

The Pitfalls of using the “Mug Book” Literature (1875-1915) as Genealogical Evidence 1

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the biographical articles and memoirs, published or unpublished, from the “mug book” era or based on its literature, that seem to us today to have captured and passed on authentic “family traditions” from that period. I offer as guidance for winnowing the kernels of wheat from the chaff of supposed family tradition, [my Grandparents Rule](#).

The [second part](#) is a detailed examination of a case in point: the copious mug book era leavings by the descendants of the John Robb of Washington County, Pennsylvania, whose will was probated there in 1804, and who left three lines of ROBB descendants as local contributors to that literature.

The “Mug Book” Era

The period 1875-1915 was the first “golden age” of American genealogy (we are now well into the second). For whatever reason, Americans of that interwar period began to feel the need to reconnect to their roots. Perhaps it was a time when the average man began to feel like a mere cog in the burgeoning and all-encompassing social and economic machine, and turned back towards his hitherto neglected family traditions in search of a sense of personal distinction, while the more successful sought confirmation that their success was deserved and ordained. Individual surname genealogies were published by the tens of thousands, though most of the research which went beyond mere information gathering from living relatives was of poor quality. We descendants, though, should be sincerely grateful to the people of that period who took the trouble to preserve so much of their private contemporary knowledge of their families.

This was the era of the “mug books” and local histories. In just about every settled county of Eastern and Midwestern America, enterprising vanity publisher’s agents canvassed the small county towns and rural neighborhoods knocking on the doors of upstanding farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers, and offering to publish their family story in exchange for a paid subscription to the published volume. The resulting compendiums have been somewhat jocularly dubbed “mug books” by some, because the engraved or photographic portraits of obscure and forgotten citizens which studded the pages of most reminded some wag of the photo albums that modern city police give crime victims to go through at the station to try to identify the hooligans who “mugged” them.

What was set down in these (auto)biographical articles is a decidedly mixed bag. On the one hand, their authors were speaking out of personal knowledge and memory of their own lives and the lives of their own natal families, and also passing on similar personal reminiscences of aged relatives they knew, living or dead. And this material was supplemented in some cases by private family letters or bible records of births, marriages, and deaths, now probably lost. Beyond this, these people were, like us their descendants, heir to “family traditions” and stories, for whatever these may be worth, and the purpose of the present article is to provide some guidelines for evaluating these traditions as genealogical evidence.

On the other hand, few of the authors of these articles had the accomplished family historian’s cultivated abilities to sift and differentiate between fact and fiction, and their resulting questionable compositions were then subjected to a none-too-careful editorial process by third parties with virtually no knowledge either of the family, or of the historical times that it lived through. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised when the published results merely attained the accuracy of the typical newspaper obituary—and in my experience, few of these are entirely satisfactory on that score.

Here, though, what concerns me chiefly is the portion of these articles (or published books) that extends beyond the living memories of the amateur family historians who were their source.

With family tradition, the story is the thing, not the bare facts. Most children get told something about their ancestors while they are young and impressionable, but not yet interested or sophisticated enough to care about getting the facts quite straight: typically, only the gist of the story registers, as with a parable. And as their understanding of human, and family, affairs matures over the course of a lifetime, they tend to fill out the original story to make it conform to their own ideas about how the world works, and to their desires to think well of their ancestors, and, by reflected glory, themselves.

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There are usually genuine facts, kernels of truth, embedded in such stories, but typically, other “facts” are invented, or at least shaded, to “improve” the story. Liars and storytellers learn that the closer their stories stick to the truth, and the more they are embellished with specific and plausible facts, whether made up or not, the more readily the invented portions are accepted. It turns out that this process of memory revision is due to a rather recently discovered psychological phenomenon that affects us all called memory reconsolidation^[1].

So we need to keep this phenomenon in mind as we evaluate these amateur genealogies that are based ultimately on old memories that have been repeatedly edited both by different people and by the same people at different stages of their lives. And we need to try to judge their likely correspondence to the truth in the light of what we know of their authors, and what they were in a position to have known of their own personal knowledge, or at least that of their known contemporaries—and not to give much, if any, positive weight to handed down stories that have had plenty of opportunity to be “improved”.

I have learned, though, that the most insidious distortions and dislocations from the truth in these family history accounts have been the work of authors who undertook to become genealogists themselves and to do a little “research”—without any idea of the difficulties and pitfalls that all novice genealogists stumble over, but hopefully recover from if they persists in the field over time.

