

"THE 1752 CALENDAR CHANGE in North America," by William Dollarhide

Genealogically, dates are critical in confirming that a person lived at a certain time, fathered children at a certain time, or was born, married, or died at a certain time. Therefore, if a date cannot be trusted, the genealogical event may not be valid. For example, if you have evidence that a man had died 10 months before a certain child was born, it would seem to exclude that man as the potential father of that child. But, if the calendar dates changed during the man's life, it will be necessary to be very precise in determining the exact date of death--and he may qualify as the potential father after all. Therefore, an understanding of the change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar is important to genealogists.

If you had ancestors living under British rule in 1752, you need to be aware of the calendar change that took place that year. The dates you find on documents around 1752 and later might be different from what you would expect--in fact, you might discover that a date was off by several months.

By an act of Parliament, the British government adopted the Gregorian calendar, effective September 1752, and the change was implemented in all of the British colonies in North America. The British were one of last of the European countries to adopt the calendar change, which had been in place in most of Europe since 1582. In that year, Pope Gregory XIII decreed that the new calendar would be followed thereafter, and the change took place in all of the Catholic countries of Europe.

1582 Changes--Julian to Gregorian Calendar:

Three significant calendar changes took place in 1582 as a result of Pope Gregory XIII's decree:

1. Drop 10 days from October 1582, to realign the Vernal Equinox with March 21st. The Julian calendar, first adopted by Julius Caesar for the Roman Empire in 45 BC, had an annual error factor of .00636 days. From 45 BC to 1582 AD, the correct day of the Vernal Equinox using the Julian calendar fell behind by a full 10 days.
2. Reduce the number of possible leap years. In the Julian calendar, a leap year occurred every four years. By reducing the number of leap years, the Gregorian calendar was able to more closely align the Vernal Equinox over centuries. The change was to make leap years for years ending in "00," but only if the number could be divided evenly by 400. The year 2000 was a leap year ($2000/400=5$), while the year 1900 was not ($1900/400=4.75$).
3. Change the first day of the year from March 25th to January 1st. This was the most dramatic change from the Julian to Gregorian calendar. Traditionally, the new year was determined by the beginning of the four seasons, and through several

centuries the first day of Spring in the Julian calendar was on or about March 25th.

The Protestant countries of Europe did not go along with Pope Gregory's decree in 1582. The lowland regions of Belgium (then part of Holland), and the northern German states, for example, were made up of Protestant Palatines, Calvinists, or Lutherans. These groups did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1700.

The British Adopt the New Calendar:

By the time the British finally adopted the new calendar in 1752, the correction needed to bring the Vernal Equinox back into alignment was 11 days. Britain's parliament chose to drop 11 days from the month of September, 1752, eliminating days 3 to 13. Thus, the first week in September 1752 jumped from Wednesday 2nd to Thursday 14th. They also declared that the first day of 1753 would be January 1st, making the English year of 1752 its shortest in history, only 280 days long.

George Washington's Birthday:

Today, we use the Gregorian calendar to determine George Washington's birthday, which took place in Westmoreland County, Virginia, on 22 February 1732. But at the time of his birth the Julian calendar was in effect, and the first day of the year was March 25th, not January 1st, so he was born 22 February 1731. His mother, Mary Ball Washington, lived her entire life believing her son was born on 22 February 1731. (She lived to see her son's inauguration as President in April 1789, but died later that year.)

Double Dating:

Right after the calendar change took place in British territory, people began writing dates between January 1st and March 25th both ways, reflecting the "Old Style" (O.S.) and the "New Style" (N.S.), which genealogists may find indicated in old records from September 1752 forward. George Washington may have indicated his date of birth in a letter written after September 1752 by writing February 22, 1731/2, or "double dating."

