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## Wives, Mothers, and Old Women with Suitcases

BY ELIZABETH SHOWN MILLS, CG, CGL, FASG

MAMIE DOUD EISENHOWER got a lot of press as the wife of a president, but she wanted none of it. When a thoroughly-modern reporter asked what her aspirations had been as a 20th-century female, Mamie replied: "I was [Ike's] wife, John's mother, and the children's grandmother. That's all I ever wanted to be."

We all have our Mammies, don't we—grandmothers now beyond living memory who seem to have had no desire for an identity of their own.

Like Ike's wife, many of our premodern grandmothers were taught that a respectable female's name should appear in a newspaper no more than three times: at birth, marriage, and death. Even so, we are not likely to find those mentions within surviving issues.

And, like Thomas Jefferson who preceded Mamie's Ike by two centuries, the males our grandmothers married likely thought it "not fitting and proper for a woman to appear in a court of law or a public assemblage of men." Why would she even *need* to? She could not vote. It was her husband's place to transact the family business, and any inheritance her father left her would pass automatically to that husband. After all, under the English common law followed by all American states but Louisiana, *wife and husband* were one person and, at law, the husband was that person.

For genealogists, the question is not so much *why*—as in, *Why do our foremothers appear so seldom in the records?* The question is *how*—*How do we identify the*

*unidentified?* How do we coax back to life someone who seems to exist only as a given name on a census or perhaps a deed? How do we take all those women on our charts whom we call *Mary Blank*, *Susan Blank*, or *Permelia Blank* and regraft them onto the family tree from which society plucked them?

*How?* We follow eight strategies all good researchers use.



### 1 Redefine Failure

Research is not just a process of discovering more records in which to look up the names of problem ancestors. Most breakthroughs happen in the ordinary, everyday records we easily find and too hastily put aside. When we use a census, deed, tax roll, or probate inventory, and we do not find a mention of our elusive female, that record has not failed us. It may still offer priceless evidence. It has only failed to say something *obvious*.



### 2 Build Research Skills

Strategies require a plan, but they also call for a knowledge of *techniques* by which that plan can generate results. We learn those techniques by reading creative case studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Whatever will o' the wisps we chase, others have chased also. Names and faces may be different, but problems tend to be the same.

The *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, *The American Genealogist*, and the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* all publish case studies that demonstrate how to lift the fog of history from shadowy females in many circumstances.

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### Shift the Focus

When we ponder *Who was Permelia before she married John?* we ask the wrong question. Our question should be: *Where was John in the year he would have taken Permelia as his wife?* Ironically, the root of our problem may be that our research on John needs to be more thorough.

Identifying Permelia means using those male-focused records to reconstruct John's life day by day. We identify precisely where he lived—the street, creek, or specific township, range, and section. We track his activities at work, at war, and in the community. We create a list of those people who make up his "FAN" club: his Friends, Associates, and Neighbors. Each is a potential in-law whose records need searching once we exhaust the records created by John himself.

Beside every impassable wall in genealogical research is a path with a gate. Even when that gate carries the wrong name, we should not ignore it. So what if John and Permelia died too soon to apply for a military pension? John's presence on a muster roll gives us a list of fellow soldiers who could have lived longer, could have applied, and could have talked about John. "Me and John," one old veteran wrote in his pension affidavit, "me and John Pettypool dug them trenches together. Me and John were buddies, just like brothers. He married my sister."



### Question! Question! Question!

The records we find on John offer many clues to the identities of his wife and mother. We nurture those clues by asking other questions. Who did his brothers and sisters marry? Siblings often married siblings. Widowed fathers and their sons married widowed mothers and their daughters. Where did John go to school? Who were his classmates? Who were his sisters' friends?

What was John's occupation at the time he would have met and married Permelia? Young men often courted daughters of their mentors, employers, or fellow workers. Whose will did he execute? Whose estate did he administer? Above all, whose bonds and mortgages did he cosign—or who cosigned for him? Serving as surety for someone else's debt was a financial risk most men took only for close kin.