Probably the chief mistake that these novice family historians make in seeking to elaborate and extend their ancestral stories is to pounce on and appropriate as their previously unknown ancestor the first person they find bearing the name sought whose circumstances make for even a halfway plausible match; and then to confidently embed this misidentification within their otherwise plausible, true-fact-studded, family narratives.

¹ The Wiki on this phenomenon calls this theory, tentatively established only about the year 2000, “controversial”, and the current consensus of scientists studying it in animal subjects, and also in humans traumatized with PTSD, is apparently now prepared only to associate it with memories initially established with high emotional content. But it has long been known that highly emotional memories are the most, not the least, stable, and it is for just that reason that traumatic memories often have to be buried and made unconscious for the traumatized (human) animal to carry on with his life. There is nothing inherently implausible with the idea that this phenomenon is far more general, and in fact presumably extends to all memories for which the salient specifics aren’t nailed down when they occur, and constantly reinforced through use—and even such attended to memories can be subject to revision as minds and perspectives evolve through life.

As I’ve found to be generally the case with modern professionalized psychology, the scientists here are merely confirming what reflective humans have known since ancient times: that memories and the stories based on them evolve over time, though I myself until now haven’t fully realized just how ubiquitous, and even normal, memory reconsolidation is. Trial attorneys and judges, and other astute observers of court proceedings, or even of the workings of their own minds over time, know how subject witness memories are to contamination by facts or opinions extraneous to their original experience, and it has now been established for decades, from the split brain studies of Sperry, Gazzaniga, *et al.*, how adept humans are at confabulating stories to fit any set of facts they’ve witnessed, invented, or been presented with.

It is for these reasons that accomplished genealogists who seek to satisfy scholarly standards in their project of reconstructing obscure family histories, strive always to seek out the original documentary records—the primary sources set down contemporaneously with the events they concern, and preferably by those with personal knowledge of those events. They also learn over time to document their own research procedures—so much of my own early work, despite the high scholarly standards I’ve always striven for, needs to be retraced because I didn’t fully organize it and connect it to the actual evidence. That’s why everything I publish now brings the actual evidence to the fore, preferably with links to the actual primary records.

Outside of such painstaking projects, although memory reconsolidation may corrupt our original memories, it can be seen as on balance a beneficial process that provides an automatic, unconscious mechanism for constantly updating our minds in line with our ever growing and evolving knowledge and life experience: as long as we take care to do this well.

I invoke at this point what I’ve come to call, my “Grandparents Rule” for evaluating this kind of material (sorry, this is quite complex—this is history, after all, and there are no magic formulas for parsing it):

My Grandparents Rule

Whatever an author of articles, books, or just private family papers, has to say about his conjugal and natal families, and about his grandparents, is likely to be valid, although it may be lacking in perfect accuracy; and where the author has evidently interviewed an older relative with such personal knowledge of that relative’s own near ancestors or their doings, than that contribution too deserves to be taken seriously, although it may be not only hearsay, but double hearsay—provided that the interview was closely contemporaneous with the author’s composition, or that he was working from detailed notes, or better, a transcription, of the interview.

However, memories of tales told to the author in his youth that are relied on in old age, are edging into the gray area of “family tradition”, and each of the claims made by family tradition, even if written down long ago, but by an author operating outside the grandparental orbit defined above, needs to be both carefully vetted for plausibility, and also subject to at least some circumstantial corroboration to be accepted.

To pick up on the blatant and highly misleading errors that typically insinuate themselves when the Grandparents Rule is violated, and to be able to effectively dismiss them as rubbish, typically requires, not only one’s own comprehensive and exhaustive research, but also, if the result is in contravention of what everybody “knows” (because it has been endlessly repeated and has supposedly “passed the test of time”), often requires the construction of a plausible theory as to just how a previous author or improver of the story went awry—and that, in turn, requires not only an effort of the imagination, but also some luck in finding a smoking gun.

