

The 2005 OCAPG Award

Steve Marshall of Orillia is the winner of the 2005 OCAPG Award offered by the Ontario Chapter of the Association of Professional Genealogists for the best essay on an unsolved Ontario genealogy problem. This report describes the successful search for an answer to Steve's research question.

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What was Susannah's maiden name? For 20 years, Steve Marshall sought an answer to this question.¹ He searched diligently and carefully; Susannah just as persistently eluded him. The few clues to her origins were that she was of German descent and born about 1793, probably in Pennsylvania. To research a female ancestor in the early years of Canadian history is not an easy project. But in genealogy, difficult ancestors often lead to the best stories. And so it has been with Susannah. The now successfully concluded search for her maiden name features the trail of the black walnut. Plus one misnamed bridegroom.

Recap of the Problem

Unusually for a Pennsylvania German, Susannah twice married French-Canadians. Alexander LaRose, her first known husband, came from Montreal to Ontario in 1812, enlisting with the 1st Essex Militia for the War of 1812.² Steve believed the couple married in 1812 or 1813 and had two children, Sapphira and Daniel. Alexander's whereabouts in the years immediately following the war are not known but in May 1819 he petitioned for land, describing himself as a labourer in what was then York. He subsequently received land in Chinguacousy Township.³ There he presumably died sometime after submitting a second petition for land on 2 October 1820.⁴

Sometime that fall or winter the widowed Susannah moved to Etobicoke. Then, on 21 May 1821, she made her first known appearance in Ontario records, marrying Peter LaRush at the Anglican church in York.⁵ Peter, another Montreal native, spent the War of 1812 fighting with the Canadian Fencibles.⁶ In 1819, two days before Alexander, he too petitioned for land.⁷ He later settled on Lot 19, Concession A, on the outskirts of Weston in Etobicoke.⁸

Alexander's Chinguacousy property was later inherited by Daniel as his eldest son and heir.⁹ Sapphira disappeared after an 1832 marriage to a York Township widower named Fred^k Macikis.¹⁰ By her marriage to Peter, Susannah had eight more children. No records found by Steve for Susannah or any of her children gave her maiden name. However, after her death in Etobicoke in 1877 one of Susannah's sons stated that his

¹For an account of this search see Steve Marshall's winning essay "What Was Susannah's Surname?" at the Ontario chapter website at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~onapg/activities.html>

²Alexander Larose, 1819, Upper Canada Land Petitions, RG 1, L 3, vol. 287A, L12/45; Library and Archives Canada (LAC) microfilm C-2127. Also, Alexander Larose, paylists, 1st Essex Militia, RG 9, I B 7, vol. 32, p. 81; LAC.

³Alexander La Rose, 1820, Upper Canada Land Petitions, vol. 305, L Leases 87; LAC microfilm C-2137.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Peter Larushe, bachelor, to Susan Larose, widow, transcript from the archivist, St. James Cathedral, in the possession of Steve Marshall.

⁶Pierre LaRoche, 1819, Upper Canada Land Petitions, vol. 287A, L12/47; LAC microfilm C-2127.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Abstracts of land records provided by Steve Marshall show Peter owned this property when he died in 1851.

⁹Daniel LaRose, Second Heir and Devisee Commission, RG40-5, file 2219; Archives of Ontario, consulted by Steve Marshall.

¹⁰Macikis-Larose, Home District Marriage Register, 1831-1840, p. 30; Family History Library (FHL) microfilm 1030052. Frederick's surname was possibly mistranscribed when it was entered into this register from the return submitted by the minister. It may also be spelled phonetically.

mother had been born in Pennsylvania.¹¹ Steve's research consequently included other Pennsylvania families in Etobicoke. No place could be found for Susannah in any of them.

Shaping a Research Plan

If genealogy was all straight lines and easy answers, a search for Susannah's maiden name would lead smartly to a record of her first marriage. In truth, genealogy more often resembles a treasure hunt without a map. And thus, a search for a marriage was problematic. As Steve noted, Alexander could have met and married Susannah in Essex or York or almost anywhere in the province where Pennsylvania Germans settled. Another difficult issue was whether to concentrate research on Chinguacousy (where Susannah lived with Alexander) or Etobicoke (where Susannah lived with Peter). To do both was desirable but impossible in the time available. Etobicoke was eventually chosen, one reason being the swiftness with which Susannah moved there after being widowed. What took her there so quickly? Had she known Peter previously? Were he and Alex friends? Or was she retreating to the sanctuary of family?

