

Using Unclaimed Letter Lists as Resources

by Paula Gammell

One often sees lists of unclaimed letters published in old newspapers: the addressee is given notice to pick up their letters else they will be sent to the main Post Office as dead.

Can anything helpful be gleaned from these lists? I think so.

First: Realize that the *presence* of their name on a list suggests that they lived here...or at least they had at one time. Now, that's not a 100% certainty – maybe the letter was just misdirected – but I do believe it is a reasonable conclusion to draw.

Second: Think of reasons why they did not pick up their mail. Ok, maybe they just forgot. But could there have been any other reasons?

Well, consider the possibilities that the person had either moved away or died.

Let's take a hypothetical unclaimed letter list from 1835 and a couple of hypothetical situations:

- Let's say your ancestor is in the 1830 census here in Tennessee and by the 1840 census is in another state. He must have moved away between 1830-40, but you'd like to narrow down that date. So the presence of his name on an 1835 unclaimed letter list suggests – *suggests* – that he was gone from here by 1835; he hadn't picked up his mail because he was no longer here.

- Let's say your aged ancestor is in the 1830 census here but not in 1840 or later. He must have died between 1830-40, but you'd like to narrow down that date. So the presence of his name on an 1835 unclaimed letter list suggests – *suggests* – that he died by 1835; he hadn't picked up his mail because he had died.

Third: Remember that records giving the names of women and children especially prior to the 1850 census are scant. Well...maybe women and children weren't named in censuses – but they could have received mail!

More hypotheticals using our hypothetical 1835 list:

- Let's say you don't know when your ancestress married. So the presence of her maiden name on an 1835 list suggests – *suggests* – she was unmarried in 1835. Conversely, the presence of her name with a "Mrs." prefix... well, that does more than *suggest* – that *proves* she was married by 1835.

- Let's say you know your ancestor had a child but don't know whether it died in infancy or survived. So the presence of that child's name on an 1835 unclaimed letter list suggests – *suggests* – that it was still living in 1835.

Of course none of this is *proof*. But it might just be the clue you need – perhaps it will confirm your suspicions, enable you to narrow down your search parameters, or even point you in a new direction.

So when you find a list of unclaimed letters, ask yourself why they were unclaimed. Think what the possible answers might be and then consider whether those possible answers will help you.

And, remember, you can find lots and lots of help in the pages of *East Tennessee Roots*!