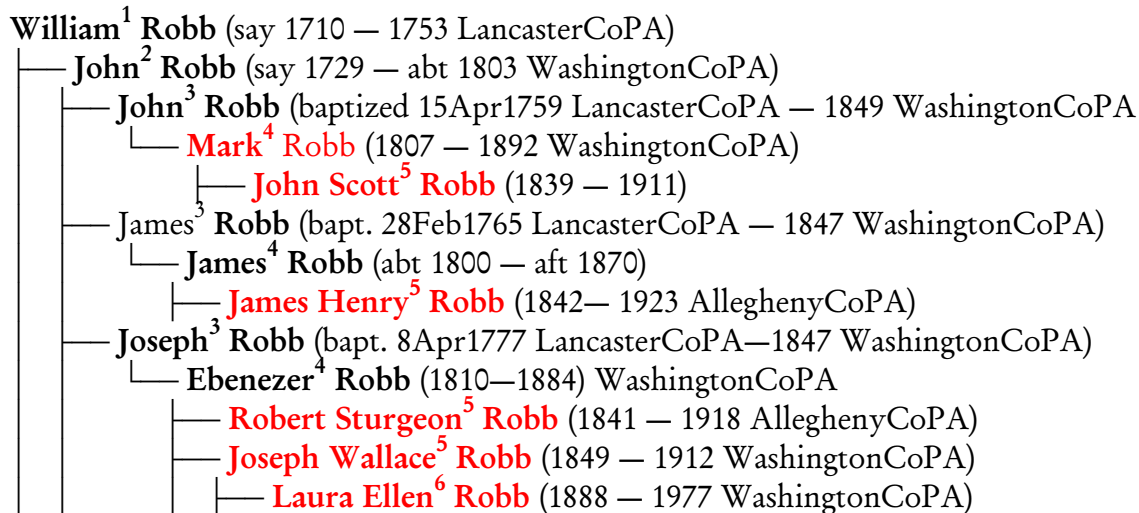
A Case in Point: The Lineage of John Robb of Washington County, PA (d.abt 1803)

—According to the Copious Mug Book Literature Left by his Descendants

When John² Robb of Robinson Township, Washington County, Pennsylvania, made [his will \(probated in 1804\)](#) he directed that his 333a plantation “Omi” be sold after his wife Barbara’s demise, and that the proceeds be divided equally among his eight named sons: William, John, James, Andrew, Samuel, David, Joseph, and Moses. As is typical with such lists in wills and other legal documents, the sons appear to have been listed in order of birth, and the fact that this order matches to seven of the names of children baptized by the Rev. John Cuthbertson back in LancasterCo, and that Cuthbertson also marries a couple named John Robb and Barbara McKnight, is part of the evidence that identifies this John and his family with the of John & wife Barbara Robb, who as residents of Drumore Twp, LancasterCo, sold the 116a on Octoraro Creek on 21Dec1778 that John had earlier purchased the survey for, presumably on the eve of their departure for WashingtonCoPA.

Fast forwarding, on 25 and 27May1805, “Omi” was partitioned into three nearly equal sections and sold to three of John’s sons: John, James, and Joseph, and they and their descendants continued to occupy portions of this land into the 20th century, with many of them contributing biographical squibs to the local mug book literature. AlleghenyCo, adjacent to WashingtonCo on the east, with Pittsburgh lying just four miles to the east of “Omi” figure into this story, because the part of the plantation that was purchased by son John lay primarily or entirely in Fayette Twp, AlleghenyCo, so some of these mug book entries from AlleghenyCo compendiums.

I’ve laid out John²’s partial descendancy below and highlighted the names of his descendants who either contributed to the local mug book literature, or who left unpublished memoirs or papers that deal with their lineage back to John² and/or with his possible origins.



Before getting into the specifics of these mug book pieces, I'd like to point out that their overall quality was a cut or two above the general run, because these 19th Century Robs were uncommonly well educated, some even through college—the majority being businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and ministers, as well as prosperous farmers. Laura Ellen Robb, who put together an impressive research paper, was an unmarried career woman with both a college degree and an MLS degree. Just to put this level of education in context, in our day, thanks to the collapse of academic standards, a college degree today means less than a mediocre high school degree did in 1940, when fewer than 40% of the population reached that level of formal education, and fewer than 5% had college degrees.

I begin with the unpublished family history of the senior contributor: Mark⁴ (John³, John²) Robb. Not only was Mark a grandson of John², he was also the son of his grandfather's son, John³, whom the grandfather chose as his partner in checking out the prospective family lands in western PA in the early 1770s, and with whom he went to war in Dec 1776, when son John³ was about 17.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Mark's account of his father's and grandfather's exploration of the area of future WashingtonCoPA in the early 1770s, when this land was yet claimed and administered by Virginia, is one of the most detailed, and because it clearly not only falls within the scope of the Grandfather Rule, presumably imbibed from one of the principals himself, John³, his father, it deserves our utmost respect as testimony. All of this makes whatever else Mark may have had to say about his grandfather's own ancestry of the greatest interest, and even authority.

