

Appendix 00 IV

Calendar Changes

In the literature and in Richard Smith Wheeler's version of the genealogy I came across reference to the 1st generation Richard Wheeler's death on February 10, 1675/76. What does 1675/76 mean?

At the time of Richard Wheeler's death dates were frequently given as a pair of numbers, one representing the date in the old Julian calendar, the other the new Gregorian calendar. The reason for the change in calendars relates to the handling of a solar year. The Julian calendar specified the year as being 365.25 days. To deal with the fractional day, the Julian calendar had 365 days in a year plus an extra day in a leap year every fourth year. However, the actual year is more nearly 11 minutes less or 365.2422 days. While not particularly consequential over one human lifetime, after two millennia the difference added up to 10 days, i.e. the vernal equinox date was occurring 10 days before the actual equinox. To correct for this the Gregorian calendar skipped 10 days in October 1582. To correct for the actual solar year the Gregorian leap years did not occur in years divided by 100, but did in years divided by 400, but didn't for 1000. Given the differences in cultures and custom, this change took hundreds of years to become universal. At the same time, the first day of the year was changed from March 25 to January 1. This latter fact accounts for the designation 1675/76.

So we have the answer to the original question. In the old Julian calendar Richard Wheeler was killed on February 10, 1675. In the modern Gregorian calendar, Richard Wheeler was killed on February 20, 1676.