The trail of the black walnut was also in mind as research strategy was plotted. It has been said that German settlers followed this trail when choosing their land in Canada. The presence of black walnut trees was a sure sign that the soil was deep, fertile, moist and light—and thus desirable for farming. To trace Susannah in the reverse direction, a different tried-and-true method would be required. In the absence of clues to her immediate family, the correct path back to Pennsylvania would have to be charted by her friends, neighbours and associates. Investigation of an ancestor's associates is a strategy often used to crack tough genealogical problems. The approach produced surprising results in last year's contest. The best option—indeed perhaps the only option—was to apply the same technique again.

A complete account of the research that followed is not possible in this space. More than a dozen sometimes elusive individuals were investigated. Not all were named in Steve's essay but most had been participants at marriages where Susannah was a witness. The key to Susannah's past was finally found with the family of Sarah Nell, who had been a witness with Susannah at the marriage of Sapphira.

The Nells

Sarah Nell had long evaded Steve's research efforts. In retrospect, it is possible to understand why. Jacob Nell, who was likely her father, came to Canada in 1806. He married and had children, then died in the mid-1830s, after which most of his family returned to the United States. Many of the traces left behind are buried in unindexed land records. These revealed the Nells to be close neighbours of Susannah's. Better yet, Jacob too was from Pennsylvania.

An early land petition sets the framework for Jacob Nell's story. Dated 23 December 1807, this document describes him as a farmer in York Township who had arrived from Pennsylvania 12 months earlier—and who had relatives in the township.¹² Six months later, on 12 July 1808, Jacob married Helena Trimmer in York.¹³ Both bride and groom were from Etobicoke, where the following year Jacob petitioned to lease Lot 23, Concession 1—a location four lots north and one concession west of Susannah.¹⁴ Jacob never owned this property but later purchased three others slightly further north.¹⁵

¹¹Susannah La Rush, delayed Ontario civil death registration 016820 (1878); digital image by subscription, *Ancestry.com*, www.ancestry.com.

¹²Jacob Nell, 1807, Upper Canada Land Petitions, vol. 382, N8/16; LAC microfilm C-2481.

¹³Jacob Nell-Helena Trimmer, marriages, St. James Church, Toronto, 1800–1821, Ontario Vital Statistics Project, <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~maryc/old2.htm> : accessed February 2006. This transcription is based on a transcription originally published in John Ross Robertson, *Robertson's Landmarks of Ontario*, vol. 3.

¹⁴Jacob Nell, 1809, Upper Canada Land Petitions, vol. 391, N Leases 3; LAC microfilm C-2484.

¹⁵Abstract Index to Deeds, Etobicoke, Lot 31, Con. B, p. 252; Lot 33, Con. A, p. 269; Lot 35, Con. A, p. 272 (all lots are in the broken front); FHL microfilm 0179596.

By 1818 Helena Trimmer had died and Jacob Nell married Frances Holly.¹⁶ The union reportedly produced four sons, Jacob, Henry, Samuel and Abraham.¹⁷ The youngest three are said to have immigrated to the United States after their father's death in the mid-1830s.¹⁸ Jacob, the eldest, remained in Canada where he was baptized as an adult in 1850.¹⁹ No further sign was found of Sarah Nell but she almost certainly belongs to this family. To be old enough to witness Sapphira's marriage, she was likely a daughter of Jacob and his first wife, Helena Trimmer.

For the first time ever, Susannah was now connected to a Pennsylvania family. It was difficult to fully measure the significance of the discovery. A common place of origin and proximity in Etobicoke were conceivably the only bond between the Nells and Susannah. But was there more to it than that? Might Susannah and the Nells be related? Jacob's petition said he had relatives in the area. If Susannah was one of them, might evidence of the relationship exist in Ontario records? Or would research have to shift to Reading Township, Adams County, Pennsylvania, which a Nell family history identified as Jacob's place of origin?²⁰ Hopeful of yet learning more about Jacob, a decision was made to investigate one last individual—Jacob's first wife, Helena Trimmer.

The Trimmers

Jacob had been in Canada only about 18 months when he and Helena married in mid-1808. It seemed a speedy marriage for a new settler who would have been busy finding land, erecting a dwelling, planting crops. Time for courting must have been limited, which raised the question: Might Jacob have known Helena before coming to Canada? Expanding research from the Nells to Helena was perfectly reasonable according to the methodology being employed. The strategy is akin to working outwards from the bullseye on a dartboard—from the problem ancestor to members of the ancestor's family to his or her associates and, if necessary, to associates of the ancestor's associates—in ever-wider circles until the problem being tackled is solved. And so, the investigation was extended to the Trimmers.