The grandfather of the writer of this sketch, John Robb Sr., emigrated from county Down, Ireland, early in the 17th Century^[2], and settled on Octarara Creek near where the city of Lancaster now stands, where he bought a farm and cleared it, and married a Miss Barbara McKnight. From this union there was born eight sons and two daughters. Their names were William, John, James, Andrew, David, Joseph, Samuel, and Moses—the girls Isabella and Nancy^[3].
 --Mark⁴ (John³, John²) Robb (1807-1892), “The History of the John Robb Family”

² Mark gets other dates wrong in this piece, and he evidently here means the 18th century. Although his supposition that his immigrant ancestors came from county Down may be based on authentic family tradition, I suspect that Belfast, in county Down, was just their port of embarkation, as it was for so many of these Scotch-Irish emigrees to Pennsylvania.

³ This apparent birth order corresponds almost exactly to the records of the Rev. John Cuthbertson of LancasterCo who married John² and baptized all but one of his children: son Samuel merely needs to be shifted to the left between Andrew and David. Throughout this document Mark provides a detailed, and apparently quite complete, accounting of all the descendants of John Sr, and in the process slots himself in as the son of "John the second" son of John Sr. He also establishes that one of his own sons is John S[cott] Robb, another contributor to the mug book literature.

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Here, in comparison, is the little that the article by Mark’s oldest son, John Scott⁵ Robb, has to say about his ancestry.

John Scott Robb, attorney, Pittsburgh, was ... son of Mark and Jane (Donaldson) Robb.... Mr. Robb’s [John Scott’s] great-grandfather, John Robb, came from Lancaster County in 1777 Mark Robb’s father came here in 1775....
[History of Allegheny County..., 405-406](#)

As [my Bibliography page below](#) shows, there’s a second article in this AlleghenyCo compendium from John Scott’s father, Mark, as well as another more lengthy article on the prominent John Scott Robb in a national Who’s Who type encyclopedia, as well as a number of other articles by ROBB descendants of this line who’ve contributed to the mug book literature.

Mark⁴ is the closest of any of these authors to John², the founder of this WashingtonCo ROBB line, being John²’s grandson, yet like most of the others he appears to be clueless, and also incurious, about his great-grandfather.

In contrast, he and most of the others do have a great deal more to say about his grandfather, John²’s and father John³’s early 1770s prospecting for, and eventual acquisition of the family plantation, “Omi”. This land holding appears to have been the glue that preserved extended family consciousness among the three sons of John² who acquired thirds of this plantation after John²’s death, and it didn’t hurt that for later possessors that “Omi” turned into a small bonanza, because like much of western Pennsylvania, exploitable oil and gas was later found beneath the property.

The other two sons of John² who divided “Omi” were James³ and Joseph³. I find only one contribution by a descendant of James³, and that provides only minimal information, but there’s a more extended article commissioned by Joseph Wallace⁵ (Ebenezer⁴, Joseph³) that has this to say about his grandfather, Joseph³:

Joseph Robb [Joseph W. Robb’s grandfather] was born and reared in Chester County, Penn., and was married to a native of the same State. Soon after their union, the couple came to Washington County, in 1790, purchasing of the Government ... “Omi” [and it goes on to speak of the couple’s erecting a log cabin, etc.].
Commemorative Biographical Record of Washington County, Pennsylvania...
(Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co, 1893), [558 \(Joseph W. article\)](#)

The only problem with this account of Joseph W.’s grandfather, Joseph³, is that the evidence back in LancasterCo (not ChesterCo), where Joseph³’s father, John²’s, land lay, in Drumore Twp, is that there’s a LancasterCo baptismal record for Joseph³ to John² dated 8Apr1777, that there is reason to believe occurred within weeks of his birth. Thus, when Omi was formally warranted and surveyed in 1790, and (from other evidence) occupied as early as 1782 while the area was still claimed by Virginia, John²’s second youngest son, Joseph, would have been aged 13, and 3, respectively.

What’s most striking here, is that the grandson didn’t bother to provide the name of his grandmother, Mary *née* Sturgeon, even though one hopes that he knew it, since Sturgeon was the middle name of his brother, Robert Sturgeon Robb, whose extensive but faulty family articles largely prompted this, my review of the evidence. Also, though Joseph Wallace⁵, does provide particulars of his own mother, Eliza Wallace’s marriage to his father, Ebenezer Robb, the date of Ebenezer’s birth is also way wrong, and I think that only some of these mistakes can be attributed to sloppy editing.

