



THE BIRMINGHAM GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

Founded March 15, 1959

www.bgsal.org

<http://birminghamgenealogy.wordpress.com/>

THE PIONEER TRAILS NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER 2019

General Meeting for November: The Birmingham Genealogical Society will meet at 2:00 p.m. on **Saturday, November 23rd** on the fourth floor of the Birmingham Public Library (in the Computer Lab next to the Arrington Auditorium). The Board of Directors will meet at 1:00 p.m. in the same room.

Please join us as **Bob Davis, Senior Professor of History and Director of Genealogy Program of Wallace State Community College, Hanceville, Alabama**, presents: **“Interviewing Your Aunt Maude.”**

Research & Genealogical Tips

© Michael John Neill, “Genealogy Tip of the Day,”

<http://genealogytipoftheday.com/>, TIPDATE

State Hospitals: If you can't find where your relative died, is it possible that she died in a state hospital several counties away? During the late 19th and early 20th century, it was not uncommon to institutionalize family members that relatives could no longer care for. They may have died in a state institution several counties away in a place where you have not thought to look for a death certificate. And, if the family was of very limited means, the person of interest may have been buried in an unmarked grave on the facility's grounds.

Only Children With No Descendants: Only children with no descendants can leave interesting estate settlements, especially if they die with enough property to require probate and neglect to leave a valid will. Their property typically will be distributed to their first cousins, or depending upon the family structure, even more distant relatives. The records of that estate settlement could be a gold mine. Do you have a cousin who died in this situation? It may be worth your time to search for their estate records

Dower vs. Dowry: “Dower” is the interest a wife has in her husband's real or personal property. Depending upon the time period and location, it may be a 1/3 interest, a life estate, etc. A “dowry” is the money/goods, etc. that a woman brings into a marriage.

The past is not dead. It isn't even past. --William Faulkner

Scott A. Martin, BGS Newsletter Editor

Pioneer Trails Newsletter

Understanding Julian Calendars and Gregorian Calendars in Genealogy

http://www.genealogyintime.com/GenealogyResources/Articles/understanding_julian_calendars_and_gregorian_calendars_in_genealogy

We use calendars to keep track of time. They have been used throughout human history to record periods or events longer than a day. For example, farmers use calendars based on the seasonal cycle of the sun to determine the correct time for the planting and harvesting of crops. Religious observances are often derived from calendars that follow the lunar cycle. Calendars continue to be used for these purposes, as well as to regulate civil life, commerce and scientific endeavors. It is important for anyone studying genealogy and family history to understand calendars.

The Gregorian calendar is the formal name for the calendar used today. Other calendars, however, are still in use in some parts of the world. These include the Jewish calendar, the Islamic calendar and the Chinese calendar. All these calendars share one common trait. They are based on either the annual cycle of the sun, the phases of the moon, or a combination of the two. The Gregorian calendar, for example, is a combination of the annual cycle of the sun (to determine the length of the year) and the cycles of the moon (the word 'month' is derived from the word moon).

Calendars play an important role in genealogy. Genealogists researching family histories before 1752 must have an understanding of the current Gregorian calendar and its predecessor, the Julian calendar in order to correctly interpret old dates. To understand why, a bit of history is required.

The Julian calendar was implemented by the Romans in 46 B.C. under the guidance of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar wanted a more accurate calendar for sowing and harvesting crops. At the time, the Roman Empire was primarily agricultural. Although the exact origins are not known, the Julian calendar was almost certainly derived in part from ancient Babylonian calendars, with additions from several other cultures. For example, the division of hours into 60 minutes and minutes into 60 seconds comes from the Mesopotamians, the division of the day into 24 hours comes from ancient Egyptian calendars and the division of the week into 7 days comes from the Jewish calendar.

Under the Julian calendar, which was based on the solar cycle, the year was divided into 12 months of 365 days. An extra day was added every fourth year. This resulted in a year having on average 365 ¼ days.

