

# The Perils of Accepting Copies of Original Records at Face Value

By Julie Miller, CG, FNGS

If an original record has been microfilmed or digitized, can that copy be considered the same as the original? The answer may not be as simple or straightforward as it first appears.<sup>1</sup>

Finding and using original records, “material in its first oral or recorded form,”<sup>2</sup> is the goal in genealogical research, and certainly microfilming and digitization make images of original records more accessible to a larger audience. But by removing context, these processes may affect the accuracy of the information the images contain.

Access to original records could become more difficult after microfilming, digitization, or even abstracting, when record custodians decide that the availability of these copies or derivative records makes it unnecessary to provide access to the original records.

Researchers need to be vigilant about possible errors and omissions in record images, and should analyze their format and source

before accepting the validity of the information they hold. The importance of these principles is illustrated in the search for the grave of Eddie Wenck.

## Eddie Wenck

Edward John “Eddie” Wenck, son of Martin Wenck and Catherine (Leiser) Potter, was born 8 July 1883 in Newport, Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> He died there on 29 January 1886; he was two years, six months, and twenty-one days old.<sup>4</sup>

Children who die young may be difficult to research. They normally leave few records and have no descendants to pass on their story. Because they do not add branches to a family tree, they are often overlooked. Eddie was one of these forgotten children.

Two microfilmed records, a Corpus Christi Catholic Church interment record<sup>5</sup> and a Newport city death register,<sup>6</sup> state that

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1. For additional information see Elizabeth Shown Mills, “QuickLesson 10: Original Records, Image Copies, and Derivatives,” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-10-original-records-image-copies-and-derivatives> : accessed 18 September 2016).

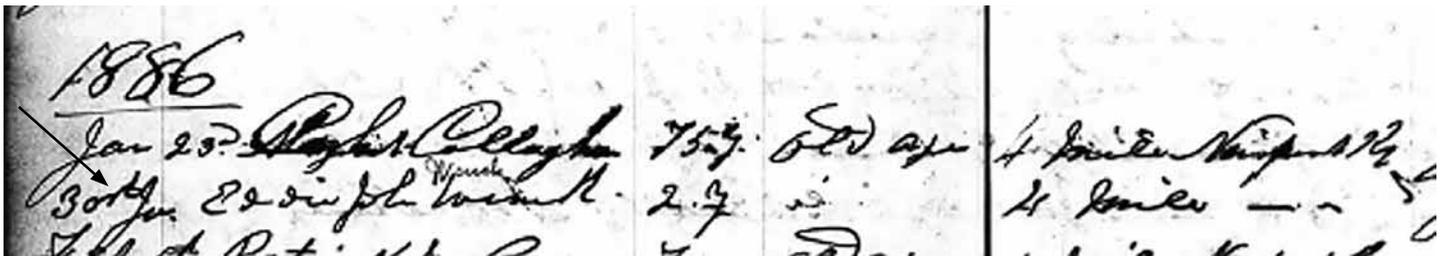
2. Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, Third Edition (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2015), 24.

3. Immaculate Conception Church 1856–1961 (Newport, Campbell Co., Kentucky), baptismal register, page 68, Edward John Wenck; microfilm F292 C822c, Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Kentucky.

4. Corpus Christi Church Misc. Records 1845–1925 (Newport, Campbell Co., Kentucky), interment register, 30 January 1886, page 46, Eddie John Wenck; microfilm F292 C822c, Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Kentucky.

5. Corpus Christi Church Misc. Records 1845–1925, interment register, 30 January 1886, page 46, Eddie John Wenck.

6. Kentucky Department of Vital Statistics, “City of Newport (Campbell County) Register of Deaths 1884–1916,” January 1886, Edward Wenck; microfilm 353.59 C193d, Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Kentucky.



Eddie John Wenck's interment entry in register attributed to Corpus Christi Church (Newport, Kentucky), page 46.

Eddie Wenck is buried in Four Mile Cemetery. The next step is to find a cemetery record.

There is no Four Mile Cemetery in Newport, the place of Eddie's birth and death. The closest Four Mile cemeteries are in rural areas of the county many miles from Newport. Their records have no entry for Eddie or any Wenck. So where is the Four Mile Cemetery where Eddie is buried?