### Research the FAN Club

The names on our list, like everything in life, need prioritizing. Which individuals appear most often in John's records in roles that suggest a special closeness? Starting with the strongest prospect, we

## Not So Famous Women . . . Who Should Be

BY TANA PEDERSEN LORD

Amelia Earhart. Queen Elizabeth. Jane Austen. Marie Curie. We've all heard the names. And we probably even remember their stories. Here's a tribute to all the women whose names we don't know but whose impact on history has been immeasurable.

1473–1458 B.C.

### Hatshepsut

Ancient Egypt is ahead of its time when it comes to equal rights for its citizens—women can own property, seek employment outside the home, and even adopt children. And female rulers govern Egypt on and off for centuries. But when Hatshepsut ascends to the throne, she doesn't

settle for just being a queen—she declares herself pharaoh, the king of Egypt and a divine being. For 20 years she rules one of the most advanced and powerful empires in history.



ca. 810 B.C.

Sammuramat, the Queen of Assyria, is lauded for her military conquests and creation of the original hanging gardens of Babylon.

ca. 600 B.C.

### Theano

Anyone who has taken geometry has heard of the Pythagorean theorem—or should have. But have you heard about the woman beside the man? Pythagoras, the famous Greek mathematician, has a promising young female student named Theano whom he eventually marries. Together they create a school for mathematics that both men and women can attend. Theano also becomes an influential mathematician in her own right and is credited with discovering her own mathematical rule that creates the foundations for others who come after her.

thoroughly pursue the records of each friend, associate, and neighbor until we find the one whose records can answer our identity questions. Ideally, one of those associates will explicitly state a kinship, as the old soldier did for John Pettypool. More often, we find bits and shards of indirect evidence—statements that relate to John and Permelia but do not explicitly say what we need them to say. Eventually, if we are diligent and sharp-eyed, we accumulate enough fragments to build a convincing case.



## Strategy

### 6 Use Records More Creatively

As genealogists, we love records that state kinships in plain terms—like those for baptisms, marriages, and burials. Other church books may disappoint us. John and Permelia may appear separately on the membership rolls of Pilgrim's Rest, but rarely will such a roll tell us Permelia's maiden name. Nor can we expect that maiden name to be mentioned when the church clerk notes the couple's departure for Kansas and their request to move their letters. Still, we may *deduce* Permelia's maiden name from those records by closely reading the full register, extracting all references to females of her given name, and carefully analyzing the results.

Three Permelias, in my own case, were admitted to Pilgrim's Rest prior to my Permelia's removal: "Sister Permelia Jones" and "Sister Permelia Smith," both by letter, and "by experience, Permelia Pickelheimer, daughter of Brother Thomas." Reading the full set of minutes across several decades, I found a dismissal for Sister Jones and a death notice for Sister Smith, but nothing further for Permelia Pickelheimer, whose father continued to be mentioned. Pursuing old Thomas Pickelheimer in other records yielded a probate, explicitly naming Permelia Pettypool as his daughter.

Many resources offer silent clues begging to be developed. Road books name young men ordered to work on neighborhood crews. Because they were assigned to short stretches of the road on which they lived, fellow crew



332 B.C.

Candace, Empress of Ethiopia, protects her people from Alexander the Great.

ca. 300 B.C.

Agnodice illegally practices medicine in ancient Greece.



A.D. 40

### The Trung Sisters

Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, young daughters of a Vietnamese lord, lead a revolution against the Chinese who had invaded and conquered their country. They form and train their own army, which eventually grows to around 80,000 warriors. Many of the army's generals—one of whom is their own mother—are women. The rebellion does not overthrow the Chinese tyranny, but the women are still celebrated every year in Vietnam with their own national holiday.

ca. 60

Boudicca, Celtic queen, leads a revolt against the Roman Empire.



ca. 1000

Lady Murasaki, Japanese author, writes *The Tale of Genji*, one of the earliest novels in recorded history.



ca. 1004

Erik the Red's daughter-in-law, Gudridur Thorbjarnarsdottir, gives birth to the first European child in the New World.

members were often kith and kin. Similarly, city directories offer cross-street indexes we can use to identify neighbors, especially valuable in tenement areas where residents seldom created legal records.

Early tract books of the U.S. Land Office identify neighboring purchasers of government land who may have come and gone between censuses—including the new settler who died and left an orphaned daughter. By identifying local merchants and doctors, tracking down their ledgers, and reading entries line by line, we can find such jewels as “one comb charged by Polly Lee, formerly Polly Gage,” or “delivery of son born to Sary Barber, who until last week was the Widow Jones.”



