

Ancestry can Extend to Places as well as Genealogies

Robert J. Gregory

*School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Fax: 64 06 3505673 E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz*

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ABSTRACT Anthropologists work almost continuously with genealogies in their efforts to understand patterns in human relationships. They also record considerable information about material culture, including homes and residences. One intriguing and valuable source of information concerns public records held by local authorities or councils of personal property, specifically residential homes. The following account covers the exploration of records regarding one personal property, a residence in Upstate New York State. Tracing the history reveals a great deal of information about the background of the author, the family of the author, and the history of the property, all within a larger context.

Did you ever consider that tracing the history of biological ancestors is only a part of the story of the past? Another way to search for intriguing information about the past history and lives of our families is through property deeds. The history of houses, pieces of land, and property can be fascinating. This article describes a look through a deed, to figure out what happened to the piece of land my brother Jim, and I, recently inherited.

Pieces of land in the United States are typically identified and described by property deeds. Sitting before me is a "warranty deed," initially dated 1 April 1878. This deed indicates that on 2 April 1878 as recorded in Liber 70 of Deeds at page 97, a man named Henry S. (all identifications of persons and locations are disguised to protect the persons involved) and Chris his wife, conveyed a piece of land to Martin H. The piece of land is described as follows: "All that tract or parcel of land situate in the Town of C, County of C, and State of New York, bounded and described as follows: Beginning at the southwest corner of lot number 35 in Smiths location thence south 85 degrees east 20 chains 76 links to a stake and stones and so on . . . Also, a right of way commencing two rods north of the South west corner of the above described farm and run-

ning the same width (to wit, two rods) along the lands of James . . . to the main highway as the same is now in use."

As with almost all research endeavors, the loose ends and unanswered questions are many. I wonder who the initial owner was, and who, if anyone, owned the land prior to 1878. I also wonder exactly when the house was built. I have no answers, but that is the nature of doing research - perhaps someday I will be able to find out additional information. However, I am fascinated that the house dates back at least as far as 1878, and that the initial description provides measurements in lengths (rods, chains, and links) that are no longer in use.

I did pursue the possibilities of answering some questions by personally going to the County Courthouse and to the section within that deals with land and deed. There, I found that Henry S sold the land 1 April 1878 for \$4,300, as recorded on 2 April at 3 and 1/2 o'clock. Henry purchased the land on 27 March 1868, I believe as recorded in Liber 42, page 316 or Liber 69, page 429, for the record is somewhat unclear, for \$1,000 from Morton S and Annice, his wife, and Judah S and his wife, Lucy. Previous to this time, Henry S lived in the town of B County of Tioga, New York. In addition to Henry, Morton, and Judah, there were also Ferdinand, Melia, and Frank S - some of whom lived in F. Thus, I was able to track back to 1868, just after the American Civil War. That the house was built at that time was unexpected, and yet I could not be sure for only the land was mentioned as being purchased. Nevertheless, given the disparities in prices, \$1,000 to \$4,300 in ten years, the presumption may be that the house was built during that decade and thereby increased the value of the property.

I thought that it was intriguing that the Senior Clerk, M. Q. and the Notary Public, A. P. F., wrote in the record (Liber 69, p. 430) on 15

February 1877 at 9 A. M. when the sale of land was being recorded that "the said Annice and Lucy each for herself on a private examination by me apart from her said husband acknowledged that she executed the same freely and without any fear or compulsion of her said husband." Such a record left me with a feeling that some gender relationships at that time were not so positive as we might have thought. Unexpected findings add additional insight into the social institutions at the time.

Another finding, through the Deeds and Lands office was an old map, dated 1869 of the Town of C. From this map, it appeared that the farm was owned by J. M., but I could locate no other record of such a person. Possibly other investigations may reveal additional information, at subsequent times.

Some of the terms I found may be old and no longer in current use. However, some such terms are still used in legal documents and by surveyors. Liber, of course, is a book in Latin. I have actually gone to the County Clerk's office to look at some of these old books, and others could do the same. The old measurements are worthy of noting - a dictionary reveals that chains and links are measurements of length, as are rods.

The next entry in the deed is even more intriguing, for the Supreme Court of C County appointed a committee of a person to sort out affairs regarding to Martin H, who was alleged incompetent. The Superintendent of a Hospital petitioned in the C County Supreme Court, as recorded in the Clerk's office 10 November 1902, that, "Martin H. has been legally committed to the x State Hospital in manner provided by the State Insanity Law, as more fully appears by the petition order and certificate made for that purpose and now on file in the Clerk's office of the County of C."

"Petitioner further states that said Martin H. is an insane person and was committed to the X state hospital as such on or about March 1, 1901 and is an inmate thereof; and that Martin H. by reason of his insanity is incapable of managing his own affairs and has been entirely unfit to have charge of or manage his business affairs or property for more than a year last past.

Thus from the records, it appears that my land

and my home were occupied by someone who went insane. The story of the property becomes more interesting, even mysterious. The petition goes on to say that Martin H. had a wife, and a son and a daughter. "The petition further states that Martin H. is a pensioner of the Government of the United States and receives a pension of fourteen dollars per month; and is the owner of personal property consisting of clothing, household furniture etc., of the value not to exceed One hundred fifty dollars. That said Martin H. is also the owner of certain real property of about \$2075 and which consists of a farm of about 100 acres situated in the Town of C, C County, which said farm is of the value of about \$1300 . . ." That made me wonder about the transaction price of \$1,000 and then later of \$4,300 - although the latter figure could have conceivably included other land as well.