The Julian calendar was used in all the countries governed by the Romans. This included England and much of Europe. It continued to be used (and maintained) by the Roman Catholic Church, which inherited many Roman institutions after the downfall of the Roman Empire. As a result, the Julian calendar was in widespread use across much of Europe for many centuries.

The Julian calendar assumes the year is exactly 365.25 days long. Unfortunately, the actual solar year is slightly shorter (it is 365.242199 days to be exact). Although the difference appears minor, it can add up over the centuries. In fact, every 129 years, the Julian calendar slipped one additional day out of synchronization with the actual solar year.

This caused a problem within the Roman Catholic Church, who came to realize in the 1500's that their reliance on the Julian calendar was causing them to incorrectly calculate the date of the spring equinox (the spring equinox is the one day in spring when there is exactly 12 hours of sunlight and 12 hours of

Pioneer Trails Newsletter

darkness). Easter, one of the most sacred days in the Christian religion, is calculated from the spring equinox (Easter is the first Sunday following the full moon after the spring equinox).

To make matters worse, many other Christian observances (such as Lent, for example) are determined from the date of Easter. Therefore, if Easter was calculated incorrectly, then many other religious observances would be celebrated on the wrong day. This caused considerable controversy within the Catholic Church and resulted in several commissions to try to find a solution. It cumulated with Pope Gregory XIII, who in 1582 issued a papal bull that resulted in several calendar revisions, the most important being:

- It established what is now known as the Gregorian calendar (named after Pope Gregory XIII).
- The new Gregorian calendar had an extra day in those years that were divisible by 4 (just like the old Julian calendar), but unlike the Julian calendar, it did not add an additional day in years that were divisible by 100, unless the year was also divisible by 400. Thus, under the Gregorian calendar, the years 1700, 1800 and 1900 were not leap years, but the years 1600 and 2000 were leap years.
- To make up for the errors in the old Julian calendar, ten days were omitted from the new Gregorian calendar. Thus, Thursday, 4 October 1582 in the old Julian calendar was immediately followed by Friday, 15 October 1582 in the new Gregorian calendar.

The Catholic countries of Italy, Spain and Portugal immediately adopted Pope Gregory XIII's decree, with France and Luxembourg soon following. However, by the 1500's the Roman Catholic Church's influence on Europe had waned and some countries were either slow to adopt (such as Hungary in 1587), or were distrustful of the Roman Catholic Church and resisted adopting the new (and improved) calendar.

The notable standout was England and the English colonies (including America), which continued to use the Julian calendar long after most of Europe had switched to the Gregorian calendar. In fact, England and the colonies did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752, almost 170 years after Pope Gregory XIII's decree. However, by that time the Julian calendar had slipped 11 days relative to the Gregorian calendar.

When England and the colonies finally adopted the Gregorian calendar, it was necessary for them to omit 11 days to 'catch up'. As a result, for England and the colonies, Wednesday, 2 September 1752 in the old Julian calendar was immediately followed by Thursday, 14 September 1752 in the newly adopted Gregorian calendar. The days in between these two dates officially do not exist.

Using England and the colonies as an example, genealogists need to be aware of two things when interpreting old records after 1752. First, in many countries (including England) the general population continued to use the old Julian calendar long after the country officially adopted the new Gregorian calendar. This is particularly true of dates recorded in personal family records and documents, as opposed to official records, which usually used the Gregorian calendar.

Sometimes it is evident which calendar was used by how the date was written down in an old record. For example, dates recorded by the Julian calendar sometimes had a notation "O.S." for Old Style, while dates recorded by the Gregorian calendar were marked as "N.S." for New Style (see [A Date Guide to English Genealogy](#) for more information).

Pioneer Trails Newsletter

A second major change is that different countries used different days to mark the beginning of the New Year. Depending on the country (and the region within some countries!), the first day of the New Year could be 25 December (essentially the winter solstice), 1 January, 1 March, 24 or 25 March (essentially the spring equinox). Britain and the colonies prior to 1753 typically used either March 24th or March 25th as the beginning of the New Year. This roughly corresponded to the spring equinox. Thus, the beginning of the calendar year was essentially moved from close to the spring equinox to close to the winter solstice.