Evidently none of these contributors to the mug book literature were genealogists and there is no hint that they did any research—which is a good thing as far as it goes, because at least what they recalled from what was passed down to them in the family, especially about “Omi”, is presumably authentic family tradition, not, perhaps, entirely accurate, but at least uncontaminated by amateurish “research” mixed with gratuitous speculation.

This brings me to the one exception to this rule: the pair of articles for which Robert Sturgeon⁵ Robb was evidently the source. And although they appear in two different mug book compendiums these have the same editor, and the 1911 article is clearly just an expanded version of the 1980 one.

I also, of course, except the much later research paper by Robert’s niece, Laura Ellen⁶ Robb, which I include here because I think that she was both inspired and misled by his work, just as so many Robb researchers since have been.

Here is Robert Sturgeon on his ROBB origins:

JOSEPH ROBB, who was the American ancestor, emigrated from County Down, Ireland, in the year 1730, and settled in Pennsylvania, together with his wife and three sons: John Robb Sr., William, and Andrew Robb.

A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and her people, 4 vols.

ed. John W. Jordan (The Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), [4:130](#) or [4:130](#) (at FamilySearch)

ROBERT S. ROBB traces his Revolutionary descent through two distinct lines of ancestry—the Robb and the Sturgeon families....

JOSEPH ROBB, the American ancestor, emigrated from county Down, Ireland, in 1730, and settled in Pennsylvania with his wife and three sons: John Robb Sr., William, and Andrew. There were a number of Robb settlements in Chester, Lancaster, and Cumberland counties. Joseph probably settled in Lancaster County, as there the sons are first mentioned as landowners.

Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania: Genealogical and Personal Memoirs, ed. John W. Jordan, (The Lewis Publishing Company, 1911), [2:972-975](#)

The claims in these two articles have been almost universally accepted, or at least never before refuted, by naive ROBB researchers (many of whom have mistaken adopted John² as their ancestor), both because they seem so authoritative, not to mention well-written, and because by now they’ve been further burnished by “having stood the test of time”.

Nonetheless, virtually none of the claims in these articles about Robert Sturgeon’s ancestry can be substantiated, mostly because they are wrong, and especially the claim that his immigrant ancestor was one Joseph Robb. I expect that some of Robert Sturgeon’s brother, Joseph Wallace’s, confusion about his grandfather Joseph³, an infant son of John² when he first acquire the family plantation, “Omi”, can also be attributed to brother Robert’s faulty investigations into his past.

The main reason I’ve covered all the other mug book articles for this family is to show that there’s no basis in “family tradition” for this claim of a Joseph Robb as the immigrant ancestor that cannot be associated with the great-grandson of John², Robert Sturgeon Robb, but also, more broadly, to show, considering the actual evidence, how extravagantly Robert has ventured into the speculative unknown. The one statement in the above extracts which can be substantiated is the one about there being a number of Robb settlements in Chester, Lancaster, and Cumberland counties, yet the author in his articles seems unaware of the need to differentiate his own line from the others, despite the fact that there were four (not three) colonial Pennsylvania Robb families, each with a different immigrant ancestor, all of which produced a number of sons with mostly overlapping given names.

Sorting these families all out has required me to exhaustively canvass all the primary records I could find for these and other key Pennsylvania counties for the colonial period, and that is in part what lies behind my categorical rejection of a Joseph¹ Robb who might have been John²’s father.

What Robert Sturgeon Robb Got Right and Where He Went Wrong

Except for creating an illusory parent for his ancestor, John², Robert in these articles provides the most cogent and detailed summary of the process by which John², accompanied by his young son John³, headed west over the mountains to the WashingtonCo area in the mid-1770s, when it was still claimed and administered by Virginia and there selected the tract that he formally entered by warrant and survey only much later, in 1790, and named “Omi”. Robert also summarizes in a general way the constant threat that this and other families were under from predatory Indians, until the 1790s were well underway. No doubt Robert is working here from authentic family tradition of the kind that his cousin Mark⁴ draws on extensively, who must have learned about it all from his father John³.

And much of the rest of what Robert has to say linking John² back to his point of origin in LancasterCo, is grounded in actual public records evidence, although I suspect that Robert himself didn’t do any research in this regard but relied on the efforts of others. Of course, the evidence he made use of is very partial and sometimes slightly skewed or misinterpreted.