### Observations and problems identified

Several issues stand out in the microfilmed copy of the Corpus Christi interment register:

- The priest of record has an Irish surname. Corpus Christi was a German parish.<sup>7</sup>
- Most surnames of the deceased are English or Irish in origin, not German as would be expected in a German parish.
- In addition to the interment register, the microfilm has a Corpus Christi death register for the same time period.
- The two cemeteries listed most commonly in the interment register are Four Mile and St. Stephen cemeteries. Corpus Christi Church had a parish cemetery, St. Joseph Cemetery, yet no burials for this cemetery are listed in the interment register.

As an image copy of the original record, the microfilmed Corpus Christi interment register provides primary information and direct

evidence. But these discrepancies raise doubts that need to be dispelled before the information can be trusted.

### Corpus Christi interment register and death register

The microfilmed Corpus Christi interment register is dated from 1870 to 1925. The Corpus Christi death register, also on the microfilm, covers 1872 to 1925. This means that two sets of records were made for the same event in Corpus Christi parish—that would have been an unusual record-keeping practice.

The surnames in the Corpus Christi interment register are mostly English or Irish names like O'Neil, Day, Walsh, King, and Ryan, not the expected surnames for a predominantly German church. The surnames commonly listed in the death register are German names like Bergmann, Deiters, Klostermann, Schmitz, and Weber. Comparison of the interment register and the death register finds no name occurring in both registers.

Father James McNerny, the priest of record for Eddie's interment entry, was the pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Newport.<sup>8</sup> He does not appear in the death register. The priest of record in the death register in 1886 was Father H. Thien, the pastor of Corpus Christi Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

7. Hoffmann's *Catholic Directory, Almanac and Clergy List Quarterly* (Milwaukee: Hoffmann Brothers, 1886), 170; digital image, *HathiTrust Digital Library* (<http://www.hathitrust.org> : accessed 17 December 2015).

8. Rev. Paul E. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, On the Occasion of the Centenary of the Diocese, 1853–1953* (Covington: Diocese of Covington, 1954), 701, 873. Also, *Williams' Covington and Newport Directory, Including Dayton, Bellevue, Ludlow and Bromley, Kentucky, also a Cincinnati Business Directory 1886–1887* (Cincinnati: Williams & Co., 1886), 213, 270. Also, *Hoffmann's Catholic Directory*, 170.

9. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky*, 695, 887. Also, *Williams' Covington and Newport Directory*, 270. Also, *Hoffmann's Catholic Directory*, 170.

The priests of record and the surnames of the dead make it clear that the microfilm's labeling of the interment register as Corpus Christi Church is incorrect. It should be labeled Immaculate Conception Church.

The microfilm has been available for over twenty years with the error. The label needed to be corrected so that the inaccurate information did not continue to spread.

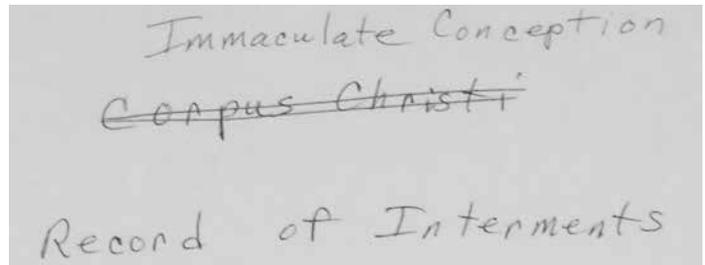
### Confirming the error

Both churches are closed now and their records are stored at the Holy Spirit Parish in Newport. Examination of the original registers would confirm the error, but the records are not open for viewing because the microfilms are publicly available at the Kenton County Public Library in Covington, Kentucky. Genealogists often encounter this issue when records have been microfilmed or digitized.

The Diocese of Covington's archivist, Thomas Ward, was shown the evidence, agreed that an error had occurred, and made arrangements for the original Immaculate Conception interment register to be examined.

Copies of the so-called microfilmed Corpus Christi interment register were compared to the original Immaculate Conception register and found to be identical. Eddie Wenck was buried from Immaculate Conception Church (the same church where he was baptized), not Corpus Christi Church.

Inspection of the original Immaculate Conception register revealed that its first page had not been microfilmed. This handwritten page is inscribed with the notation "Immaculate Conception ~~Corpus Christi~~ Record of Interments." The interment register was labeled incorrectly as Corpus Christi on the microfilm because it was incorrectly labeled on the front page of the original register.



