

"1752--A VERY IMPORTANT DATE," by Carolyn Barkley

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I recently edited a book for a family history author whose text stated that an individual was born 8 February 1722. His footnote, however, in citing the source for the date, included the notation "second month 8th 1722." This notation, when applied, meant that the birth date for this individual was actually 8 April 1722. This error in date translation made me think that we could all benefit from a refresher in the change from the old calendar (Julian) to the new (Gregorian) so that we date our ancestry correctly. The following information is adapted from a January 2006 "Genealogy Pointers" article by William Dollarhide:

Genealogically, dates are critical in confirming when a person was born, married, died, and participated in events. If a date cannot be trusted, the genealogical event may not be valid. If you have evidence that a man had died ten months before a certain child was born, it would seem to exclude that man as the potential father of that child. If the calendar dates, however, had changed during the man's life, it would be necessary to be very precise in determining the exact date of death. He might qualify as the potential father after all. The ability to make these precise date determinations relies on an understanding of the change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian.

The English government, by an act of Parliament, adopted the Gregorian calendar effective September 1752, and the change was implemented in all of the British colonies in North America. (To confuse things for British Isles researchers, the Scots had adopted the new calendar as of 1 January 1600, so between then and 1752 when it was 18 May in Scotland, it was only 7 May in England.) The British were one of the last of the European countries to adopt the calendar change, which had been in place in most of Europe since 1582, the year that Pope Gregory XIII decreed a new calendar that was adopted by the Catholic countries of Europe.

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

1. Ten days were dropped from October 1582 to realign the vernal equinox with March 22nd and to correct an annual error in dating the equinox in the Julian calendar from its inception under Julius Caesar in 45 BC.
2. Reduction in the number of possible leap years. The Julian calendar included a leap year every four years. By reducing this number, the realignment with the vernal equinox became more closely aligned over the centuries. The change called for leap years for years ending in "00," but only if the number could be divided evenly by 400.
3. Change the first day of the year from March 25th to January 1st. This change was the most dramatic and the one that causes researchers the most problems.

By the time the English finally adopted the new calendar in 1752, the correction needed to bring the vernal equinox into alignment was eleven days. Parliament chose to drop eleven days from the month of September 1752, eliminating days three to thirteen. Thus, the first week in September 1752 jumped from Wednesday the 2nd to Thursday the 14th. In addition, they 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.

Right after this change took place, people began writing dates between January 1st and March 25th so that they reflected the old style (O.S.) and the new style (N.S.). For example, George Washington, writing a letter after 1752, would have referred to his birthday as February 22, 1731/2.

Any date a genealogist finds in old records before 1752, and between January 1st and March 24th inclusive, should be expressed as a double date.

A rule of thumb for genealogists researching British North American records prior to 1752 is that any date found on a document and dated January 1st through March 24th is one year off. For example: You find a will for your great-great-great-grandfather dated 12 March 1734, and then find a codicil dated 27 March 1735. It might appear that your ancestor died about a year after he wrote the first document. Actually, the two documents were written fifteen days apart. The 12 March 1734 document was written prior to the first of the new year which occurred on March 25th. March 27th, then, was in 1735, only fifteen days after March 12th. To put it more clearly, 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. Thus October, which is a word based on the Latin for the number eight (octo), makes sense in the Julian calendar, but not in the Gregorian where October is the tenth month.

Think you've got it? Well, there are always exceptions. Some groups in early America may have adopted the Gregorian calendar before 1752, even in British-controlled territory. 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 or the Julian 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 in Dutch towns continued to use the Gregorian calendar despite the British government's use of the Julian calendar for almost an additional one hundred years.

If you would like even more information about the "great change of 1752," you may want to look at Kenneth L. Smith's "Genealogical Dates: A User-Friendly Guide" (Picton Press, 1994) or check out the following websites:

[www.norbyhus.dk/calendar/html](http://www.norbyhus.dk/calendar/html). This site includes a table with a long list of countries and the last date of the Julian and first date of the Gregorian calendar for each. Not all revolve around the 1582 or 1752 dates. Croatia's last Julian calendar date is 30 September 1923 and their first Gregorian calendar date is 14 October 1923.

[www.tngenweb.org/sullivan/pcalendar.htm](http://www.tngenweb.org/sullivan/pcalendar.htm). This site is a quick converter fo