

When things go wrong

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SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

PastFinder

By Janet Brigham

The single comment I hear most often when I teach a family history class happens when some technology thing fails to work right. People invariably comment, with relief, that it does them good to see things going wrong for *me*, because things so often go wrong for *them*.

My tech glitches seem to help them not blame themselves. But usually we aren't to blame — when we work with technology, things go wrong.

Things go wrong even with older technology. Just the other day, one of the microfilm readers at our Family History Center became inoperable because a rubber band holding a part together snapped. Rubber bands get brittle and break. We don't yet know whether *inoperable* also means the entire machine can't be fixed.

'Use it up, wear it out'

Sometimes a device just wears out and can't be repaired. Once you have determined that is the case, the best you can do is find an environmentally appropriate way to recycle it. Usually just throwing it in the trash is not the best solution — look for recycling centers or check with the manufacturer.

'Make it do, or do without'

More often, the problem is addressable or — even better — preventable.

1. **Extra copies.** Preventing a problem can involve simple steps. Save a backup copy of your file or information onto a flash drive, so the only copy isn't on your computer. If your computer misbehaves, you'll still be able to work on or display your material on another computer.
2. **Backup equipment.** And if you don't have two laptops? You can use another computer, even one available at a library or Family History Center.



3. **Test it.** If you are planning a presentation, perhaps to show family photos or to help family learn more about their ancestors, arrange for a backup or alternate computer ahead of time and make sure it has software that runs your presentation.

If you are using a program such as PowerPoint, you can save a standalone version that runs without needing the full version of PowerPoint to be installed on the computer (in PowerPoint, save your presentation as a .pps file).

Doing database work? Family History Centers have computers available for family history use, with database software already installed.

4. **Stay calm.** If something does go wrong while you are using your computer to demonstrate or display

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something, don't panic. Chances are, you didn't cause it, and perhaps you can't fix it on the spot. Treat it as a teaching or learning moment.

Recently a teacher was starting a presentation when the presentation came up on the screen in bright pink. Pepto Bismol pink. Three of the brightest computer problem-solvers I know tried to solve it without success. So we all watched the presentation in bright pink. After a few minutes, we got used to pink. Later, one phone call to the projector manufacturer's technical support fixed the problem.

5. **Have a plan.** If you have a big project ahead, such as scanning a box of photos or writing something that's important to you, be sure the software is working, and be sure you have a backup plan to use in case you run into problems.

If you've set aside a day for scanning photos, don't end up spending the entire day trying to connect your scanner or figure out the scanning utility software. Set yourself up for success by setting it up ahead of time and testing it enough so that you will have the time you need for the project.

6. **Stay clean.** Another way to stave off disaster is to keep malware and viruses off your computer by using effective anti-virus and anti-malware software. If your computer gets infected anyway, and you cannot get rid of the problems by using the software, you might need to have it cleaned by a professional. On several occasions, technicians have found infectious items on a home or work computer of mine that has been protected by anti-virus and anti-malware software. An occasional good cleaning is like cleaning your carpet — no matter how often you vacuum, a carpet still needs cleaning.

Be vigilant. Learn to spot potentially dangerous email messages. Whether you know the sender or not, don't click on file attachments you aren't expecting. Be careful about clicking on links in a message. Look at the email address of the sender. For instance, if the message is purporting to be from a bank but is coming from a personal email address, don't click the link.

And never, ever think that a family member who isn't traveling seems to be stuck in a Tijuana jail and needing cash, or you've inherited/won/ been awarded oodles of money—particularly if you're required to send money to get money. Or if it's from Nigeria or is written oddly.

7. **Troubleshoot by searching.** My email client (email software, Mozilla Thunderbird) scrambled my email message headers and contents one day. Thunderbird is open-source software that isn't created by a company with a technical service department. I found the fix by doing a web search on some key terms (*garbled email thunderbird worked*) — evidently the problem happens often enough that the solution is posted in multiple online forums. Once I had the answer, it took less than a minute to repair.

8. **Anticipate problems.** My desktop PC started showing error messages one day indicating that the hard drive was at risk of failure. Sometimes unscrupulous companies infect a computer with messages just to drive traffic to their websites to buy software that supposedly will fix the problem (but might introduce new problems). I was skeptical.

In this case, we did some research (using another computer) and found that the error message appeared to be genuine. We completely backed up my computer (creating a **mirror backup**, which is as complete as an image in a mirror would be) before it failed, then had a new hard drive installed. Having a recent mirror backup will help a computer technician rebuild the contents of your computer.

