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. 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.


ABOUT AUTHOR

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Aaron is a genealogist and house historian specializing in New York City research across all time periods, from the Dutch colonial era to the 20th century. His book, New York City Municipal Archives: An Authorized Guide for Family Historians, won the National Genealogical Society’s 2017 Award for Excellence: Genealogical Methods and Sources. He is also editor of NGS Monthly, former contributing editor of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Record, and former editor of the Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine. In 2011, he received the American Society of Genealogists’ Scholar Award.

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