*Notation on front page of interment register, Immaculate Conception Church (Newport, Kentucky).*



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It is likely that the inscription on the front page had not been corrected when the records were microfilmed in 1993. This does not explain why the page with the inscription was not microfilmed. Nevertheless, at some point after 1993, the mistake was found and corrected in the original Immaculate Conception register. Unfortunately, the error was not corrected in the microfilmed register and many researchers continued to collect and use inaccurate information. In 2015, the error was corrected in the Kenton County Public Library catalog and on the microfilm box label.

The only way to discover the missing page was to see the original register. The simple notation significantly changed the source of these records and interpretation of the information they contain.

## Four Mile Cemetery

This brings us back to the question, “Where is the Four Mile Cemetery where Eddie Wenck is buried?” Members of Eddie’s family are buried in either St. Stephen Catholic Cemetery or Evergreen Cemetery (Newport’s public cemetery) depending on their religious affiliation. Both cemeteries are located in Campbell County, Kentucky.

Two records name Eddie’s place of burial as Four Mile Cemetery, the interment record (which we now know was created by Immaculate Conception, not Corpus Christi)<sup>10</sup> and the Newport city death register.<sup>11</sup> No other family members are buried in Four Mile Cemetery.

Campbell County is located in Northern Kentucky. Two Four Mile cemeteries are located in the region:

- Four Mile Baptist Cemetery in Carthage, Kentucky (now known as Twelve and Four Mile), about twenty miles from Newport.



*Church of the Immaculate Conception, Newport, Kentucky, from the Collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County.*

- St. Joseph “Four Mile” Cemetery in Camp Springs, Kentucky, twelve miles south of Newport.

Eddie’s entry is one of many in the Immaculate Conception interment register listing Four Mile Cemetery as the place of burial. Since it is unlikely that a Catholic priest would have presided over many dozens of burials in a Baptist cemetery, it was eliminated from the list of likely cemeteries.

St. Joseph “Four Mile” Catholic Cemetery is located twelve miles from Newport in Camp Springs. No entry for Eddie or any Wenck appears in its records. An easy assumption is

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10. Immaculate Conception Misc. Records 1855–1928 (Newport, Campbell Co., Kentucky), interment register, 30 January 1886, page 46, Eddie John Wenck; microfilm F292 C822c, Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Kentucky. These records are on the film containing the Corpus Christi records.

11. Kentucky Department of Vital Statistics, “Newport Register of Deaths 1884–1916,” January 1886, Edward Wenck.

that Eddie and the others must be buried in the Camp Springs cemetery because it has the same name and a Catholic affiliation. However, it seems unlikely that this large group of Newport families would travel twelve miles in the 1880s to bury their loved ones when other options were closer.

## When things don't seem right, it's time to dig deeper

Could there be another Four Mile Cemetery not already identified? Inquiries were made to local historians, library staff, archivists, and long-time residents, but no one knew of a Catholic Four Mile Cemetery other than the one in Camp Springs.

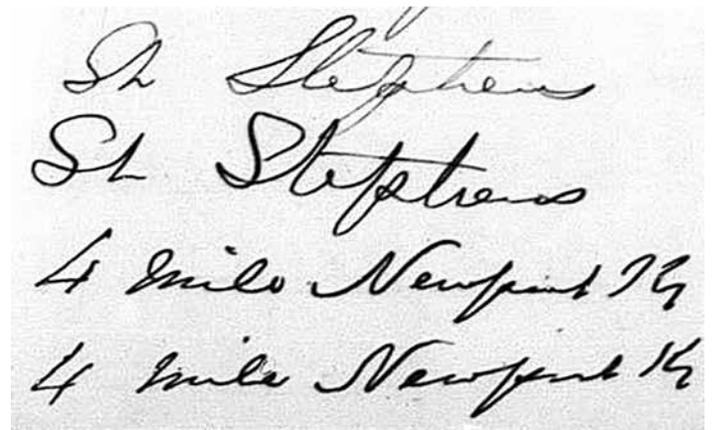
There were three Catholic parishes in Newport when Eddie died in 1886:

- Corpus Christi Parish.<sup>12</sup> Its parish cemetery, St. Joseph Cemetery on Licking Pike, was started in 1869.
- Immaculate Conception Parish.<sup>13</sup> No record of a parish cemetery has been found.
- St. Stephen Parish.<sup>14</sup> Its parish cemetery, St. Stephen Cemetery, was started in 1860 and is located four miles from Newport on the Campbell Turnpike.

