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929.3748 PA LANCASTER

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IMMEDIATELY SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE  
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## **DNA Testing Tearing Down Those Brick Walls**

**By Adrian Williams**  
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There is one simple fact of life that every genealogist faces: there are brick walls out there and we run into them, often with few or no options to get around them. Many times, those brick walls vary. For someone with a common surname, the wall is a bit obvious...Williams is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most common surname in the United States. That translates to over 2 million people currently living in this country with the same last name. How do you sort all of those people out to determine who your ancestors are, especially when there is a common recurrence of the same given name, such as George and John and Samuel? For many others, the most common brick wall is the lack of documentation. Wars, disasters and fires have not been kind to the storehouses of information that have been kept since our colonial infancy. These events have left many of us facing a brick wall of not being able to prove ancestry because the records no longer exist.

However, all is not lost. There is a new resource in the genealogist tool box; DNA testing. DNA testing itself has been around for quite a few years and has been most noticeable in the venue of law and justice. It has been only relatively recent that

, DNA testing has been focused on genealogy. The most popular genealogical DNA testing facility, Family Tree DNA (<http://www.familytreedna.com>) began in early 2000 and to date has over 800 surname projects underway. The dramatic increase in participation in these studies is a true testament to their success.

We get our DNA makeup from our parents, who each donate a set of chromosome during conception. The father donates the critical chromosome which determines our sex. If the father passes the x-chromosome, the child will be a female while males receive the y-chromosome. The y-chromosome is extremely resistant to change which means that it is passed nearly intact from father to son, generation after generation. In essence, as a male, I carry the same y-chromosome that my 9<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather received from his father. It is this stability in the y-chromosome which makes it so useful for a significant majority of DNA testing.

An individual test, in itself, does not provide any useable genealogical information. The results of that test need to be compared to other test to find a "match" or someone else who has the same markers in their y-chromosome usually someone with the same surname. When two people "match" or have the same marker values, they are said to descend from the same common ancestor. The test will not tell them which ancestor they descend from or when their ancestor was living. The best that we can determine is that we shared a common ancestor within x-number of generation. The number of generations is determined by the level of test taken. There are three primary y-chromosome tests offered (by Family Tree DNA), the 12- marker, the 25-marker and the 37- marker. The number of generations is determined mainly by the test kit that was taken. The more the markers (and hence the better match) the closer the probability lies. For example, if two people match 12 for 12, then there is a 90% probability that they share a common ancestor within 48 generations and a 50% probability that the ancestor was shared within 14 generations. However, with the 25-marker test, those probabilities get much better. If two people match 25 for 25, the probability improves to 90% within 23 generations and 50% within 7 generations. The 37-marker test narrows these probabilities down even further.

So the question that begs to be asked is "How does this benefit my research...what can I prove with a bunch of markers?" Here is a true example from the Williams project ([Http://williams.genealogy.fm](http://williams.genealogy.fm)). Sherrod Williams (b. ca 1776 and settled in TN) had a large number of children. For years, researchers have been trying, with very limited success, to determine which Williams' were actually descended from or related to him. In the project, a number of known Sherrod Williams descendants were tested. Also tested were

people thought to descend wither from Sherrod or one of his siblings. When the results came in, and the results matched (i.e. participant 1's markers matched those of participant 2; basically, they have the same Y-chromosome), a number of "thought-to-be" connections were proven, the first being the tenuous connections between Sherrod and two of his children. Another connection made was a line that descended from Phillip Williams. They thought for years that they were related to Sherrod, as either father, brother or uncle, but couldn't find any documentary proof. Their matching results proved that they were, in fact, related to Sherrod. The proving works the other way around as well. A participant was sure that he descended from Sherrod Williams. His results were not even a close match, which lets him now that somewhere along the way, his research has taken a wrong turn, which is not necessarily a bad thing; how many years would he have lost by chasing down the wrong path?

Do you have to have a known possible connection to gain any value from the testing? As our own project has also proven out, the answer is no. The very real possibility exist that your test will match another family line that no one knew existed, opening the doors to new connections and a greater likelihood of successful research.

The key to success, especially in the projects with common surnames and hundreds of family lines, lies in the volume of participants; the more participants, the greater likelihood of matching. There are a number of ways to become involved. Men can participate directly in the various surnames studies. Women can also participate via a brother, uncle, male cousin, etc. The costs are reasonable, especially when one stops to consider how much they have spent on their research so far. If you find yourself interested in participating in one of the projects or have more questions about DNA testing, visit the Family Tree DNA website at <http://www.familytreedna.com> There are a number of companies offering DNA testing, but they are the most popular and one of the only ones that host Surname DNA projects. Each of the surname projects has a project coordinator that you can contact about your specific surname. Check out the various surnames that have projects. You may find that, thanks to technology, you can now get over that brick wall.

*The author of this article claims no affiliation with and is not compensated by Family Tree DNA. They have written this article in the sole effort of educating other genealogist to promote awareness and participation.*

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