

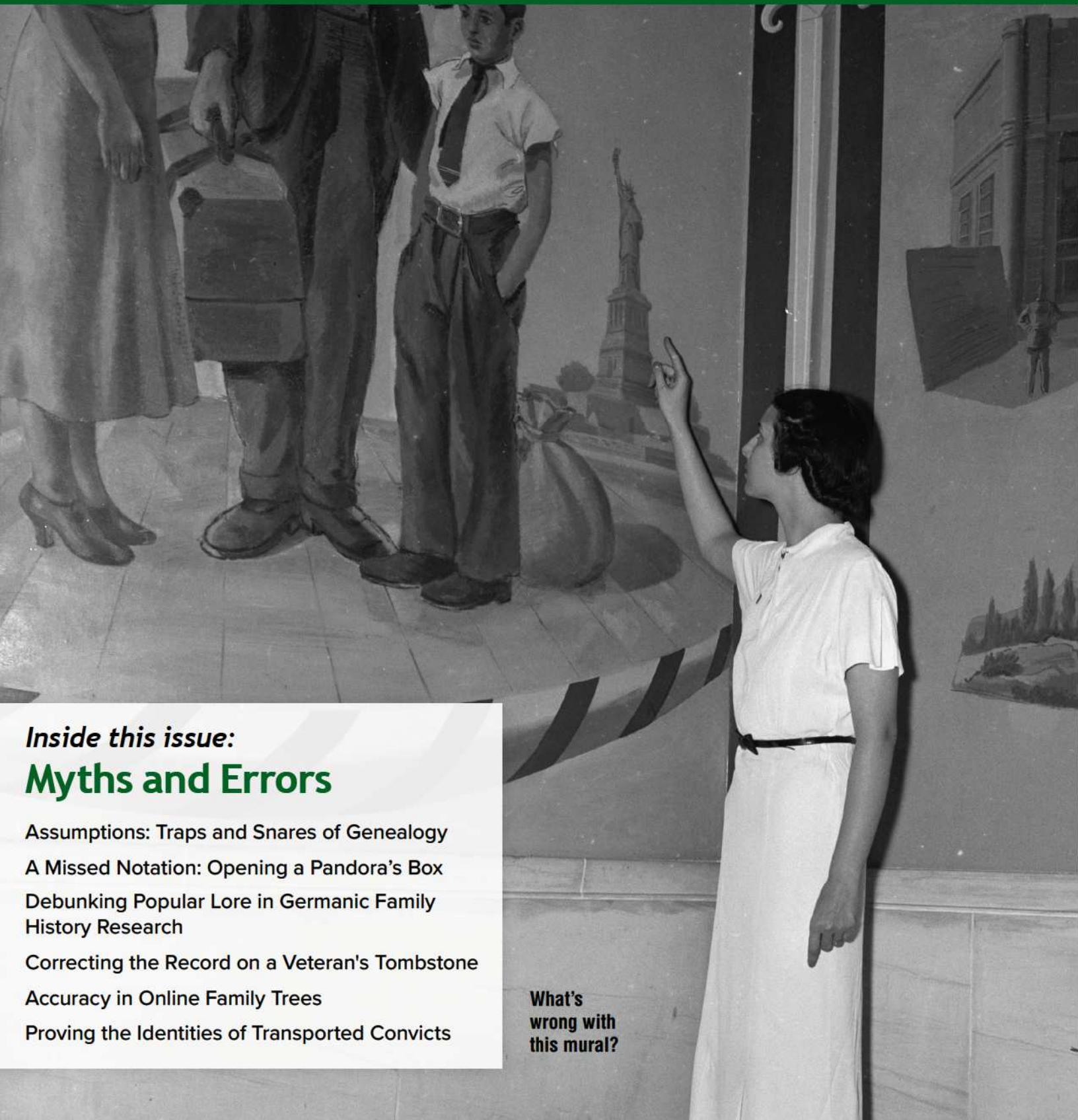


FOR GENERATIONS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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A Missed Notation: Opening a Pandora's Box

Tony Burroughs, FUGA

It was just a death certificate, reviewed numerous times—but a clerk's handwritten note had been overlooked. Upon reexamination, this one word opened a Pandora's box of genealogical information.