A Trimmer entry seen earlier was quickly relocated. Daniel Trimmer purchased Lot 26 in Etobicoke's Concession A on 28 June 1819.²¹ This property was seven lots due north of Susannah and her husband Peter. To help evaluate the wisdom of proceeding further, steps were then taken to test the frequency of the Trimmer name in Pennsylvania. The 1800 census revealed one Trimmer in that state, a Matthias enumerated in the Adams County township of Huntingdon, next door to Reading, where Jacob Nell was said to have originated.²² The International Genealogical Index produced numerous hits for Daniel Trimmer in the same area. Those within 30 years on either side of 1800 fell in either Adams or the neighbouring county of York.²³

Encouraged by this geographic clustering of Nells and Trimmers in Pennsylvania, a search was made for more Trimmers in Ontario. Numerous references to earlier and obviously later generations were found,

¹⁶Jacob Nell's wife was identified as Francey when he sold land on 13 October 1818. See Abstract Index, Etobicoke, Lot 31, Con. B, p. 252. Other land transactions gives Francey's surname as Holly. See Lot 35, Con. A, p. 272.

¹⁷McDonald to Seng, 27 February 2003, Nell Family Genealogy Forum, <http://genforum.com/nell/messages/121.html> : 2006.

¹⁸For Samuel Nell, 25, born Canada, see 1850 U.S. census, York, Tuscarawas Co., Ohio, p. 2; National Archives and Records Administration micropublication M432, roll 734. Also, Henry Nell, 29, born C.W., 1850 U.S. census, Pipe Creek, Miami Co., Indiana, p. 200; NARA roll 160. Also, Abram Nell, age 22, born C.W., 1850 U.S. census, Erie, Miami Co., Indiana, p. 106; NARA roll 160. Also, Abraham Nell, age 31, born Canada East, head of a household that includes Frances Nell, age 73, 1860 U.S. census, Peru, Miami Co., Indiana, p. 79, NARA micropublication M653, roll 281. Digital images, *Ancestry.com* : 2006. Evidence that these individuals were sons of Jacob is still needed.

¹⁹Jacob Nell, son of Jacob (deceased) and Fanny Nell, born 25 January 1818, baptized 30 January 1850, baptismal register, St. James Church, Toronto, 1843–1863; Archives of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto microfilm 186.

²⁰Rev. Raymond Boyd Nell, *The Nell Family in the United States* (Minneapolis: Colwell Press, 1929), p. 42; electronic edition by subscription, *Heritage Quest Online*, <http://persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/books/search/people> : 2006.

²¹Abstract Index, Etobicoke, Lot 26, Con. A, p. 266.

²²1800 U.S. census, Huntingdon Twp., Adams Co., Pennsylvania, p. 544; digital image, *Ancestry.com* : 2006; from NARA MS32, roll 35.

²³IGI, Family History Library, *Family Search*, www.familysearch.org : March 2006.

and these were provided to Steve privately. For the purposes of this report, however, one entry is of special interest. Found in an online transcription of marriages performed at St. James Church in York, it read as follows:

3 June 1817, banns, Alexander Caron and Susan Trimmer, spinster, Etobicoke Township. Witnesses: Leany Trimmer and Wm. Holloway.²⁴

The entry leapt promisingly from the page. Here was another Trimmer in Etobicoke, rather surprisingly a Susan—marrying, of all people, an Alexander. The groom was not a Larose yet the middle three letters of the surname were the same. A transcription error might have distorted the beginning and end. Could it be?

The Answer

The long quest to learn Susanna's maiden name ended with a satisfying and memorable trip to view the original record at the Archives of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. Alexander Caron was nowhere to be found. In the place where the online transcript said he should have been was instead found a clearly written record documenting the marriage of Alexander Larose and Susan Trimmer.²⁵ It read:

York 3 June 1817
This day were married after publication of banns
Alex^r Larose and Susan Trimmer Spinster Etobecoke
Township. John Strachan Min^r
This marriage was solemnized between us
Alex^r Larose [made his mark]
Susan Trimmer [signed]
Witnesses:
Leany Trimmer [signed]
Will^m Holloway [signed]

At this time the original marriage entry for Jacob Nell and Helena Trimmer was also viewed. Although the minister recorded Jacob's surname as Nall, Jacob signed as Nell. Helena signed as Leany.²⁶ Except for a top stroke missing on the T, her signature is identical to that of the Leany Trimmer who witnessed Susan's marriage.²⁷ The marriage of Daniel Trimmer to Elizabeth Holley on 16 May 1811 was also noted.²⁸ The parties to these marriages were all from Etobicoke.