When recording old dates for genealogy, you can enter either a Julian date or a Gregorian date provided that you carefully record which calendar is being used. Alternatively, you can convert old Julian dates to the Gregorian date equivalent and enter the Gregorian date into your records, with a notation that it is a Julian date converted to a Gregorian date. When you are uncertain whether the date is a Julian date or a Gregorian date, then this should also be noted.

Example: Converting a Julian Date to a Gregorian Date

A person is born in England on 1 March 1751. Since this date is before September 1752, we can be reasonably certain the date has been recorded using the Julian calendar system. To convert this Julian date to the equivalent Gregorian date, it is necessary to do the following:

Step 1: Add 11 days. Thus, 1 March becomes 12 March.

Step 2: (this step is only necessary if the Julian date is between 1 January and 25 March). Add one year. Thus, 1751 becomes 1752.

Thus, the equivalent Gregorian date is 12 March 1752.

Some people who keep genealogy records prefer to write a Julian date of 1 March 1751 using the notation 1 March 1751/52. Genealogy In Time Magazine recommends you do not use this format because this notation is neither a Julian date nor a Gregorian date. The correct Julian date is 1 March 1751 and the correct equivalent Gregorian date is 12 March 1752. 1 March 1751/52 is technically not a date, so do not use it. The importance of proper date notation can perhaps best be highlighted by using George Washington's birthday as an example:

George Washington was the first President of the United States and a pivotal figure in early American history. He was born on 11 February 1731 in Westmoreland county, Virginia. At the time, America was an English colony, so it used the Julian calendar. In the Julian calendar, George Washington's birthday was 11 February 1731. However, in the Gregorian calendar, George Washington's birthday is 22 February 1732. This is the reason why (to this day) the United States celebrates George Washington's birthday every year with an official holiday on February 22nd (the correct Gregorian date) and not on February 11th (the old Julian date).

HOLIDAY FIREBALL TRADITION REVISITED

Contributed by Anne Kimzey

Alabama Folkways Series, December 1993

A year ago Alabama Folkways featured a column by Doug Purcell describing the tradition of fireballing -- the practice of lighting kerosene-soaked balls of yarn or tightly-wound rags and tossing the fiery objects outdoors at night as a way of celebrating Christmas or the New Year.

The topic generated an outpouring of responses from readers who had participated in the tradition as children and recalled the excitement they felt watching the dazzling display of fireballs whooshing through the dark skies. One reader even drew a diagram of the field, placement of participants and path of the fireballs, and an illustration of the fireball bucket and the two people in charge of the fireballs and matches.

The responses greatly increased our knowledge of the tradition, particularly of how widespread it used to be. When the column appeared last year, Purcell told of an active fireball tradition in Barbour County. He also knew the practice once occurred in the Alabama counties of Henry, Houston, Dale and Russell and in Hancock County, Georgia. Our respondents indicated that fireballs have also flown through the skies of Chambers, Tallapoosa, Elmore, Bullock, Pike, Crenshaw, Geneva, Covington, Monroe, Dallas, Marengo, Perry, Bibb and Blount counties. While most respondents told of fireball memories dating back to the 1920s and '30s, Jeanette Gibson of Goodway in Monroe County, Alabama wrote that her family and friends began to gather on Christmas Eve a few years ago for "refreshments, fireworks, and fireballs," when she found it difficult to make the trip back to Blakely, Georgia, where her father's side of the family has thrown fireballs at Christmas for generations.

"On Christmas Eve our grandfather, George Edgar Bates, Sr., would have a place picked out in the back pasture usually where an old tree had fallen and needed to be burned. Our family (approximately 30) would gather around at dark and enjoy fireworks and throw fireballs," she wrote. "We would enjoy one another's company until past midnight and then hurry home before Santa got there."