Morris Burroughs was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1864. He was a parlor car porter for the Chicago & Alton Railroad and died in Chicago on 15 December 1903. Notes in a little red book kept by Morris's son provide this biographical information.¹ The death certificate for Morris supplied by the Cook County Vital Records Office in Chicago contains his dates of birth and death, state of birth, address, length of residence in Chicago, cause of death, and the name of the undertaker.²

However, the death certificate was only the first step in a journey of discovery. A clue in the certificate led to another death record, Morris's prior residence and occupation, a possible relative, and details about the circumstances of his death. The tale of Morris's death certificate provides several lessons relevant to working with any records.

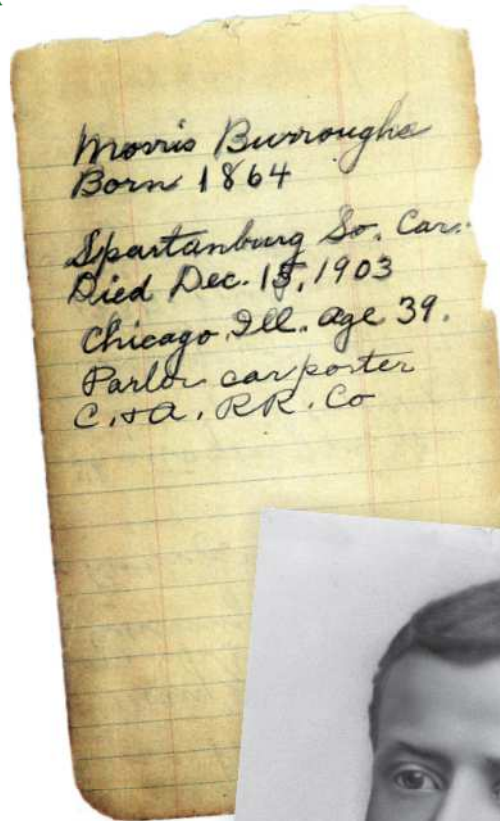
Study the entire document

Close examination of Morris's death certificate reveals a small handwritten word at the top: *Corrected*. The note could have easily gone unnoticed. Genealogists are excited when they obtain a document with new information and may overlook important clues. Be sure to read the record thoroughly and pay attention to every word.

Websites cited in this article were viewed on 25 May 2021.

1. Unnumbered page in handwritten notes on Asa Morris Burroughs' ancestors, recorded by Asa, son of Morris Burroughs, of Chicago, Illinois, in a little red book (notebook); inherited by Tony Burroughs.

2. Cook County, Illinois, Corrected Death Certificate 12908 (24170), Morris Burroughs (1903), Department of Health: City of Chicago.



A page from the little red book of notes by Asa Morris Burroughs, son of Morris. Photograph by the author.



Morris Burroughs. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Tony Burroughs, FUGA, has appeared in twenty-five national and international television programs and delivered over one hundred lectures at national genealogy and history conferences including sixteen keynote addresses. Tony researched Olympic gold medalist Michael Johnson's family history and consulted on the genealogies of Oprah Winfrey, Smokey Robinson, and Reverend Al Sharpton. His book, *Black Roots* (Simon & Schuster), was number one on *Essence* magazine's Bestseller List. He is also published by Random House and Oxford University Press.

Corrected death certificate for Morris Burroughs, 1903.

Original death certificate for Morris Burroughs, 1903.

Obtain the original record

Make efforts to acquire an image or photocopy of the original record. Many vital records are being computerized, and offices may provide only abstracts of information from the original documents. It is unlikely that a computer printout would include the word *corrected*.

Morris's corrected death certificate prompts two questions. What was corrected? Does the original death certificate exist?

A request for a copy of Morris's original death certificate prior to the correction was made to the Cook County Vital Records office. A clerk said it did not exist, and her supervisor agreed. However, the head of the department said the original death certificate was in a warehouse and it would take a few days to retrieve it.

Often cashiers and clerks are unfamiliar with requests beyond their daily business routines and uninformed about historical records. Don't hesitate to seek service from supervisors and heads of departments if a request is unusual, or if a clerk doesn't seem aware of the type of record sought.

Several days later, a microfilm printout of Morris's original death certificate arrived.³ Three affidavits were attached, all attesting to the fact that the original certificate contains an error. It states that Morris was born in Tennessee.