The son, Orsen F. H., was appointed as a committee with a bond of five thousand dollars, filed in the County Clerk's office November 20, 1902. The petition continued and "asks for an order authorizing the sale of said premises located in the Town of C in order to promote the interests of said incompetent." The superintendent apparently then became owner of the property until various reports, orders, agreements and confirmations so that the property was sold effective 20 March 1909 and recorded as of 12 April 1909 to Floyd J. B. Various mortgages were issued against the property, but these were subsequent satisfied. Floyd J. B. took out a mortgage for \$1500 as of 20 March 1909 from Martin H. and this was satisfied 25 March 1919. Also, another mortgage for \$1000 was dated 20 March 1909 and satisfied as of 16 March 1914. I can assume from this information that the property was worth at least \$2,500 at this time.

The property went to Theresa E. B. from Floyd J. B. as of 28 May 1910. As of 20 February 1914, a search was made of Indices of Deeds, Mortgages, Loan Office Mortgages, Lis Pendens, Sheriffs Certificates of Sales, Homestead Exemptions, Collectors Bond and Tax Sales for the property, also The Docket of Judgments and the Docket of Mechanics and Laborers Liens for conveyances, incumbrances and liens affecting the title, and, as of that date, there were none. Theresa E. then sold the

property to Victor L. as of 9 March 1914, with the two mortgages or liens on the premises and Victor L. being "the party of the second part hereby assumes, covenants and agrees to pay and discharge the two mortgages above described as a part of the consideration for this conveyance."

Martin H. died 27 May 1909 and his widow Hannah M. died 23 December 1911. His daughter and son were his only heirs at law and next of kin. (Florence E. W. and Orson F. H. The daughter and son also executed a quit claim deed 11 March 1914, and recorded 16 March 1914 in Liber 172 of deeds at page 240 - which "is now made for the purpose of confirming the title of said premises in the party of the second part who is about to purchase and take a conveyance of the same from Theresa E. B." A search was conducted, similar to previous searches and the land was again ready for resale. This was about the time of World War I, and again, further research might answer some of the unanswered issues.

Helena M. W. bought the property from Victor L. as of 15 December 1914, and again a search was made, which repeated the previous searches but added the more recent period of time. This was duly witnessed and given an official seal as of 6 June 1924 by the Clerk of Court.

My own grandfather and grandmother then bought the land as of 6 June 1924, Paul G. and Annie G., husband and wife, and to the survivor. The cost recorded for the sale was a consideration of \$1.00 and Revenue stamps at \$2.00. Paul G. and Emi G. (the names as recorded were changed for some unknown reason) then leased the land for oil and gas exploration, in 16 May 1930 "eased and let and by these presents does grant, demise, lease and let unto the said lessee, for the sole and only purpose of mining and operating for oil and gas, and laying pipe lines, and building tanks, powers, stations and structures thereon to produce, save and take care of said products, all that certain tract of land . . . it is agreed that this lease shall remain in force for a term of ten years, from this date, and as long thereafter as oil or gas, or either of them, is produced from said land . . .". Rumors that oil or gas deposits had

been found in the area were to at least some extent, confirmed by this finding.

As of 20 March 1943, another search was carried out and then land was sold to Herman B. and Klothilde B. as of 24 March 1943. This sale fits in with my knowledge that my three uncles were being called away to fight, one in Europe, one in the South Pacific, and the other in North Africa and Italy. My grandparents, understandably, could not run the farm by themselves even with the help of their three daughters, one of whom was my mother. Thus the farm was in possession of my mother's side of the family for nearly 20 years.

The B's did not apparently live on the farm, but rather sublet to Philo and Lelia N. husband and wife, subject to the oil and gas lease, and a mortgage of \$1760. During and after the War, I recall visiting the farm with my mother, and even riding a horse behind one of their girls. The team of Philo and Lelia N. presumably paid for the farm as of late in 1953, then had a search conducted as of 4 December 1953 and the property was then conveyed to John G. and Mary G. who were my parents. My mother, the daughter of Paul and Ann G., as previously described, grew up on that farm. She shared stories about her early life there with me, when I was a child.

I still recall that initial week when we moved to the farm in December 1953, and how I learned to milk the cows, clean and arrange things in the house, and I also recall the long hours that my dad put in to run things. Gradually the workloads, routine of school, and farm life came together, and our family enjoyed the next few years. In particular, my mother was happy to be "home" and the extended family too, joined us for countless celebrations and get-togethers. The sense of community and neighborhood made the extended family happy.

My mother passed away in 1969, and my father lived alone there until 1994 when he died. My brother and I inherited the property as of late 1995. Thus, the story of the past, intertwined with genealogy and the history of the region, is told in a deed.

What you can do

If you have a property deed, pull it out and study the history of the property. Pay special attention to the dates, and trace out changes in

ownership, and then compare what you know about your family and ancestors, what you know about local and national history, with what happened at various times according to the deed.

You may be pleasantly surprised at the amount of and types of information you find. Certainly the history of your property and family and the surrounding context may become clearer.