However, rather than descend at this point into a detailed critique of Robert’s article here, what I’d like to point out is that much of what he has to say closely parallels the evidence presented in his niece Laura Ellen Robb’s paper, except that Miss Robb, to an unusual degree for her time, brings all of this evidence front and center, and even reproduces a good deal of it. She also departs from her uncle’s extravagant and erroneous claims at certain points, such as Robert’s conflation of the Revolutionary War service of John³, who at 17 enlisted as a private with his father John² in 1776 with an Ensign, then Lieutenant, then Captain John Robb who served with Washington in several important battles: Miss Robb correctly identifies this officer John Robb as the son of the John¹ Robb of CumberlandCo who made his will there in 1761, and whose descendants later removed to the Muncy Valley of Northumberland (later Lycoming, later Sullivan) County, and who, though distant cousins, never had any connection with this line of Lancaster, then WashingtonCo Robbs.

My point here is that Laura, with her college degrees, understood evidence, as well as the need to argue from it, and although not all of her conclusions are sound, her paper, which was probably completed in the 1970s a few years before her death, was a much more impressive effort than anything else I was able to find when I began researching these colonial Pennsylvania Robbs exhaustively about 1990. But despite this, she appears to have been guided to too great a degree by her Uncle Robert’s erroneous conclusions, and in particular by his adoption of a gggGrandfather Joseph¹ as his immigrant ancestor, making the mistake, I believe, of giving weight to a “family tradition” that, as we have seen, did not exist, but came into play only with her uncle, Robert Sturgeon Robb.

I would, however, like to make one further criticism of Robert’s articles. The alert reader, with my tree of Robert’s actual Robb ancestry in mind, may have thought that I erroneously added and extra “g” when I referred to Robert’s immigrant ancestor. But the mistake was Robert’s, not mine. He actually claims that his line runs: Robert⁶ (Ebenezer⁵, Joseph⁴, John³, John², Joseph¹), interpolating the name of his great granduncle, John³, as an ancestor: possibly he did this unconsciously so that he could claim as an ancestor the illustrious officer John Robb who served with General Washington at the Battle of Trenton, etc. But it stands as an egregious mistake nonetheless, and one that nicely illustrates my [Grandparents Rule](#).

The Misreading of “brother” as “father” in the Will of John² Robb

The more material mistake, postulating Joseph¹ as the immigrant ancestor of this John² line, evidently rests on a misreading of [the WashingtonCo will of John² Robb \(proved 8Feb1804\)](#)—in my transcription. John’s will provides for the calling in of a debt owed him on a bond of his brother Joseph. However, Laura Ellen⁶ Robb’s research paper, apparently following the lead of her uncle, Robert Sturgeon⁵ Robb, endorses Robert’s misreading of “brother Joseph” in the will as “father Joseph”, and thereby his manufacture of this illusory immigrant ancestor Joseph¹ Robb, whom she does her best to work into her paper despite the utter lack of supporting evidence.

To refute this claim I first turn to the document itself, or I should say, documents, because in addition to the will book copy of this will (which is the most that genealogists ever expect to find), the original will too has evidently survived and was handed down in the family, and it is this original document (of which I have a facsimile copy) that apparently Robert, if not Laura herself, misread. Laura’s paper says “A copy of the above will is herewith reproduced” (though no such reproduction accompanied the paper I was given to photocopy^[4]).

I begin with the will book copy of this will, because the county clerk who transcribed it officially into the will book clearly had no difficulty reading the word in question “brother”, as [this snapshot of the first page at WashingtonCoPA Wills 2:11](#) shows.

However, in [this corresponding snapshot of the original will](#), the original writing was evidently somewhat spidery and has since been further degraded by fading (and not improved by multiple reproduction), and the word “brother”, apparently penned rapidly at the end of its line, is missing part of its bottom, setting up the apparent ambiguity.

In particular, in the word “brother” in the original, the bottom loop of the “b” omitted, and the indentation that denotes an internal “r” in this script was so lightly applied (if applied at all) that it has now faded out. However, there is clearly no descender as there would be if the first letter of this word were the “f” in “father” (as in “four equal” on the next line), while “my”, the word that immediately precedes “brother”, does have a clearly legible descender. Also, the second letter of the word in question is clearly the “o” of “brother”, not the “a” of “father”^[5].

Besides this, the calling in a bond due from the father of John², who was himself at least 70 when he made his will, makes little sense. If a father, by then at least in his 90s was even still living (and few people in those days lived even into their 80s), it’s even more unlikely that he wouldn’t have long ago wound up his financial affairs while he still had the ability to generate income.

