Dear Sir,

Census and Census-type Documents (L.P.S. No. 2)

Valerie Smith's exhortation that all presumptions should be clearly stated is admirable, but she fails to follow her own advice. At the foot of page 20 she states "it is clear that James Green has married twice". It is not clear - there could be two (or more) James Greens. Again, on the next page she states "James Green Junior must b: James' Son". Maybe, but there is no must about it. The genealogist continually meets pitfalls of this sort and coincidence is surprisingly frequent. No doubt, Mrs. Smith has other evidence for her statements, but she does not quote them.

Mr. Tillott is in error when he says that the 1841 census gives the County of birth of the individuals recorded. In fact, all it does is to give Y (for yes) or N (for no) to the question - was the individual born in this County? A 'Y' is useful, but an 'N' is almost valueless.

Like other records, census returns are not free from errors. A useful account of this subject is given in Genealogical Research in England and Wales by David E. Gardner and Frank Smith, 1956.

Yours faithfully,

Robert Dickinson,
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Valerie Smith Comments

Dr. Dickinson is quite right in stating that I have not stated all my presumptions and for this I offer an unreserved apology; however, I would like to make it quite clear that I was dealing with the analysis of a parish register only in relation to the use of a list of inhabitants, and that I am well aware that more stringent tests of identification are necessary for the recovery of information using the register as the sole source.

In using a register in conjunction with a list, one fundamental assumption is necessary in order for it to be possible to undertake this type of work at all; this is that the basic residential unit in England has always been the nuclear family consisting of a man, his wife, and their children (or the step-children of one of them) who are still young enough to be dependent on their parents for support. It follows logically from this, that the order of listing the members of a household would be to put the members of this conjugal family at the head of the list. All the available information supports this view. In view of this, the researcher dealing with an example such as that given in my article would have all the evidence both of logical expectation and of past results to lead him to expect that the most probable relationship of the four persons surnamed Green would be that of husband, wife and children.

I have stated that all information from the register which could relate to the person in question must be entered on the card. In the light of this limitation it may be allowed that there were in the register only two entries concerning the marriage of a man named James Green and that only one of these concerned a woman whose Christian name was Margaret. It may also be allowed that the child born to James and Margaret Green is the son of this couple, since not only is this the more probable explanation from the register evidence alone but also she is included in the list in a position in the household most likely to be occupied by a dependent child. If this much is allowed, then one has the situation of another person, James Green junior, being present in a position on the list between a married couple and their child; given the order in which these lists are compiled, this is in itself strong evidence in favour of his being also a dependent child; but he is not the son of James and Margaret, who were not married at this date. At the date in question, a man named James Green was married to a woman named Jane Smith. There is no mention in the register of
this woman after the marriage of James and Margaret, and therefore no obstacle to presuming that she was the first wife of James Green and the mother of his son, James.

I do not wish to claim that this is the only possible explanation of the events found in the parish register, and I would not be prepared to make all these suppositions if working from the register alone. I would say that in the light of the evidence of the list, such a chain of deduction as I have outlined is the only one which will fit all the facts without involving reliance on highly improbable coincidences.

This is not a full answer to the problem of ambiguity; such a full answer would demand an article of its own. In order to illustrate the point I wished to make, I have deliberately constructed my example to include little ambiguity; in a large parish with a common name the problem could be much more complicated than I have suggested here, and it could well be impossible to find a solution which would be acceptable. I have merely tried to point out that, given the basis of English household structures as the nuclear family, and given the order in which names are placed on a list in accordance with this, the presumptions illustrated in my original article are adequately supported by the evidence available.

P.M. Tillott writes:

Dr. Dickinson is perfectly right; my sentence was misleading. The subject of errors and inconsistencies in the enumerators' books will be treated in a chapter of the forthcoming Cambridge Group publication mentioned in the article.

By a printing error, a line was omitted at the end of the article. Armstrong's chapter in An Introduction to English Historical Demography comments only upon analysis by punch cards; there are comments on both punch card and computer methods in Armstrong's and Dyos' chapters in The Study of Urban History.

One other matter, apparently trivial but the cause of much confusion must be referred to. Some misprints in the first substantive paragraph in the article have transposed the underlining of Census Reports and Census Enumerators' Books. The Reports (i.e. the printed and published statistics compiled by the census office) should always be referred to by italics (or by underlining where italics are not available); the enumerators' books should never be referred to in this way since they are, of course, a manuscript source material.