



**SA Genealogy &
Heraldry Society Inc**

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FACT SHEET

Ancestry.com

The census records from 1841 to 1901 available on ANCESTRY.COM are a very valuable tool for researchers. However, in order to get the best out of this resource (and avoid the frustration of families that disappear from the records without a trace), you may need to exercise a degree of cunning and a good imagination. The reason for this is that the data base is riddled with what can best be described as 'novel' phonetic and script interpretations of the data.

These 'errors' are easily understood if you think about how the information was collected and how it has been converted into indexes. Many of the people recorded in these census records were illiterate, so they could not spell their names. Many also had strong regional accents, and even perhaps speech impediments. The data recorders therefore had to try to record what they heard, and in doing so used their own experience and knowledge. This may mean that someone who came from a village where Mary Ann was a common name might record all forenames like 'Marion' or 'Marianne' as 'Mary Ann', or they might automatically spell Maria as Mariah and Elijah as Elisha, or perhaps record a surname of Symons as Simons.

Once the data was recorded, someone had to read what was written, and again, their own experience becomes important when they try to read unclear script and interpret unfamiliar names. It is this process that can lead to some very strange results.

An account of some of the errors found is given in a Journal article

Some of the errors reported in this article are illustrated by the following examples:

- The forename 'Jesse' appearing as 'Lissa', 'Jesse' and 'Jame' in successive census lists;
- A family named Symons being recorded under the name 'Lymons';
- A woman listed as a niece in one family actually being a nurse;
- A man named 'Amos' being recorded as 'Anns' in one census, and another named Mark being recorded as 'Margt';
- Town names being recorded incorrectly ('Penton' for 'Purton');
- Cork (in Ireland) and Cornwall being confused;
- West Australia being recorded as 'West Amberlan';
- Louisa being entered as 'Lewisa', or 'Susan as 'Lusan';

Unexpected distributions of family members also occur when children were in boarding schools or workhouses, or were living with relatives while their army parents were posted overseas.

When using ANCESTRY you may need to:

- Exercise your imagination;
- Take nothing for granted;
- Check up every logical inconsistency (such as Margt or Anns being listed as sons);
- Try variant spellings (Symons, Simons, Symmons, Simmons, Symonds, Simonds, Semonnes, Simmens, Simmends, Tymmons, Timmons, Lymons, Limones);
- Think about what a name may have sounded like in the local accent;
- Think about how a written name may be read incorrectly, with particular thought for errors in the first letter (Nester / Hester, Radcliffe / Hadcliffe, Lymons / Symons, Valder / Nalder, Bradley / Radley, Wissen / Missen, Jolly / Tolly, Fenner / Jenner);
- Consider possibilities like children being in boarding school, or some children being in the 'workhouse' or 'poorhouse';
- Try expanding your search by dropping search terms (i.e. do not enter 'England' as a birthplace, even if you know it is correct, do not enter 'son' as a relationship in case the child is in a school or workhouse where the relationship is 'scholar', or is staying with relatives and is listed as a 'visitor' or 'nephew');
- Try searching by place name or birth year or town of residence if you cannot find the name;
- Consider the possibility that your family may have been in the army, and may actually have 'disappeared' for a tour of duty in India or Gibraltar (or even Australia) before returning to England;
- Be very suspicious about names like 'Fenefer' and 'Jenniphes' and wonder whether they should have been recorded as 'Jenefer';
- Look for Edmon if you cannot find Edmund, Edwin if you cannot find Edward, Allis if you cannot find Alice, Christy Anna if you cannot find Christina, Anna if you cannot find Hannah
- Remember that a written capital 'H' can look like an 'M', a 'V' can look like a 'W', a 'B' can be confused with an 'R'.

But above all, INSPECT THE ORIGINAL RECORD VERY CAREFULLY.