Finally, as I’ve noted above in my discussion of Robert’s articles, my exhaustive canvass of the primary records of Chester, Lancaster, and other counties where early Pennsylvania Robbs ever put in an appearance, failed to turn up even a single reference to a Joseph Robb who could have been the father of John² of Lancaster and Washington counties, though my research did identify a William Robb who died in Drumore Twp, LancasterCo, where John² later purchased land, and who, considering a whole web of circumstantial evidence, was almost certainly the father of John², as well as of a much younger brother Joseph², who, it can be shown, was still living in 1804, in ChesterCo less than ten miles from John²’s erstwhile LancasterCo land^[6].

⁴ My source for Laura’s paper, plus an extensive descendant tree for this extended Robb family of WashingtonCoPA, was Mrs. Margaret (Douglas) Hughey, a niece of Laura Ellen. Mrs. Margaret, who was still living on a portion of “Omi”, also put together her own Robb memoir, “The Robb Family: Pioneer Settlers of Washington Count” and published it amongst Robb cousins on 10Feb2009, on her 88`th birthday.

⁵ On the other hand, the original will usefully supplements the will book copy (at least in the copy’s online reproduction), because in the copy, the married surname of testator’s daughter Agnes’s married surname (the last word on the page) is substantially faded out, whereas on the original the word is clearly decipherable as “Andrews”.

I haven’t attempted to publish my full copy of the original will online, because it was made from photostat sheets of the actual original on 8x14” pages, and it’s already poor quality would be further degraded: however I have published [my transcription of John Robb’s original 1804 will](#), together with analytical remarks.

⁶ This is not the place to make the case for William, which is complex, and based on a complete reconstruction of his conjugal family. I expect to publish a paper in due course, which will do this.

Final Thoughts

The absence of any notion that Joseph¹ was the immigrant ancestor of this line until Robert Sturgeon Robb began taking an interest in his family history, suggests that it was he who was responsible for this misreading, working from the original will. Robert’s articles appear to rely on a combination of family tradition with respect to the acquisition of “Omi” (for which he probably picked the brain and writings of Mark⁴), and research that he probably commissioned from others, but for which in his articles he provided little or no specific references or argument to support his claims. It appears that one of his main concerns in undertaking this research was to establish his Revolutionary War ancestry for the purpose of being accepted into the SAR (which he was) and for that purpose, in those days, just about everybody relied on letters to the federal War Department and its archival predecessors, and these people, then and now, had (and have) little basis for differentiating between people of the same name. That has to be done by perseverant and accomplished genealogists.

That Robert wasn’t much up to deciphering these old documents is suggested by the fact that he evidently didn’t bother to even try reading the rest of John²’s will, because he claims in his 1911 article (p973) that John² divided “Omi”, “probably prior to his death”, whereas the will itself stipulates that John’s land was to be sold after the death of his wife, and the proceeds to be divided equally among his eight sons, complete with a stipulated, complicated payment schedule.^[7]

The research paper of Robert’s niece, Laura Ellen Robb, is a very different kettle of fish, because, first, it admirably widens its scope to all of the early Robbs of Pennsylvania, and second, because it brings certain items of actual evidence front and center. But although Laura was scholarly enough to understand the critical importance of evidence and argument, she too relied on the work of others. In particular, she notes that it was the Genealogical Society of Philadelphia that correctly determined that the Robbs who settled in the Muncy Valley of central PA, were not the source of any of the WashingtonCo Robbs, and though she presents important detailed evidence about the LancasterCo background from the spotty tax records of the period, and even makes an argument that one “widow Robb” there was the mother of John², she also refers in deference to “the opinion of those who have made a complete study of this matter”, and she (and they) somehow missed the Drumore Twp will of this woman’s husband, William Robb, probably because he signed his name William Rab (a valid Scottish phonetic variant of Robb, as is “Robe”), and so was indexed under the plentiful “Rabb”s of colonial PA, most of whom were German. Instead, Laura tries manfully, to shoehorn a Joseph into this picture, despite the lack of any evidence to support this name.

