

Indented trees consisting of one line for each person provide a concise way to represent the basic Birth, Marriage, and Death data for each person, nested into their family contexts. It should go without saying that one should limit what is specified to just what can be documented—or qualify doubtful information in a clear and consistent way. The conventions I’ve adopted below for my own indented tree presentations satisfy these requirements.

Here’s [an Example Indented Tree](#) from my report on John³ (Daniel²⁻¹) Dennison.

Conventions for my Indented Tree Formats

The Person Line is the basic element of these trees. Each line represents one person, and includes his/her name, and birth, marriage, and death (BMD) data, insofar as these data elements can be documented, or at least estimated from the available evidence. More on the specification of these elements below.

My indented tree format begins on the left margin, with a line for the earliest ancestor, and is followed, in most cases, by a line for the subject’s marriage data, and the name, and optionally, the BMD data of that subject’s spouse, and/or the names of the spouse’s parents. The spousal line is indented one unit, and following the spousal line at the same indentation level, is one line for each of the couple’s children, in their order of birth.

Each child can in turn become a subject for his/her conjugal family, which is further indented.

This scheme of indentation can be repeated iteratively to any depth of indentation short of the right margin, and continuation lines could be used to extend that, if necessary.

To economize on space for persons who are at the deepest level of nesting in the tree, and where the focus doesn’t extend to their own conjugal family, I will sometimes concatenate the marriage data onto the same person line as the subject, and/or merely list the couple’s children by name on a single line, in birth order.

In accordance with the widely used American convention, each generation is numbered, preferably using generation “1” for the first generation immigrant ancestor, “2” for his children, and so forth. Where the earliest ancestor traces back to the old country, by convention the parent(s) of the immigrant are identified as “A”, their parents as generation “B”, and so forth.

Where the immigrant ancestor isn’t known, however, I will simply use “1” for the earliest known generation heading the tree, and include a prefatory note to indicate that the numbering is provisional, pending identification of the immigrant ancestor.

Conventions for the specification of Person Line BMD data

The first data item for each person is naturally the person’s full name—but only insofar as it can be documented. Too many genealogists gratuitously expand middle initials into full names based on nothing but guessed matches to maternal, paternal, or ancestral names, and some even conflate two persons into one by concatenating their given names into a first name, middle name combination.

In my trees, I usually render surnames in ALL CAPS to allow them to stand out, but at the same time, and for the same reason, I generally omit the focal surname and specify only in-law surnames.

The additional (BMD) data I specify for each individual consist of: the date and place of birth; the date and place of death; the date and place of the marriage, the name of the spouse, and optionally, the name of the spouse’s parents. Multiple marriages should be numbered sequentially. An example illustrating all of these conventions might be: “m2. 23Oct1842 Mary KING (15Jun1820 - 7Jan1898), in AlbemarleCoVA, d/o (daughter of) John & Margaret.”

Dates (whether full dates or year dates) that are not backed by specific, unequivocal evidence, are always qualified: approximate dates by “abt”; guesstimated dates by “say”; or otherwise by “bef”ore, “by”, “aft”er, or “btw” (between), depending on the evidence.

Approximated (“abt”) dates imply supporting evidence that’s short of complete accuracy, and that may be off by 1 or at most 2 periods of the lowest order component of the date, either way. Thus, birth years calculated from age in the USCensuses of 1850 and beyond, are always “abt <year>” (plus/minus one year), while full birth dates calculated from gravestone inscriptions that include the specific date of death, and the age in years, months, days, are always “abt <full-date>” (plus/minus one day), since latent ambiguities lurk in the specification and calculation of such dates.

Meanwhile, “say” dates are guesstimates based on circumstantial evidence, and/or typical patterns of the time, place, and social group, such as average age at marriage for (separately) the bride and groom, or the typical birth interval between children.

I prefer to concatenate the three parts of dates (e.g. 23Oct1842) so they don’t get split between lines.

Places are the specific jurisdictions where the evidential BMD records are to be found—for most states/colonies these are counties; for most New England states, towns.

My Place Abbreviations

I’ve developed a couple of schemas for abbreviating counties/towns, and states/colonies uniquely. For states I just use modern ZIP or other postal codes, and append these as suffixes to the county/town name, e.g. “RoanokeCoVA” represents Roanoke County, Virginia, while “RoanokeVA” represents the Independent City of Roanoke, which is an entirely different jurisdiction (in VA, uniquely, Independent cities are NOT part of the counties they abut). When I am referring to a county, I virtually always include the identifying tag “Co” to avoid ambiguity.

As with dates, I concatenate the parts of places so that they don’t spill over to a new line.

I also use a more severe schema for abbreviating county names where space is of the essence. I’ve devised tables of unique four character county codes for each state/colony that I do work in, and to avoid the need to remember abbreviations I use the first four characters of the county name as the abbreviation whenever this is unique. Thus, “RoanVA” = “RonaokeCoVA”. About the only time I resort to such a severe mode of abbreviation is in naming files.

Editorial Commentary and Doubtful Data

I flag questionable data elements or whole Person Lines by enclosing them within square brackets. I generally do this with data that I’ve merely copied from usually reliable secondary sources, without attempting to validate it in any way, though the square brackets in such cases are meant mostly as a note to myself to perhaps follow up in this area in the future. Where I actively doubt the validity of data I additionally flag the square bracketed material with a “?” (question mark) A “?” at the beginning of a Person Line (right after the “[“ (left square bracket), means that the whole line, or the existence of the person, is in question; otherwise, the “?” follows the questionable data element, and is generally itself followed by the “]” (right square bracket).

I sometime interpolate additional or alternative text into my Person Lines, or into the tree itself, and when I do this I differentiate my commentary from the asserted BMD claims it refers to, by using a different (smaller) font or font size. Sometimes this editorial commentary will also appear within square brackets, and sometimes it will be broken out at the end of a Person Line, or on a separate, interpolated line, prefixed with an em-dash (“—”). Continuation text for the same commentary item will be prefixed by the ellipsis (dot leader) symbol (“...”).

Hyperlinks to Citation and Analysis

Since one of the main desiderata of indented trees is their compactness, I relegate extended commentary, analysis, and citations to separate sections of the report in which the tree is embedded.