but were actually born 11 months apart, according to old and new-style dating.