

Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Census Tick Marks and Codes—Revisited," *Ancestry Daily News*, 20 December 2004; accessed at Ancestry.com, *Learning Center* <http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=9465>.

Census Tick Marks and Annotations--Revisited!

A "student" from last summer's Samford University Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research e-mailed an interesting challenge this week. She had read my previous [article](#) exploring tick marks on the U.S. census of 1850.

Now she had a different pair of census markings she had been trying to decipher. Could I help? Because I was traveling and an unexpected airport layover was keeping me from what I had planned, it was a moment when temptation met opportunity.

The result was a spell of mind-stretching that could be a useful exercise for others. If you care to do brain bends along with me here as we work through one of her curiosities, you will find these [same census pages](#) at Ancestry.com.

Problem 1:

Charles Love appears on the 1880 enumeration of Whistler Village in Mobile County, Alabama (District 116, Ancestry image 15, dwelling 141/family 147). Charles was an Alabama-born unmarried male laborer, aged 50. In the column where health problems were to be recorded that year, we see a somewhat oversized, underlined, and crooked "CS." My correspondent, being an alert researcher, had noticed that "CS" also appears amid various other entries for Whistler residents.

Inquiring elsewhere, she had gathered a slew of opinions as to what "CS" must mean. Given that it appears in the "health problems" column, some suggested, it likely meant "consumption." No, others noticed, it's not always in the "health problems" column. Maybe it stood for "cousin," someone proposed, considering that other people of a different surname shared Charles's home. Au contraire, others thought. It's probably "Confederate Service." But then, as my inquirer astutely noticed, "CS" sometimes appeared beside the name of children or men too young to have fought in a war fifteen to twenty years before. So what did it stand for?

Defining a Pattern

When we encounter inexplicable entries on a census, it is wise to study the instructions given to enumerators in that particular year.* This is not to say that all census takers followed instructions, of course. Some didn't. Yet knowing what they were told to do gives us a foundation on which to build our analysis. In this case, the published instructions for the 1880 census say nothing about recording "Confederate Service," and "CS" was not an abbreviation that enumerators were authorized to use for health problems or relationships.

Once we know that a census annotation does not reflect an arcane instruction, our next step is to identify a pattern for its appearance. We do this by studying not only the entry that we're interested in but all those created by the same enumerator. Scanning the pages for Whistler Village, I quickly confirmed what my correspondent had noticed. "CS" is indeed used in entries for children as well as adults, and it is not limited to the "health problems" column.

Then, I noticed two other things. First, there are only two positions in which "CS" appears. When it is not in that large and seldom-used space for "health problems," it is penned in the left margin of the census form. Second, in every case in which that annotation appears, we see immediately to the right of it a bold correction of data, one much darker and in a different handwriting than the rest of the enumeration. For example:

- When "CS" appears in the margin, the correction is always in the "sex" column to the right of that annotation. For Sarah J. B. Lindsay, aged 12, an M in the sex column had been overwritten boldly with F (image 1, entry 2/[3]). For William and Andrew Riles, ages 4 and 2, the original F's had been overwritten with M's (image 13, entry 121/127).
- When "CS" appears in the "health problems" field, the column immediately to the right (the birthplace) always had a bold correction in handwriting different from the original. For the birthplace of Charles Love, the head of our "household of interest," the enumerator had originally written "unknown." Someone had changed that to "Ala." Similar corrections appear for Isabella Johnson, an 11-year-old female living with the Willm. L. Hollowell family (image 14, entry 132/138) and for the 11-month-old Leanora Eckford (image 5, entry 42/46).

Analyzing the Results

No other common thread was discernible--only the fact that a correction lay to the right of each "CS." Might this annotation, perhaps, be the initials of the individual who made the correction?

As researchers, when we form a hypothesis, we must also look for ways to test it. Were there other instances in which similar corrections did not carry a similar annotation? Yes and no. There were, indeed, other corrections in the "sex" column, made with darkened letters unlike those made by the enumerator. In those instances, however, "CS" did not appear.

Even so, in each of those other cases we see two common traits. First, the formation of the letters "M" and "F" are different from those theoretically made by "CS," suggesting that someone other than "CS" made those corrections. Second, each of these other cases did, indeed, carry a set of different initials in the margin to the left: a "BH" penned sideways.

Conclusion

Charles Love was not a Confederate soldier. He did not suffer from consumption, and he was not the cousin of anybody in his household. (At least not insofar as this census reveals.) The enumerator for Whistler Village, Robert Forrester, simply omitted Charles's

birthplace. A supervisor then assigned one to Charles by default, and initialed his alteration.

Perhaps that supervisor operated at the local level--in which case there might be a remote possibility that he personally knew Charles Love and personally knew his birth place. However, the fact that two different individuals (aside from the enumerator) made corrections on this census--and the fact that their corrections are limited to obvious wrong-gender problems and an assumption that the state of birth was the same as the state of residence--suggests that the correction likely occurred within the Census Bureau itself. That review would have been made at the time coding was done for the punch-card procedure by which statistical results were tallied nationwide.

Putting It All into Perspective

If “strange” census notes turn out to be clerical corrections, should we have spent time pondering them? Yes! Every piece of data on a census needs to be thoughtfully considered, because any addition or correction is potentially significant so long as we don't understand it. Successful researchers are alert to every detail and inquisitive enough to pursue the oddities and aberrations. They're the ones who ultimately spot the breakthrough clues everyone else has missed.

* The simplest and best guide is “Bureau of the Census, Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions, 1790–1980” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), which is out of print but can be found in the Government Documents section of large city libraries and university libraries. Its revision, Jason G. Gauthier's “Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000” (Washington: Census Bureau, 2002), deletes some valuable portions of the original work but adds informative background discussions.

Elizabeth Shown Mills, author of *Evidence! Citation and Analysis for the Family Historian*, has long taught genealogists how to analyze documents for clues. In her latest book, *Isle of Canes*, she teaches us how to use the nuts and bolts of records to create enigmatic lives when we write our family stories. The same skills that help us interpret the records, she argues, can also help us interpret each ancestor's character and personality.

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