A mirror backup copies everything on the computer without compressing (or shrinking) it, so the backup requires adequate storage space. An online storage service may be able to create a mirror backup for you.

9. **Have extras.** Don't assume everything will work when you need it. Years ago, I was working early one morning to finish a document before going to work, when my Mac mouse died. I had no other Mac mouse, and the interface required a mouse. I went to an office supply store when it opened at 8 a.m. and bought a Mac mouse so I

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When things go wrong (continued)

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could finish the document. (We had no Macs at work, only PCs that ran WordStar software, which I didn't have on my Mac.) The take-home message? Have extras of mission-critical items.

One Saturday at a recent SVC GG meeting, we found that we needed a particular type of cable to connect a laptop to a projector for one of the classes. The cable had been misplaced after a previous month's classes. To our surprise, two individuals in the group had the right cable in their computer bags. A third had one at home a few moments away. What a group! (The missing cable showed up later in another projector bag.)

We should have checked all the projector bags ahead of time — that's now on our checklist.

10. **Save often.** Even a functional computer or a program that has worked well in the past can act up, particularly at critical times. That's when your program might freeze, or your computer might freeze to the point that your mouse no longer works. Sometimes the power flashes off and on in your area, unexpectedly and disastrously.

Set programs such as word processors, presentation software, and database software to **back up automatically every few minutes**. This might result in your inadvertently copying over information that you wish you still had in its original form; but as soon as you realize that could be the case, save your file with a new file name, so the old file will be retained.

A more frequent problem is that the program freezes and you're unable to save your work. Some programs create a saved version automatically when software crashes; use that when it's available.

If you need to, set a kitchen timer or a timer on your computer or cell phone to remind you to save your work frequently. Your computer may have a reminder feature or gadget. After a while, saving will become a more automatic behavior.

11. **Get help.** Don't expect programs and comput-

ers to remain unchanged or to always work. If they don't work as they have in the past, or as they should, contact customer service or technical support. Also, look up the problem online. Even <gasp> read the users guide.

Once I approached a statistician about a challenge I was having with a database. With a few keystrokes she showed me how to accomplish what I wanted to do. I asked her how she had learned that. She glanced at me and replied, "I read the manual."

12. **Restart.** The ultimate home-grown solution to many computer freezes is to reboot the computer (or phone, or tablet, or whatever). Sometimes that does make the problem go away for the time being, but more importantly, it may give you time to search for a solution. And don't forget to check cable connections.

13. **Be fearless but not ruthless.** The late minister Edwin Louis Cole said, "You don't drown by falling in the water; you drown by staying there." Even if your technology isn't working correctly, don't just stay there. Work to find a solution, then implement it carefully. If you have a solid, reliable backup strategy in place, you can implement the solution without concern that you will lose everything on your computer. Also, let a technical support expert talk you through diagnosing the problem and implementing the fix.

14. **Ask experts.** For genealogy solutions, you can ask experts, including those associated with SVC GG. For technical issues, you can ask those who provide programs and hardware.

SVC GG still gets numerous questions about the discontinued Personal Ancestral File (PAF) software. In fact, SVC GG still gets questions about versions of PAF dating back more than 20 years. Most questions can be answered by our experts, but when that isn't possible, we also have connections to programmers who know it well.

Sometimes expert help is available through online tutorials and support lists. Programs including RootsMagic, Legacy Family Tree, and Ancestral Quest have online help, email and



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Indexing: Time to get (back on) the train

Those of us volunteers who indexed the 1940 U.S. Census had fun. We also had fun indexing the earlier censuses before the 1940 was available.


Remember the surge of interest you felt the first time you found a record online simply by searching on a name? If you also thought, *wow, this is so easy*, you might not have been aware that it was possible because thousands of volunteers just like us — and including us — worked our way from name to name through digital versions of original documents.

You easily can sign up to be a part of the SVC GG

indexing team, which is part of the worldwide FamilySearch indexing project. To start as an indexer, sign up at familysearch.org/indexing/ and let SVC GG know by email so that we can add you to the SVC GG indexing group.

To restart indexing, sign in and pick records to index (if necessary, you can retrieve your login and password at the login for FamilySearch.org).

Select a location and a project. Read the instructions and helps. Use Support if needed.

Wow, this is so easy. 

Whadya think this is?

Whadya think this is? (Answer is on page 8.)

- A. Official State of Texas Coffee Mug
- B. USB humidifier
- C. Chicago Red Star (women's soccer team) water bottle
- D. Official Chinese remote disk drive
- E. Portable firewall security system



When things go wrong (continued)

telephone customer support, and search users lists and forums.

