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YOUR ANCESTORS' UNMARRIED, CHILDLESS SIBLINGS COULD BE THE KEY

by Aaron Goodwin



I was slow to learn. When I began genealogy, I was focused exclusively on my direct ancestors. Why would I care about anyone else? Why would anyone? After a while, and begrudgingly, I conceded that researching my ancestors' siblings and their spouses could occasionally be helpful. Very big of me, frankly, because venturing back into the 19th century and earlier meant that I would be researching *a lot* more people. Families of eight to twelve children were the norm.

I grew to recognize that siblings, their spouses, and their spouses' families could have a significant impact on my research. Repeated given names

became onomastic evidence, and spouses' surnames helped track migrations and sometimes led to the maiden names of previously unidentified mothers. But the siblings I cared about least, the siblings I usually ignored were those who never married and never had children. What, after all, was their genealogical usefulness?

It's funny that I should have thought this because I, myself, am unmarried and childless. Not because I'm still young, and it just hasn't happened yet. I'm 51; neither young anymore, nor quite ancient. Perhaps I'll marry, though that seems less and less likely by the day. I will almost certainly never have children. And yet, I'm the genealogist of the

family. If, in a hundred or more years, a future genealogist born of my niece, nephews, or cousins ever decides to take up the research mantle, they will almost assuredly find my work as a key reference for theirs. My lack of progeny notwithstanding, I am not genealogically useless.

Likewise, researchers today can find a great deal of information about both their extended families and their direct ancestors by paying close attention to their ancestors' unmarried, childless siblings. These are the very people in many compiled genealogies that have nothing more after their names than "s. p." (*sine prole*; without issue).

They needn't have been genealogists to be useful. The wills of such siblings often include the names and relationships of various heirs. More importantly, depending on the timeframe and jurisdiction, the law often required the identification of all legal heirs for those who died intestate. In the absence of a spouse or children, that can be a lot of heirs.

Lutheran registers from Essenheim establish the Palatinate origins of the immigrant Johanes(1) Fishel family, from his parents' marriage in 1691 until his emigration in 1742. [1] Moravian records from York County, Pennsylvania, provide details for the Johan Michael(2) Fishel family, from his 1742 immigration with his parents, past his marriage, the birth of fourteen children, his death, and through his children's lives until at least 1802.[2]

Some of those children died young, as recorded in Moravian records, but most simply disappeared from Moravian records. What became of them? And where did they go? Complicating matters, ten of the fourteen children were female. Without knowledge of their spouses and their surnames, how would they be tracked?

Of those fourteen children, one was Michael(3) Fishel, who died in the summer of 1833 from a cholera epidemic in Lexington, Fayette County, Kentucky.[3] The administration of this intestate, unmarried, childless man's estate included twenty-one pages of powers of attorney, their certifications, and acknowledgments of receipt, all recorded together in an Estill County, Kentucky, deed book.[4] (Why were they recorded in Estill County? Because Michael owned a 17,823-acre tract there.)

In those twenty-one pages, all of Michael's legal heirs were identified, including his surviving siblings, his sisters' spouses, the children of siblings who had pre-deceased him, and even some of the spouses of those children—*forty-seven* heirs in all. As if that weren't enough, those heirs were also located after many had migrated out of York

County to Adams, Lancaster, Perry, and Westmoreland Counties, Pennsylvania, as well as Rockbridge County, Virginia.

In the midst of all of this crucially important data, I couldn't help but take special notice of one particular record: the only marriage certification included. It pertained to Michael's sister Juliana's second marriage.

"This may certify that Isaac Brooks a black man and Julian Miller late Widow were Join together in the marriage relation this 18th day of August in the Year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred by me one of the justices etc for the County of Adam[s] A. Russell." [5]

Included in the certification were the names of eleven witnesses to that remarkable 1800 marriage.

So the next time you encounter an unmarried, childless sibling in your research, don't overlook him or her. If anything, you might consider zeroing in on them first thing.

[1] Kirchenbuch, Evangelische Kirche Essenheim, Dekanat Mainz; Taufen, Tote, Heiraten, Konfirmationen, 1623–1787 (FHL 1,475,713, Item 2), 72, 77, 111, 118, 122, 126, 128, 232, 324.

[2] "Records of Moravian Church, York, Pennsylvania: Soul-Register of the Members of the Congregation and Society and Their Children in Yorktown in the Year 1780; Family Register of the Married Brethren and Sisters of this Communion," *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine* 4 (1909–11), 329–330. Also, Records of Moravian Church, York, Pennsylvania, volume 2: 79, 83, 85, 104–106, 108, 110, 112, 114–116, 118–120, 122, 150, 154, 156, 157, 169. These records are among three unpublished, bound volumes at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (call number Y 1MR:1–3). The first volume is photostats of handwritten English translations, apparently compiled around the turn of the 20th century. The second and third volumes are photostats of original registers in German with occasional English.

[3] G. Glenn Cliff, comp., "Kentucky Marriages and Obituaries: Volume Two," *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* 39 (October 1941): 382; citing *The Lexington Observer and Reporter*, 22 August 1833, from a list of deaths from 1 June to 1 August 1833, reported to the City Council of Lexington, for Ward No. 1, Main Street (<https://www.jstor.org>: 21 July 2018).

[4] Deed Book F, 1834–1839, Estill County (Kentucky) Court Clerk’s Office (FHL 254,619), 375–395.

[5] Deed Book F, 1834–1839, Estill County (Kentucky) Court Clerk’s Office (FHL 254,619), 377–378.

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