The letters and phone calls revealed that fireball tossing was practiced in both white and black communities in Alabama. The origins are still a mystery. Those who were familiar with the tradition only among black communities speculated that the practice came from Africa.

Many white respondents emphasized their Scots-Irish ancestry and believed the game originated in Scotland. In fact, one caller alerted us to a radio advertisement for a car dealership in Mobile featuring a character with a Scottish accent talking about throwing the fireball to bring in the New Year. I called the dealership and the Scottish sales manager verified that he had spoken on the air about the ancient rite of throwing fireballs. He said, to his knowledge, it is not done in Scotland today, but he'd heard it was a custom that dated back to the "16th or 17th century." He had no idea that it was an Alabama tradition.

The radio provided another lead when a co-worker reported hearing a program on the Christmas memories of country music stars. She said Hank Williams, Jr. described throwing fireballs as a boy in Banks, Alabama. Several readers wrote to explain that they made fireballs (also called "kerosene balls") as a homemade alternative to fireworks, which they were too poor to afford.

Pioneer Trails Newsletter

Instructions sent to us for making fireballs were all very similar, although only one person mentioned putting a rock in the center of the ball so that it could be thrown farther. Gladys Kitchens Foster of Lafayette wrote: "My Grandma would take men's Columbus knit socks which had holes in the toes and heels and unravel them, then rewind to make balls. She would sew them so they wouldn't unwind. At that time my uncle ran a small country store and he would put our balls in the kerosene tank a few weeks before Christmas for them to soak." Mrs. Foster was one of several respondents who said she threw the balls "over the house top." Roy Ledbetter of Shorter wrote about a game called "Hail-E-Over," which he played in Tallapoosa County in the 1930s. First they made a softball-size ball from unraveled socks and soaked it in kerosene. "We would then light it and yell 'Hail-E-Over' and throw it over the house. The kids on the other side of the house were supposed to catch it before it hit the ground and throw it back over the house. The game was lost by the side that let it hit the ground first. (It had to be a tin roof because a shingle roof would burn.) This was our fire works on the 4th of July and Christmas."



Despite the dangers of playing with fire, the fireballers insisted they wore no gloves, although catching and throwing quickly or rubbing one's hands with dirt were mentioned as strategies for avoiding burns. Virginia Key of Troy wrote of growing up in Elmore County, "An Aunt of mine, probably about 12 years of age at the time, had a fireball stick to the back of her leg and she carried a bad scar from this accident." She went on to describe how the risks involved were part of the excitement of the game. "I watched terrified from our porch," she said. "My mother was so frightened of the 'game' that her terror was contagious, but it was an exciting sight to a 3 1/2 year old to see the ball of fire flying through the dark sky."

Mostly, respondents emphasized that fireball throwing was homemade fun in an era when you had to create your own entertainment. Many readers described other games that they played as children and other traditions associated with the holidays.

Officers & Directors

President: Patricia Crim Dietlein - pdietlein@aol.com

1st VP (Programs): Barbara Tillery - jartil@bellsouth.net

2nd VP (Membership): Barbara Adams - gulf9009@gmail.com

Treasurer: Gary Gerlach - ggerlach@charter.net

Secretary: Patrick Henry - pjhenry@mindspring.com

Historian: Carl Dykes - cwdykes@uab.edu

Curator: Carl Dykes - cwdykes@uab.edu

Parliamentarian: Gary Gerlach - ggerlach@charter.net

Website/Social Media: Patrick Henry & Melissa Hogan & Barbara Tillery

Publicity: Melissa Hogan - genealogistinal@yahoo.com

Director: Scott Martin - bevel67@aol.com

Director: Jim Anderson - jaa@compuserve.com

Director: Ann Gilbert - agilbert@bham.rr.com

Director: Mary Beth Newbill -

mnewbill@bham.lib.al.us

Director: Yvonne M. Brakefield Knowles-

ybrakefield@mac.com

Director: Jyl Hardy - jylhardy@charter.net

Pat Coleman - colemanp@bellsouth.net

Liaison, Family History Center