For example, most personal database software programs have user-generated support lists. Refer to software websites or search for software mailing lists on Cyndi's List (cyndislist.com).


15. **Don't be overly patient.** If you encounter software or hardware that just doesn't work as it should, and you've tried to resolve the problems but can't, it's okay to give up on it.

An example: If you have tried but can't seem to learn Photoshop for managing digital images, try Photoshop Elements. If that still seems beyond you, try a program with a simple editor, such as Picasa or PicMonkey online.

Use the free trial versions of software to see how

well you like it. If you can't figure it out (even with tutorials and trials), use something else. If you already own the program, check for an upgrade. The problems may already have been fixed.

Don't be shy about factors such as readability. If the type is too small for you to read, and if it can't be adjusted, that program might not be the best for you. If every time you use it, you have to look up the instructions, something designed to be more intuitive might fit you better.

Whatever you encounter, don't just give up. If it's too late to prevent a problem, use problem-solving strategies. If it was, by some chance, your own fault, let the blame go; the goal is to move forward with workable tools. 



Ask the Doctor

Is GEDCOM safe?

Q I still don't know what I'm doing in my database software. I want to share my information online, and I see where I can "import a GEDCOM." What is GEDCOM? Is it safe to use? Are there alternatives to using GEDCOM?

GEDCOM is your friend. It is a simple, safe way for you to move information out of one personal genealogy database program and into another. It also lets you upload your information from your computer to an online tree on sites such as Ancestry.com, FindMyPast.com, MyHeritage.com, and others (see the back page of this issue for information about two free online tree sites).

A GEDCOM is a file format that transfers genealogy information from one program to another. You can create a GEDCOM file in a Mac Reunion program that can be opened in a PC Legacy Family Tree program. To learn the history, background, and technical details about GEDCOM, look it up online — even Wikipedia.org has a comprehensive article about GEDCOM. (If you are familiar with *Star Trek* or other science fiction, think *universal translator*.)

To **create a GEDCOM**, export one for use elsewhere, or import one, follow the instructions in your personal genealogy database. Be sure not to export confidential information about living people, or other information that your family has determined to keep private. This is a time when your First Amendment free expression isn't necessarily foremost.

If you have built a tree on Ancestry.com without having the information in your own database software, you can **export a GEDCOM of your Ancestry tree**. You may need to search online for instructions (the short version: go to your Ancestry tree, under *Tree Pages* select *Tree Settings*, then find and click on the green *Export Tree* button, then let it process a few seconds and click the green *Export a GEDCOM file* button).

Creating a GEDCOM usually starts with the Export feature, which usually is under the File pull-down menu. (Not always, but usually.) You'll need to name it and save it before you can share it.

You can email a GEDCOM file, upload it and post it online, and download someone else's GEDCOM.

The only caveat that the Doctor feels impressed to

explain involves **importing a GEDCOM**. Whenever you bring someone else's GEDCOM into your own personal database, you run the risk of importing poor information (as in junk genealogy or duplicate information). While you may personally know the person originating the information, and perhaps the person makes a fine lasagna or plays golf, the person might not have the best genealogy information. Importing a GEDCOM usually starts with the Import feature, which usually is under the File pull-down menu. You won't be able to import just part of it without some serious tinkering.


Never import someone else's GEDCOM directly into your own carefully constructed database. Instead, create

a temporary file where you can import the GEDCOM, check it out, and determine whether it's worth importing.

You can specify just how much of a GEDCOM to export from your own database. Most personal genealogy database programs have a filtering system that allows you to specify exactly the information to export. For example, if your database has multiple family lines, including those of your spouse, a cousin who asks for your information might not be interested in your spouse's ancestry. In that case, you can decide just what to export and which ancestors to leave out.

Once, when the Doctor was just starting to populate a personal genealogy database with information, a distant cousin mailed the Doctor a huge database of thousands of people who linked to the Doctor's family in the 1600s. This new database had not even one source and included people down to the present.

Wisely, the Doctor decided not to import the whole thing. Instead, the Doctor created a new database file and imported the big new undocumented GEDCOM. The Doctor thanked the distant cousin for the database but never linked it to the Doctor's database. The Doctor referred to the new file every so often for clues.

GEDCOM was developed decades ago when few genealogy database options were available. It has turned out to be a genius idea, worthy of at least a Top Ten Genealogy Ideas of the Century award, if not an actual Nobel prize. 