One affidavit is from Morris's widow, Mary Jane Lillie (Williams) Burroughs.⁴ The other two affidavits

Mary Burroughs affidavit, attesting to Morris's birth in South Carolina. The mark instead of college-educated Mary's signature suggests that the undertaker took care of the affidavit.

are signed by the physician and undertaker.⁵ Essentially, they all say the same thing. "An error was made in reference to the place of birth... the former Certificate should show the place of birth to be So. Carolina."

While it is unlikely that the undertaker and physician had firsthand knowledge of his birth, Morris probably told Mary he was from South Carolina. The little red book indicates that Morris was from Spartanburg, South Carolina, while Mary was from Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Beware of errors

Death certificates often have errors because they are created in stressful situations. Spouses and families are distraught over the death of loved ones. They also have to worry about paying funeral and

3. Cook County, Illinois, Death Certificate 12908, Morris Burroughs (1903), Department of Health: City of Chicago.

4. Cook County, Illinois, Department of Health: City of Chicago, 21 December 1903. Affidavit of Mary Burroughs, widow of Morris Burroughs.

5. Cook County, Illinois, Department of Health: City of Chicago, n.d. December 1903. Affidavit of John W. Lewis, MD, physician last in attendance of Morris Burroughs. Cook County, Illinois, Department of Health: City of Chicago, 21 December 1903. Affidavit of William M. Porter Jr., undertaker who buried Morris Burroughs.

cemetery expenses, notifying friends and relatives, possibly taking off work, and making sure out-of-town guests have meals and a place to stay. Details on government forms seem insignificant to grieving families.

Other errors occur because informants do not have accurate knowledge about the deceased person. Therefore, genealogists should be cautious about statements on death certificates. The only items of primary information on a death certificate are the date and location of death. Everything else is secondary and needs to be verified by other sources.

Unfortunately, most errors remain on death certificates and are not corrected. This was an unusual case, and it raised another question. How did the error occur? Mary knew Morris was from South Carolina. He still had relatives living in South Carolina when he died,⁶ and his son often talked about visiting South Carolina with his parents.⁷ Undoubtedly Morris and Mary took a train to visit his relatives. As a Pullman porter on the Chicago and Alton Railroad, he had traveling privileges.⁸



Mary Jane Lillie (Williams) Burroughs.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Develop a theory and search for records to back it up

Question the reasons for discrepancies and try to explain conflicting information. Did stress cause Mary to accidentally report her own birthplace, Tennessee, as her husband's birthplace? Or had Morris lived in Tennessee before relocating to

Chicago? After all, Morris and Mary had to have met somewhere. Mary attended Spelman College in Atlanta⁹, and they could have met in Spartanburg, Chattanooga, Atlanta, or Chicago.

Morris and Mary married in Chattanooga in 1888.¹⁰ The Chattanooga city directories provide a good starting point to test the hypothesis that Morris lived there before his marriage. Many directories are now online, and they are also found in local libraries and large libraries like the Library of Congress.¹¹

Morris Burroughs is not listed in the Chattanooga city directory from 1872 to 1885. In the 1886 directory, his name finally appears.¹² "Burroughs, Morris, *c*, wks Read House."

Just as exhilarating as locating ancestors is proving theories about where they lived. Genealogists develop numerous theories, and many do not pan out. This one did.

Understand the context of the records

The *c* next to Morris's name is not his middle initial. It stands for *colored*. Chattanooga was a segregated city in the South, and all African Americans in the directory are designated with a *c* next to their names.

Other city directories list Black residents in separate sections, not interfiled with White residents. Morris's relatives were missed in Spartanburg, South Carolina, city directories until it was discovered that they are not listed alphabetically with the White residents. "Colored Department" in the rear of the directories lists African Americans living in Spartanburg.

Wks is an abbreviation for *works*, in this case indicating Morris's employer, the Read House. Information about the Read House is located in the rear of the directory in the business section, which is like a classified business directory. The Read House

6. 1900 US census, Spartanburg County, South Carolina, pop. sch., Spartanburg, ED 108, p. 24A/252 stamped, dwell. 432, fam. 435, George Clemons household. George's wife Charlott was Morris's sister, her mother Ellen Burrough lived with them, and they had four children at the time. Two nieces are incorrectly reported as their children.