### Learn Their Culture

When our research moves backward to immigrant generations, our difficulty in identifying females often stems from unfamiliarity with legal and cultural practices. When, on a 1909 passenger roll of the *San Giorgio* from Palermo, we find Giuseppe Giglio, aged 19, listed as the son of Benedetta Sammarco, aged 58, we should not assume that Giuseppe's father had died and his mother had remarried. In Anglo-America that might be likely, but throughout much of Europe,

a woman's maiden name remained her legal name throughout her life.

Many such customs were transplanted in America's non-English colonies, and in some locales they persisted almost to the 20th century. When William Cribbs filed suit against Mrs. Mary Anthony in Louisiana in 1811, he confused generations of Anthony genealogists who could not place her in their families. Again custom was the cause—specifically the Louisiana practice of using a husband's given name as the surname of a wife or daughter. Mrs. Mary Anthony was Mary Routh, widow of Anthony Bowker.



### Follow Females to Their Deaths

Pre-1850 widows are often prematurely buried by us when we search for them on censuses after a husband's death. Not finding the widow named as a householder, we are tempted to conclude that she had died. Odds are, she simply gave up housekeeping; the older the widow, the more likely those odds. In other cases, we may find a widow in the home of a married child in one census year but not the next; again, the conclusion might be, “Died before the next census.” Perhaps, but often not.

ca. 1090

#### Trotula of Salerno

In southern Italy, Trotula gains fame as a physician and healer during an era when some European women who practiced medicine are considered witches. She writes several important medical treatises including *Passionibus Mullerum Curandarum*, or *The Diseases of Women*. Many of her recommendations are controversial. For instance, she advocates giving women opiates during childbirth to alleviate their pain.

ca. 1500

A Rajput princess, Mirabai composes songs and writes poems that are still sung in Indian temples today.

ca. 1600

Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi is the first female painter to become a member of the *Accademia dell'Arte del Disegno*, the first drawing academy in Europe.



1778

Deborah Sampson, disguised as a man, fights in the Revolutionary War.



1872

#### Victoria Claflin Woodhull

Victoria spends her unusual childhood traveling the country with her family and telling fortunes, selling elixirs, and showing off her psychic powers. When she finally settles in New York, her business savvy—and some influential clients—help her start the first female-owned brokerage firm on Wall Street. She also creates and publishes a weekly journal. Then in 1872, Victoria becomes the first woman to run for president of the United States—at a time when most women can't even vote.



My own mother was no genealogist, but her recollections were rich in genealogical perspective. By age 87, she could no longer fend for herself in her home state with no relatives left nearby. Amid our plans to move her and all her accumulations, she wrote, "I should be like grandmas used to be—an old woman with just a suitcase, going from one child to the other, moving on to the next before she wore out her welcome."

Many past widows felt the same. Not all were blessed with children who appreciated the adage, "A home without a grandmother is a house with no crown jewel." Widows who created stable lives with their offspring can stymie our research if we focus too narrowly on our own lines (and those lines don't include the widowed grandmother). The branch we do not descend from, the one that caught the westward itch, may have taken the grandmother with them. Their offspring in Sacramento may still have the family Bible she wrapped in her shawl when they loaded her onto the wagon—the one in which her husband had written: "John Pettypool married Permelia Pickelheimer, 18 August 1799."

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1879

Mary Baker Eddy founds the Christian Science church.

1881

Clara Barton establishes the American Red Cross.



1953

### Rosalind Elsie Franklin

By age 15, this young British girl knows she wants to be a scientist and pursues a higher education despite pressure from her family. During the 1950s, while working in a research lab in England, Rosalind uses x-ray techniques she learned in Paris and discovers the double-helix pattern of the DNA molecule. Her data is shared with other biochemists who take this information, add it to their own, and publish the material. Four years after Rosalind's death, Wilkins, Watson, and Crick receive the Nobel Prize for their work on DNA. To this day the debate continues on how much credit should have gone to this instrumental scientist.



1981

Sandra Day O'Connor becomes the first female justice in the United States Supreme Court.



2003

Iranian Shirin Ebadi, women's and children's advocate, wins the Nobel Peace Prize.