How I found it

The wrong information, gone viral

By Richard Rands

This is a curious case where many thousands of online tree creators have copied an undocumented tree from an online source, without regard to the validity of the data. This case appears to have “gone viral,” although little evidence exists to back it up. It is important to remember as you consider this case: “The absence of evidence is *not* evidence of absence!”

In the 1850 U.S. Census — the first census to enumerate everyone in the household — a man named Jessie F. Wixom appeared in Bureau County, Illinois. He was listed as 60 years old, born in New York, a carpenter. His name was followed by that of a 33-year old woman named Rebecca, presumably his wife, although relationships to the head of household were not indicated until the 1880 census).

Rebecca was listed as born in Ohio. After Rebecca’s name were listed five additional members of the household: 16-year-old Russel, born in Ohio; and 14-year-old Mary Jane, 10-year-old Martha Ann, 9-year-old Matilda, and 5-year-old Adaline, all born in Illinois. Russel was listed as “deaf and dumb.”

Before we look at Jessie’s entry in the 1860 U.S. Census, let’s explore the significance of the 1850 entry. Virtually all of the online trees that contain Jessie F. Wixom suggest that Rebecca was his second wife, whom he married in 1829, after the death of his first wife, a Mary Morecraft, who died in 1829.

Married at the age of 12?

The creator of what probably was the original entry at the online tree site has apparently used Rebecca’s age in the 1850 census, 33 years old, to calculate that she was born about 1817. However, whoever made that computation did not make note of the fact that being born in 1817 would make her 12 years old when she married Jessie in 1829—a detail that raised my curiosity in the first place.

Genealogists run into anomalies like this all the time. We usually suspect that the enumerator copied down the age incorrectly, or that the marriage date is

wrong. We then search for additional sources to try to discover better information. It is often a good idea to have some hypotheses in mind that will help focus the search.

In this case, one notion could be that Rebecca’s correct age could have been 43 or 53. Another notion might be that the marriage date was actually closer to the birth date of the oldest child, Russel, about 1834, based on his age of 16 in the 1850 census. Russel may not have been the first child born to Rebecca, but at least that scenario would have given her a few more years before being married.

A few of the online trees listed Rebecca’s birth year as 1793, without any documentation. That birth year would have her 36 years old at marriage, and only three years younger than Jessie—a nice resolution to the anomaly, but

one that raises another anomaly. The youngest child listed in the 1850 census, Adaline, was 5 years old, or born about 1845. Adaline would have been born when Rebecca was 52. As we say in genealogy, “Possible, but unlikely.”

My favorite method for validating this kind of anomaly is to look at the censuses prior to the 1850 census. The first U.S. Census was taken in 1790. The Constitution stipulates that a census be taken every 10 years, and we do have access to data from the censuses prior to the 1850. Unfortunately, from 1790 through 1840, only the name of the head-of-household was listed, with the rest of the members of the household tallied by sex and age.

In any case, we can take a look at all the Jessie Wixoms (and the usual variations in spelling) that appear in the 1840 U.S. Census anywhere in the country to see if any of them has a tally of household members whose ages correspond to ages in the 1850 census.

In this case, we see that based on the 1850 census listing, an entry in 1840 should contain at least one male age 50 (Jessie), and one male age 6 (Russel).



The invasive plant kudzu can choke a forest; bad research can choke family trees.

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How I found it (continued)

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Females in the household should include one female, age 23 or 47 (Rebecca, depending on a birth year of 1817 or 1793, the two undocumented ages in online trees), and one female, age 4 (Mary Jane). Martha Ann might or might not have been born at that point. If the online trees are correct and Rebecca was Jessie's second wife, it is possible that some of the children of his first wife were still in the household. These tallies are the minimum required for a good match.

In fact, of the several Jessie Wixoms in the 1840 census, not a single one contains the minimum tallies to match up with Jessie's 1850 listing.

Our Jessie F. Wixom could have been left out of the 1840 U.S. Census for several reasons. Extrapolating back to the 1830 U.S. Census, I found the same results—no entry for a Jessie Wixom that could match up to the 1850 results.

A next approach was to try to track down a death record or obituary for Rebecca. I located an entry at Find a Grave that could be that of Jessie's wife. The headstone is old and broken, but the top half contains the name Rebecca, and the bottom half says, "wife of F. Wixom." The cemetery is the Ottville Cemetery, in Hall Township, Bureau County, Illinois. Hall is the name of the township where the Wixom family lived.

Normally this type of record could resolve at least some of the questions. This particular headstone photo does little to help. In the photo online, the



This headstone, as pictured at FindaGrave.com, was not helpful because important information was obscured.

critical details of Rebecca's death are covered up by dirt and grass that was not moved aside when the photo was taken.

