

CALENDAR CONFUSION

Those of us actively pursuing the genealogy, as well as the history, of our ancestors will eventually find ourselves in the "calendar maze." How could one of our great-grandmothers be baptized before she was born? Why are dates written as if they are two years, i.e. 1735/6? Why are dates abbreviated, i.e. 2d 7ber 1730? What does a date written 18 : 12 mo. 1666 mean?

Reviewing the steps in the development of the calendar might be the key to understanding dates in Colonial America.

Julius Caesar conquered Egypt in the winter of 48-47 B.C. and put Cleopatra on the throne. While among the Egyptians, he learned of the simplicity of their calendar and hoped to make the one in Rome more like it. In 45 B.C., Caesar brought Sosigenes, an astronomer, from Egypt to Rome to aid in revising the Roman Calendar. Caesar declared the year to be 365 days and 6 hours long, and divided it into twelve months with a specific number of days in each, thus ending the authority of Pontifex Maximus to change them from time to time.

The first day of January was the beginning of the year. To make the days come out right, an extra day was added in February every fourth year. The extra day was not added at the end of the month, but rather made two days of what we call the 24th of February. In the Roman Calendar, it was called "sextile calendae." The extra day was called "bisextile." Hence, what was later known as leap year was called a "bisextile" year.

Although the Julian Calendar was widely used, the practice of starting the new year on January 1 was not. With the spread of Christianity, December 25 was celebrated throughout most of Europe as the birthday of Christ. Many countries adopted this date as the beginning of the new year.

The Julian Calendar, with a few revisions, remained in effect in most of Europe for many centuries. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., called by Constantine I, the first Christian ruler of the Roman Empire, established the day for celebrating Easter as the first Sunday after the first full

moon after the 21 of March. In 325 A.D., the vernal equinox fell on March 21.

During the Middle Ages, the adoration of the Virgin Mary grew and the Feast of the Annunciation, often called Lady Day, was celebrated on March 25, the supposed day of Mary's conception. This day became the beginning of the new year in many countries.

In England, December 25 was the first day of the year from Anglo Saxon times until the reign of Henry II (1154-1189) when March 25 became the official beginning of the new year.

By the 16th century, dissatisfaction with the calendar, including the date for beginning the new year, had become evident. In 1532, Holland declared the beginning of the new year to be January 1. Spain did the same in 1556, the Holy Roman Empire in 1558, France in 1567, and Geneva, a protestant nation, in 1575.

By 1582, Pope Gregory XIII was convinced that Julius Caesar had erred by approximately 11 minutes in establishing the length of the year. The vernal equinox was falling 10 days earlier than in the 4th century. There was fear that, if something was not done to correct this error, Easter, a traditional Spring holiday, would someday come in the middle of the year. The Pope, in that year, ordered adjustments which became known as the Gregorian Calendar. In order to put the vernal equinox back to March 21, the Pope ordered that October 4, 1582 be followed by October 15, 1582. He declared that the new year would thereafter begin on the first day of January. In order to compensate for Caesar's error in the length of the year, he ordered that of those years ending at the ends of the centuries (1600, 1700, 1800, etc.), only those divisible by four hundred, would be leap years. Thus, 1600 was a leap year, while 1700 was not. Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, and France adopted the new calendar at once.

Readers of English history know that the British monarch and the Pope were not on friendly terms in those days, so England

Calendar Confusion, continued:

did not adopt the new calendar at that time. Scotland made January 1 the first day of the year in 1600, but did not adopt the Gregorian Calendar until 1752.

Over the next 170 years, England and all her colonies continued using the Julian Calendar, and this difference between the two calendars led to much confusion. In fact, it was not uncommon to see (N.S.) and (O.S.) after a date meaning "new style" and "old style."

The American colonists were great abbreviators and used numbers in abbreviating the months of the year. Remember in those days March was the first month and February was the twelfth month. Such abbreviations appear in colonial documents as 9ber for September and Xbr for December. In order to clarify the proper year, dates between January 1 and March 25 were often written "1733/34" indicating 1733 according to the Julian Calendar and 1734 according to the Gregorian Calendar.

In 1751, Parliament adopted the Gregorian Calendar, making January 1 the first day of 1752. Since March 25 was the first day of 1751 and December 31 was the last day of that year, there were no months of January or February or days one through twenty-four in March, 1751. To make up the eleven days difference in the calendars, including the extra day created because the year 1700 had only 365 days in the Gregorian Calendar, Parliament declared that "the day following September 2, 1752 shall be called the 14th day of September 1752."

Because of the confusion created by the use of two calendars in different countries, dates between January 1 and March 24 often indicate both years.

The calendar we use today is a combination of the ancient Roman Calendar, which gives us the names for its twelve months, and the Egyptian Calendar with its twelve orderly months, each with 30 days and five extra days which were not part of any month.

Now dates can be copied exactly as they appeared in early documents with confidence that they will be understood or easily explained.