Double dating applies to a date between January 1st and March 25th. As a genealogist, any date you find in old records before 1752--and between January 1st and March 24th, inclusive--should be expressed as a double date. The authors of the documents did not do it for you in most cases. There may have been some anticipation of the calendar change in the British North America before 1752, but in most cases, finding a date written as 22 February 1731/2 is rare. What was written was the Julian date of 22 February 1731. After 1752, the use of double dating was widespread in the old documents.

Check the Dates!

For genealogists researching in British North American records before 1752, any date found on a document and dated January 1st through March 24th is one year off. Let's say you find a will for your great-great-great-grandfather, dated 12 March 1734. But by being a good genealogist, you find another will, or codicil, which changes the first will. Your ancestor left two documents, one giving everything to his five sons. But the second document was dated 27 March 1735, and you think you have learned that your ancestor died after the second document was signed, or about a year after the first will. The fact is, the documents were signed only 15 days apart. The 12 March 1734 document was signed before the first of the new year, which occurred on March 25th. So, March 27th was in 1735, but only 15 days later than March 12, 1734.

In the Julian calendar, March 24, 1734 was followed by March 25, 1735. March was also identified as the First Month, so a date may be expressed in records before 1752 in various ways, such as 1st-3-1734, 3-1st-1734, or even 3-7ber-1734 or 3-8ber-1734 for September and October.

The Latin names for some months relate to their position in the Julian calendar, not the Gregorian calendar. Thus, October, which is a word based on the Latin number eight (octo), makes sense in the old Julian calendar but not in the current one, where October is the 10th month.

Exceptions in North America:

Genealogists should be aware that certain groups in early America may have adopted the Gregorian calendar before 1752, even in British-controlled territory. Thus, when a Reformed Church record in a German settlement in America is used for genealogical research, the date needs to be confirmed--were those Germans using the Gregorian calendar or Julian calendar? For example, the Protestant Palatine Germans had adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1700, well before their migration to America.

Other non-British ethnic groups settling in America before 1752 may have already adopted the Gregorian calendar. Dutch settlers along the Hudson River in New York and northern New Jersey were already using the Gregorian calendar when they came to America. After 1660, when the English took over the Dutch settlements, the civil and church recorders of the Dutch towns continued the use of the Gregorian calendar, even though the British governed their settlements and had not yet adopted the Gregorian calendar. Since most of Holland had been using the new calendar since 1583, it had become their standard for calendar dating long before they came to America.

Quaker Dates:

The English Quakers who migrated to the Delaware Valley from about 1675 to 1725 left good indications of the Julian calendar in their Meeting records. In keeping with the Quakers' desire to divest themselves of any practice of the Church of England, they did not like to use the names of the months (which were mostly named after pagan gods by the Romans). So the Quakers created their own way of expressing a month, as the 1st month, 2nd month, 3rd month, and so on.

In written Quaker Meeting records, a date was almost always shown in the order of year, month, and day, e.g., 1732, 3rd mo, 24th day. What is interesting is that some Quaker records before 1752 show double dating, e.g., 1746/7. Why the Quakers were double dating years before 1752 is not known, but it clearly means they were recognizing both the old style and new style dating. Therefore, before September 1752, when any Quaker date includes a reference to a month by its numbered position, genealogists must count the months in the Julian calendar, not the Gregorian, e.g., 1746, 3rd mo, 28th day, would translate to 28 May 1746 in the Julian calendar. After September 1752, the Quakers, like other Americans, began writing their dates based on the Gregorian calendar, but adding double dates for the year, e.g., 1755/6, 3rd mo, 22nd day, which would be the same as 22 March 1756.

In some cases, confusion about whether a Quaker date is Julian or Gregorian needs to be confirmed by looking at many dates recorded in the same record book. For example, if a genealogist finds a Quaker date expressed as the 7th month, 31st day, you would know that it refers to July, the 7th month in the Gregorian calendar, which indeed has 31 days; while an indication of the 7th month in the Julian calendar would represent the month of September, a month with 30 days.