I contacted the individual who posted the photo to see if a new photo could be taken, but the response was that "the cemetery is on private property and there is no going back." Essentially, the last two digits of Rebecca's death date are covered up, and her age at death is covered up.

While I work on ways to find a better copy of the headstone details, I decided to follow one of Jessie's few surviving children in the hope that there might be useful clues in his records. What I found was two John Wixoms who could have been Jessie's son, but the one listed in all of the online trees link him to a father born in Tennessee, rather than New York where our Jessie was born.

The evidence was limited by online trees with wrong information, and a headstone overgrown with grass. Fortunately, a county historical society had a transcript of the headstone, recorded by someone who moved the grass aside. The society sent me a packet of information about the family. Sure enough, Rebecca was married at 18, not 12.

Follow Richard Rands online on The Chocolate-Powered Genealogist, where you also can learn what type of chocolate he ate as he wrote each blog entry: chocopowdgen.blogspot.com/ or bruteforcegenealogy.com/BLOG.html


Register for free October 10 seminar about ancestors' records

Registration is open for SVC GG's all-day October 10 seminar **Discovering Our Ancestors' Records**. You can register through our website, svcgg.org (click on the link to the registration site).

The seminar will be free and open to the public. Participants with any level of genealogy experience — from beginners to experts — are welcome. Preregistration is recommended to make sure that adequate seating and seminar materials can be provided.


The October 10 seminar will be at the Quince meetinghouse, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California, from 9 A.M. to 4:15 P.M.

Keynote speaker will be Rod DeGiulio, executive vice president for records at FamilySearch.

The schedule of seminar sessions and classes is at svcgg.org/pages/FamilyDiscoveryDay2015.html. Tracks are planned for genealogy beginners to experts. 

What didja think it was? Were ya right?

(Answer to question on page 2:) **B.** This is a Doulex USB-powered Mini Humidifier, with versions sold by such companies as Infmetry, Amazon, and Sears. The presumption is that most computer environments are dry (because of the air conditioning) and cause chapped lips and hands, so we all need this toy in our computer bags.

The online ad for this gadget states, "I am not a cup." 

Two free online tree websites to try

Two online tree sites won't cost you anything to sign up and use. One is geared mostly toward you as the user; the other aims to enable tree sharing.

FamilyEcho.com allows you to build a tree online by importing a GEDCOM (see page 4 of this issue), or by building it one per-

son at a time. You can upload and attach one photo for any person on your tree. It also is easy to download a GEDCOM, PDF, or other file type from the tree to your computer.

Sharing your FamilyEcho tree with others may involve their creating a tree and importing your GEDCOM.

Upcoming meetings

The Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group **meets monthly except December**, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 A.M. at the meetinghouse of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right).

12 September 2015, 9–11 A.M.


- Wills and administrations
- Scanning photos and documents
- Reunion 11 for the Mac
- Reunion 11 basics
- Getting started in genealogy

10 October 2015, 9 A.M.—4:15 P.M.

Seminar: Discovering Our Ancestors' Records

Keynote speaker: Rodney DeGiulio, executive director of Records at FamilySearch.

Register: svcgg.org (click on the red *To Register* link).

View the full seminar schedule: svcgg.org (click on the *Additional information* link below the red heading about the seminar). 

Famberry.com is a new free British entry into the online tree lineup. A new and improved version of Famberry should be available online soon, according to Famberry developers, resolving some functionality issues in the current version.

Users can upload a photo for each individual in the tree, modify details, and add new family members. Most importantly, the site allows you to send an email invitation to any living family member in the tree. You also can set their privileges to allow them to modify or delete information or to become an administrator.



About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVC GG, the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, is a nonprofit group of more than 500 genealogy users. We are based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California; members live all over the world.

SVC GG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family his-

PastFinder
First place, Major Society Newsletter, 2013-14
First place, Local Society Newsletter, 2012
National Genealogical Society

Website: www.svcgg.org

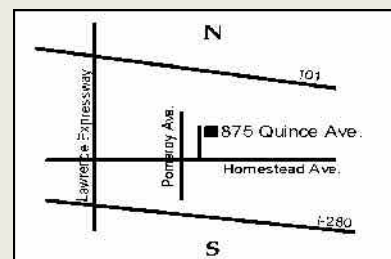
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Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance at the front.

torians improve their skills in using technology for genealogy research.

PastFinder is published monthly except December. It is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter digitally by emailed link. 