Susannah's relationship to Leany and Daniel will be left for future research to determine but one possibility is that they were siblings. Helena's marriage places the Trimmers in Canada by mid-1808 at the latest. If family members immigrated together, it means Susannah lived in or near Etobicoke for at least a decade before her marriage to Alexander. As speculated earlier, the presence of family members in the township would explain her hasty return there as a widow.

Analysis of Alexander and Susan's marriage highlights one other point that will require further attention. The date of the event does not neatly accommodate both Daniel and Sapphira. Evidence points strongly to an 1818 date of birth for Daniel, with two records placing his birth an almost perfect nine months

²⁴Marriage transcription, St. James Church, Toronto, 1800–1821, Ontario Vital Statistics Project.

²⁵Larose-Trimmer marriage, 3 June 1817, marriage register, St. James Church, Toronto, 1800–1835; Anglican Archives microfilm 188.

²⁶Nell-Trimmer marriage, 12 July 1808, marriage register, St. James, 1800–1835.

²⁷If these are the same individual it is not clear why Leany did not sign in 1817 as Leany Nell.

²⁸Trimmer-Holley marriage, 16 May 1811, marriage register, St. James, 1800–1835.

after the marriage.²⁹ But if Alexander and Susan married in 1817 and *if* Daniel was born in early 1818, where does Sapphira fit? If born later than Daniel she would be improbably young to marry in 1832. If she was Daniel's twin, it means she married at the age of 14. If she was born before Daniel, it was before Alexander and Susan's marriage, which raises numerous scenarios Steve will want to keep in mind as he continues research on this family.

Conclusion

The discovery of Alexander and Susan's marriage underscores an important lesson for genealogists. Not all sources are created equal. Online transcriptions, published indexes and other derivative sources are great conveniences. Such is their extraordinary usefulness that their availability can make or break the search for an elusive ancestor. Even so, derivative sources must be treated with caution. As with the transcription in which Alexander and Susan's marriage lay hidden, they may contain errors and may be incomplete. The handwriting in an old record may only make sense to someone familiar with the people or area or events described. This truth is dramatically illustrated by the fact that a transcription of marriages at St. James in Toronto prepared independently of the online version used during this research renders Alexander LaRose's surname as Luvon.³⁰ Wise researchers will read all such sources with an eye to potential transcription errors. They will also verify findings against the original record.

The search for Susannah's maiden name highlights one other reality: Solving tough genealogical problems is not for the faint of heart. The work is time-consuming and can be tedious. In addition, a solution may ultimately depend on familiarity with resources in more than one geographic area. Not everyone has the time or the resources that may be required. Nonetheless, those who persevere may reap rich rewards. In this case, Steve can now refer to his ancestor as Susannah née Trimmer. The door has also been opened to research in Pennsylvania records, with Adams and York counties rating top priority. With further time, patience and hard work, Steve may yet be able to follow the trail of the black walnut back to Susannah's precise place of origin.

The 2005 OCAPG Award program was carried out by D. Russell Morton, Brenda Dougall Merriman, CG, CGL, Patricia McGregor, and Alison Hare, CG. Research was conducted by Alison Hare. All participants in this year's contest received free advice. The award will be offered again in 2006. For more details, please visit our website at www.rootsweb.com/~onapg.

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²⁹ The 1901 census says Daniel was born 15 March 1818. See 1901 census, Etobicoke, York West, Ontario, district 131, subdistrict A, division 5, p. 1; digital image, LAC, http://www.collectionscanada.ca/archivianet/020122_e.html. Daniel's tombstone in Riverside Cemetery, Etobicoke says he was 90 years and 7 months old when he died 15 September 1908, thus born 15 February 1818. The 1852, 1881 and 1891 censuses also support 1818.

³⁰The Cathedral Church of St. James (Anglican), Toronto, marriages 1800-1908 (Toronto: Toronto Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society); Archives of Ontario 929.3 S25.