

It's a Date...Or Is It?

Calendars and dating systems and how they affect the search for our ancestors

**Thirty days
hath September,
April, June, and November;
All the rest have thirty-one
Excepting February alone
Which hath but twenty-eight, in fine,
Till leap year makes it twenty-nine.**

Julian Calendar

The Roman calendar was reformed during the reign of Julius Caesar. The year was fixed at 365 days, and a leap year of 366 days every four years was instituted. Although a major improvement over the previous one, the Julian calendar had a major flaw. On average, a Julian year was longer by about 11 minutes than the solar year upon which it was based. Over a long period of time, this discrepancy caused a “slippage” of about one day every 128 years.

Gregorian Calendar

By the mid-1500s, the calendar was ahead of the solar year by ten days. The calendar did not match the seasons. Easter, the day upon which other church holy days were calculated, no longer fell when it should. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII instituted the calendar most commonly used today, and decreed that ten days should be dropped to allow the vernal equinox to occur on March 21. The Gregorian calendar also omitted three leap years every 400 years by providing that only century years evenly divisible by 400 would be a leap year. Hence, 1700, 1800 and 1900 were not leap years, but 1600 and 2000 were.

Catholic countries quickly adopted the reforms. Protestant countries resisted the change. For example, England (and her American colonies) did not change to the “new” calendar until 1752. By that time, the Julian calendar was off by 11 days. To make the correction, 11 days were dropped from the English calendar; 2 September 1752 was followed by 14 September 1752.

New Year

The day designated as the first day of the year has never been consistently or universally recognized. Many countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Scotland, Russia, began the new year on January 1st well before making the switch to the Gregorian calendar. Other countries, such as England and the American colonies, made the switch at the same time.

Double Dating

The year noted in an early record is subject to much ambiguity unless care is taken to determine when that particular country changed the start of the new year. Historians and genealogists use a double year to indicate what was recorded in the original document and the year it would be if the year had begun on January 1. Note that this only applies to January, February, and through March 24.

For example, England did not switch to the January 1 new year until 1752. So, a date of 7 Feb 1605 in an English parish register would be noted as 7 Feb 1605[/6] or 7 Feb 1605 [1605/6]. This means that using the “old calendar” the year was 1605, but according to the “new calendar” it was 1606. Never just convert the date to its Gregorian equivalent—it only causes confusion! However, be sure to use brackets [] to indicate that you (the researcher) added something to the original record. Occasionally, the double date will be shown in the original document. In that case you would not use the brackets because you did not add the double date.

Ecclesiastical Calendar / Feast Days

The principal seasons of the Christian church calendar are, in order, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity. Fixed feast days and saint's days occurred on the same date each year. Others were moveable feasts; the date depended on the date of Easter for that year.

Many early church records were dated with reference to a day of the week and the nearest feast day. For example, a baptism may be listed as the fourth Sunday of Lent. To assign a calendar date, you need to know the date of the religious event for that year, and you need to take into account whether the Julian or Gregorian calendar was in use at the time. Be sure to record the date exactly as you found it in the original record, as well as the calculated date.

An excellent explanation of the historical Christian church calendar: "The Ecclesiastical Calendar," by Patricia Law Hatcher www.ancestry.com/library/view/news/articles/7058.asp

Books that may help you convert the ecclesiastical date to the secular calendar date:

- C.R. Cheney and M. Jones (eds), *A Handbook of Dates: For Students of British History* (Cambridge University Press, rev 2000)
- Inger M. Bukke and Finn A. Thomsen, *The Feast Day Calendar for Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Protestant Germany* (Bountiful, Utah: Thomsen's Genealogical Center, 1980)

Interactive Ecclesiastical / Feast day calculator: www.smart.net/~mmontes/ec-cal.html

Regnal Years

In some documents, especially legal documents, the date was recorded using the year of the reign of the current monarch. To interpret the correct year, you must know the date the monarch came to the throne. Be sure to record the date exactly as you found it in the original record, as well as the calculated date.

Quaker Style Dates

The Society of Friends, the Quakers, did not use the names of the days of the week or the months of the year because many of them were derived from the names of pagan gods. Instead, they used an ordinal number to refer to a particular month and day of the week. For example, 20 May 1782 would be written 20th da 5th mo 1782, or sometimes, 5mo 20da 1782. Deciphering these dates usually only becomes difficult prior to 1752 when the Julian calendar was in use, and March was considered the first month rather than January. Be sure to record the date exactly as you found it in the original record, as well as the calculated date.

More information about researching Quaker records (pp 67-68 dates/calendars): Ellen T. Berry and David A. Berry, *Our Quaker Ancestors: Finding Them in Quaker Records* (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing, 1987) View the book online at www.books.google.com

Other online resources

- "Recording and Interpreting Dates," by Patricia Law Hatcher (excellent 2-part article) www.ancestry.com/library/view/news/articles/2205.asp
- Description of many worldwide calendars and related topics calendopedia.com
- Table of calendar changes www.ancestrysolutions.com/Julian%20Table.html
- Perpetual calendar www.timeanddate.com/calendar