Could Four Mile Cemetery be the same as St. Stephen Cemetery, *four miles from Newport*? The Immaculate Conception interment register lists both cemeteries as places of burial in separate entries, many times on the same page. Wouldn't the recorder, most likely the priest, have written the name of a cemetery one way or the other?

## Expanding the focus

The research focus was expanded to include all 250 Four Mile Cemetery entries in the Immaculate Conception interment register dated from 1872 to 1890. These entries were compared



Entries for St. Stephen and Four Mile cemeteries on the same page, Immaculate Conception Church interment records, page 43.

to the published St. Stephen Cemetery index.<sup>15</sup> The book does not identify the cemetery as Four Mile. However, 85 percent of the Four Mile names in the Immaculate Conception interment register appear in the index.

The cemetery index, a derivative source, was adequate for checking the credibility of the "two names but one cemetery" hypothesis, but the original St. Stephen Cemetery records were needed to confirm the location of the 250 Four Mile burials.

## Confirming the cemetery

Access to the St. Stephen cemetery records was initially denied because of the availability of the published index. A compromise was reached to search for the 15 percent or forty names not found in the index, including Eddie Wenck.

Like many cemeteries, St. Stephen's has large cabinets of index cards for its burials. Initial searches in the index cards did not produce any positive results. An inquiry was made about additional records and it was learned that old St. Stephen cemetery books originally kept at St. Stephen parish are hidden in cabinets at the cemetery office, rarely used. The registers are old and fragile, the faded ink is hard to read, and

12. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky*, 694.

13. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky*, 698.

14. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky*, 706.

15. Kathleen Carmichael Adams, compiler, *St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Cemetery, Campbell County, Kentucky 1850-1940* (Campbell County, KY: K. C. Adams, 199?).

words are often written in Latin. The registers are not in chronological order, making them very disorganized and difficult to use.

Years ago, names were copied from the parish cemetery registers onto index cards. The cemetery's official stand on these old registers is that if there is no index card there is no entry in the registers. Because the initial search did not result in locating even one index card, the staff was persuaded to allow the use of the old parish registers.

The record of Eddie Wenck's burial was found with the 1886 entries on page 291.<sup>16</sup> In fact, over half of the forty names were found during the allotted time. More names probably would have been found if not for the time constraints imposed by the cemetery staff.

Eddie Wenck is buried in section AA, the baby section of the cemetery, with no marker. This large section has only a few markers. But after all the searching, Eddie, the little boy lost for so many years, was found in the same cemetery with his mother and other relatives.

The results are conclusive. St. Stephen Cemetery *was* once known as Four Mile Cemetery but the association has been lost. It was not recorded in local history resources and the residents ceased using the name Four Mile Cemetery when referring to St. Stephen Cemetery. Eventually it was forgotten.

## Lessons learned

Do not accept any copies of original records at face value. Analyze every document and its format before accepting the validity of the information.

Take the time to research the place and time. The records must be studied in historical context. This process often uncovers information that helps in understanding the records even if those sources do not include a family's name.

Report errors to record owners and record copyholders. Document the corrections and share those findings.

<sup>16</sup> St. Stephen Cemetery Office (Ft. Thomas, Kentucky), Old Parish Burial Register, page 291, Edie [sic] Wenck, 30 January 1886.



*Section AA, Baby Section, St. Stephen Cemetery, Fort Thomas, Kentucky; photographed October 2014 and privately held by the author.*

Lastly, researchers should trust their instincts when something "just doesn't feel right." The available records for Eddie's burial place are two microfilmed image copies of original records showing primary information with direct evidence. It would have been easy to simply accept the information provided by the records. But records are not always what they appear. It is worth the time and effort to dig deeper and either confirm or disprove our instincts.

## Conclusion

This was a case of mislabeled records, a forgotten cemetery name, and restricted record access. The microfilmed image copy was not adequate and derivative sources did not include all entries. Original records that were not easily accessible provided the key to finding the answers. 🌳

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