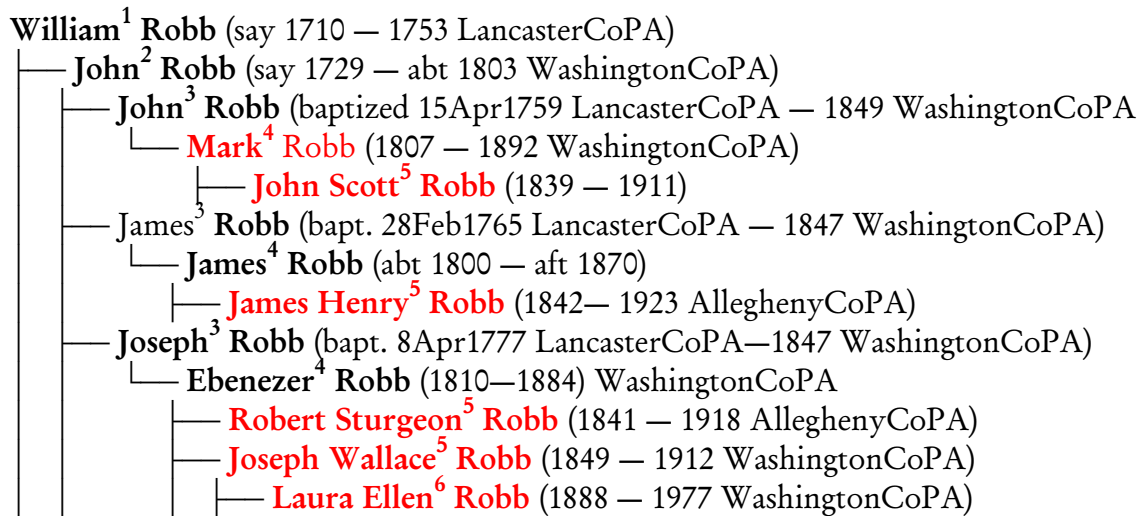
The intent of this paper has been to illustrate the ease with which amateurish family histories published (formally or informally) by well-meaning ancient relatives who lived only a few generations removed from the events they spoke of, can create artifacts capable of misleading generations of descendants.

Of course the truly enlightened family historian knows that every genealogical claim needs to be questioned, and grounded, if at all possible, in records more or less contemporary to the events they concern. It is all the better for such documents if they are exposed to the scrutiny of contemporaries other than the recorder, and in retrospect they should be subjected to the same sort of mental inquiry undertaken by a conscientious juror considering the testimony of a witness in court. The mere opinions of others, even if they are authoritative others, should be set aside, although the opinions and the special understanding of credible experts, at least deserve careful attention.

⁷ I think that both the dating and the probate of the will were deliberately delayed for some months or even years after it was signed and witnessed, until John's widow, Barbara, died, and evidently the sons came to an agreement that three of them would then purchase each a third of the property, which was carried out by three deeds from the executors to sons John³, James³, and Joseph³, in May1805, allowing the usual year after probate for the estate to settle.

Bibliography

I reproduce the Tree of Descent for this ROBB lineage to aid the identification of the authors here.



Mark⁴ Robb:

“[The History of the John Robb Family](#)”, undated, but about 1890 from internal references —a typescript of two first person memoirs concatenated together, which can be identified by its first line as the work of Mark⁴—electronic copy in my possession. Also, [this VR-studded obit for Mark](#).

John Scott⁵ Robb; also an article for father **Mark⁴ Robb** that adds nothing to Mark’s memoir: *A Genealogical and Biographical History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania*, ed. Thomas Cushing (1889; reprint GPC: 1975), [405](#); [504 \(Mark\)](#)

Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography, eds. James Grant Wilson & John Fiske (D. Appleton & Co, 1888), [338](#) —since there are many editions of this with varying pagination I’ve linked to a clipping from 1888

JosephWallace⁵ Robb: also James Henry⁵ Robb:

20`th Century History of the City of Washington, and Washington County, Pennsylvania, and Representative Citizens

Joseph F. McFarland (Richmond-Arnold Publishing, 1910), [916...919 \(Joseph W\)](#); [1362-3 \(James H\)](#)

Commemorative Biographical Record of Washington County, Pennsylvania, Containing sketches of prominent and representative citizens, and of many of the early settled families (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co, 1893), [558 \(Joseph W\)](#).

Robert Sturgeon⁵ Robb:

A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and her people, 4 vols. ed. John W. Jordan (The Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), [4:130](#) or [4:130](#) (at FamilySearch)

Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania: Genealogical and Personal Memoirs, ed. John W. Jordan, (The Lewis Publishing Company, 1911), [2:972-975](#)

Laura Ellen⁶ Robb:

“A History of the Robb Family in Pennsylvania”—copy in my possession
A 23 page typescript research paper that covers the ROBB families of PA more comprehensively than just the WashingtonCo ROBBs. It does,, though, present evidence and argument tying them back to LancasterCoPA, and even suggests that John² and sibs are children of “widow Robb” of that place.