

Overview

If you've worked in FamilySearch's Family Tree for any length of time, you've probably come across at least one tangled family. You might see too many spouses or children, illogical dates (like a child born before her parents), or conflicting sources. Sometimes the problems extend over multiple generations and can become quite convoluted.

How do you clean up these sticky problems? There's no magic formula, but there are best practices you can follow to reduce the chance of error and make the repair process go more smoothly.

Determine Intended Identity

FamilySearch's Family Tree is a shared tree. Users are working together to document the human family. It's an ingenious idea, but it introduces a problem that didn't exist when people only kept individual trees.

When someone creates a record for a person in a genealogy application (for example, RootsMagic) or on a genealogy website (such as Ancestry.com or Family Tree), they intend that record to represent a certain human being. In an individual tree, that identity stays the same over time.

However, in a shared tree, other users can actually change someone's intended identity through incorrect merges and wrong relationships. So an important step in untangling sticky problems is to use the change log to determine the person's intended identity when they were first created in the system. That identity then serves as a baseline for making the necessary corrections to fix the problem.

Diagnose the Problem Correctly

Speaking of fixing the problem, it's important to diagnose it correctly. Here's an example. Several incorrect merges were made to a record in Family Tree for a man named Samuel Hibbert. In the process, he gained a number of children who weren't really his. As it happened, their birth dates were after his death date.

A user found this badly-merged record and saw the data errors indicating that some children were born after Samuel's death. Without looking into the cause of the data errors, the user concluded the death date was wrong and removed it. However, the death date was

correct! The real solution in this case was to undo the wrong merges and disconnect the children that didn't belong.

The Fixing Process

At a high level, the repair process usually involves three steps:

1. Fix incorrect merges.
2. Fix incorrect relationships.
3. Fix incorrect information and sources.

1. Fix Incorrect Merges

Once you've determined the intended identity of the person you're cleaning up, you're ready to repair any bad merges. All merges are shown in the person's change log. Keep in mind that there may be merges within merges.

If no changes have been made to a person since a merge, the change log shows an Unmerge button on the merge entry, and fixing the bad merge is as simple as one click. Both persons are returned to their pre-merge state.

However, once changes have been made—which is usually the case with sticky problems—the Unmerge button is no longer available. (Family Tree can't tell what to do with changes made since the merge—do they belong to the surviving person or the other one?) So instead of unmerging, it's necessary to restore the person deleted by merge.

When you restore a person deleted by merge, only that person goes back to their pre-merge state. *The surviving record stays the same.* That means any errors on the survivor must be fixed manually (see steps 2 and 3 below).

It is often helpful to go to the beta version of Family Tree (<https://beta.familysearch.org/tree>) to restore or unmerge persons who were deleted by merge because more complete information is displayed after the restore or unmerge. You can then determine each restored person's intended identity. If it's not the same as the identity of the person you're cleaning up, you can return to regular Family Tree and restore or unmerge their record there.

2. Fix Incorrect Relationships

If you restored a person (rather than unmerging), review the restored person and clean up any wrong relationships you may find there. Wrong relationships may have contributed to the incorrect merge in the first place.

3. Fix incorrect information and sources

It's a good idea to review both records carefully. Fix any incorrect vital or other information and detach any incorrect sources. Attaching correct sources can help prevent incorrect merges in the future.

Success Tips

As you go through the repair process, keep these tips in mind:

1. **Prioritize.** You can't fix everything, and that's okay!
2. **Be methodical.** Follow a process, and take notes on what you've done and what you need to do.
3. **Be part of the solution** (not part of the problem).
 - a. Don't assume.
 - b. Use what you know to discover what you don't know.
 - c. Don't merge unless you're sure.
 - d. Do your best to add accurate information to Family Tree.

Following these tips make the entire process easier and less error-prone. And remember, as you build your skills, untangling gets easier!

Final Thoughts

Untangling problems in Family Tree can be time-consuming and even frustrating. But it can also be deeply satisfying to help fix and prevent errors.

The slide deck for this presentation is [available here](#).