7. Burroughs family traditions regarding travels of Asa Morris Burroughs and father Morris Burroughs, as reported by Alma Irene Burroughs, Asa's wife. Tony Burroughs, compiler (manuscript notes, February 1976), privately held by Burroughs, Chicago, Illinois.

8. Pullman Company Archives, Office of Finance and Accounts, Auditor of Disbursements, Payroll Records 1887-1969, Morris Burroughs (August 1887); Newberry Library, Chicago.

9. *Fifth Annual Catalogue of the Spelman Seminary and Normal School for Women and Girls in Atlanta, Georgia, 1885-1886* (Atlanta: Constitution Publishing Company Printers, 1886), 14. Digital images, *Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library* (<https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.catalog:1885.01>).

10. Morris R. Burroughs and Mary J. L. Williams, 24 May 1888, marriage license register, page 464; Hamilton County Clerk, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

11. For more information on directories, see Terry Koch-Bostic, "City Directories: Antiquarian People Finders," *NGS Magazine* 45:2 (April-June 2019), 43-53.

12. C. W. Norwood, *Norwood's Directory of Chattanooga, Tennessee* (Chattanooga: Norwood, Connelly & Co., 1886), 120.

is a hotel on West 9th Street in Chattanooga, across the street from the site of the Union Depot. A large etching of it appears in an advertisement.¹³ The Read House is still in operation, but only a marker remains for the Union Depot.¹⁴

Use new information to develop and check new theories

Seeing an illustration of the hotel where Morris worked was as electrifying as learning that he had lived in Chattanooga. But how did he get the job as a Pullman porter in Chicago?

Pullman Company payroll records show that Morris was living in Chicago and working as a Pullman porter in 1887, the year after his listing in the 1886 Chattanooga city directory.¹⁵

It is possible he got the job contact from another Pullman porter who came to the Read House, or a porter Morris met when he walked across the street to the Union Depot.


Still another question is how Morris met Mary Williams, his bride to be. Since they married in Chattanooga in 1888, and he lived there in 1886, that is apparently where they met.

In 1884, James Burris is listed in the Chattanooga directory as a gardener, living in the rear of 310 Grove: the address of Lee and Malachi Williams, Mary's brothers.¹⁶ James could have been the connection between Morris and Mary, and further investigation may show that he was a previously unknown Burroughs relative of Morris.

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Advertisement for Read House, Norwood's Directory of Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1886-1887.

Follow every clue

The original death certificate reveals more information than the different place of birth. The corrected death certificate indicates that Morris died of tuberculosis, the leading cause of death at the turn of the twentieth century. The original death certificate states that he had tuberculosis for eight months. Morris did not die suddenly but suffered with this debilitating disease for months, implying that his family agonized over his illness, and he may have been hospitalized.

The Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Chicago opened in 1915, twelve years after Morris died.¹⁷ Records from Cook County Hospital are at the Illinois State Archives, but

the volume for 1903 does not list Morris's name. He could have been hospitalized at another institution or his family could have cared for him at home.¹⁸

Conclusion

Study every record thoroughly and look for handwritten notations added to a document. If a notation is found, try to determine what it means. It may lead to an additional record.

If errors or discrepancies appear, locate the original document. Understand the context of the records and consider reasons for the error. Use these disparities to develop theories and search for records to prove or disprove them.

Paying attention to added notations might open a Pandora's box of genealogical information. 🌳

13. *Norwood's Directory of Chattanooga, Tennessee*, 89.

14. *The Read House 1872* (<https://www.thereadhousehotel.com>); Gilbert E. Govan, "The Chattanooga Union Station," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 29:4 (1970), 372-378.

15. Pullman Company Archives, Payroll Records 1887-1969, Morris Burroughs (August 1887).

16. C. W. Norwood, *Norwood's Directory of Chattanooga, Tennessee* (Chattanooga: Norwood, Connelly & Co., 1884), 63, James Burris; 254, Lee and Malachi Williams.

17. Theodore Bernard Sachs, "The Municipal Control of Tuberculosis in Chicago: City of Chicago Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium, Its History and Provisions" (Chicago, 1915), 68. Digital images, *HathiTrust* (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001587876>).

18. Most tuberculosis patients at this time remained at home. Edward O. Otis, *The Great White Plague* (New York: Crowell & Co., 1909), 118. Digital images, *Internet Archive* (<https://archive.org/details/greatwhiteplague00otis>).