

## **Documenting Difficult Cases**

### **Wills & Deeds Before 1850**

More and more of this type of record can be found online. If not on the more popular sites such as FamilySearch.org or Ancestry.com, they may be found on the actual websites of the county or town clerks offices.

County and town records may be your best bet for documenting family relationships and dates prior to the 1850 Census. While the original documents are filed in county courthouses or record centers, it is often easier and more efficient to look at the indices, abstracts, and microfilm copies that are available at county, state, or college history libraries. Please note that when copying a page from any of the resources below, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side.

Deeds document land transfers and the original copies are generally filed with the respective county. Books of abstracts and microfilm of the originals may be more widely available. Deeds may note a chain of inheritance and death dates in reciting the history of the tract, or indicate a nominal price for a sale within the family (essentially a bequest prior to death or an exchange for lifetime support of an elder family member). Deeds may also indicate the use of land as security for an intra-family loan. Even if it does not note a family relationship, a deed serves to document a name and location and the fact that a person was alive at the time. While the deed may not necessarily be as helpful when proving a family relationship, it can serve as circumstantial proof of such a relationship.

Probate files contain the copy of the will that was filed after a person's death along with the date it was written. The will generally names the spouse, if still living; any living children; and may name grandchildren, siblings, nephews, or nieces. A disinherited child may be left out of the will, but that child may show up in another relative's will. Original probate files are filed with the county, although books of abstracts and microfilm of the originals may be more widely available.

Orphans' court records cover cases in which a person died intestate, a minor child was orphaned and had to be assigned to foster parents, or a will was contested. Letters of administration may be issued to appoint someone to settle the estate, file a valuation of the estate, and or order the estate's division among the heirs.

List of tombstone inscriptions, many recorded in the 1930s, may provide information about family cemeteries that no longer exist. This can be very helpful, as some cemeteries lacked quality record keeping or lost the information that was recorded. Please note that the misreading of dates and names on tombstones is common, and one should be careful when relying solely upon this resource.

Tax records may document whether a person was living or deceased (i.e. "for the estate of") as well as the person's location at that time. The records may report state, county, or local taxes. The older records are primarily property tax records.

## **The U.S. Census: 1790 – 1940**

You can gather much information from the federal censuses and mortality schedules, including an individual's year of birth, his or her parents' names, the state in which the individual was born, and the states in which the individual's parents were born. Many states also conducted a census during the periods between the federal censuses. These provide comparable information and are often overlooked. Census records are available on microfilm at the ten federal Branch Archives and larger genealogical libraries. Some libraries may order a reel of census film, once your research narrows to the particular census desired. Please note that when copying a page from a census record, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side. You may make a pencil mark, on the copy only, to help the reader find your ancestor's name.

Federal censuses have included different details from one to the next.

- The original 1790 Census copy was destroyed when the British burned Washington, D.C., in 1812, although it was reconstructed from local records and though indexed, names only the family head.
- The 1800 Census is indexed and names only the family head.
- The 1810 Census is indexed and names only the family head.
- The 1820 Census is indexed and names only the family head.
- The 1830 Census is indexed and names only the family head.
- The 1840 Census is indexed and names only the family head.
- The 1850 Census includes all family members and all families are indexed.
- The 1860 Census includes all family members and all families are indexed.
- The 1870 Census includes all family members and all families are indexed.
- The 1880 Census includes all family members and is Soundex indexed for houses with a child under the age of ten years old.
- The 1890 Census includes all family members and is indexed, although it was ruined in a fire, with only a few whole states and few counties in others remaining.
- The 1900 Census includes all family members and is Soundex indexed.
- The 1910 Census includes all family members with a Soundex index for only some states.
- The 1920 Census includes all family members and is Soundex indexed.
- The 1930 Census includes all family members and is Soundex indexed.
- The 1940 Census includes all family members and is Soundex indexed.

Note: The Soundex is a coded surname (last name) index based on the way a surname sounds rather than the way it is spelled. Surnames that sound the same, but are spelled differently, like "Smith" and "Smyth," have the same code and are filed together. The Soundex coding system was developed so that you can find a surname even though it may have been recorded under various spellings. To search for a particular surname, you must first work out its code.

Names were sometimes misspelled and left out of the index, but if you know the individual's approximate address you can determine the census ward in which he or she lived and do a name-by-name search of the microfilm of that ward's census records. The records were generally taken

in a systematic, house-by-house order down each street, and the streets are sometimes noted on the census forms.

In 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880, the federal census included inquiries about persons who had died in the year immediately preceding the enumeration. In general, the schedules' questions covered topics including the individual's name; age at last birthday; sex, race; marital status; profession, occupation, or trade; state, territory, or country of birth of the individual and his or her parents; length of residence in county; month in which the individual died; disease or cause of death; place where disease contracted (if not at place of death); and the name of the attending physician.

Many of these census indices can be found online at Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, Footnote.com, or similar genealogical databases. The SAR Genealogical Research Library, located in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, has access to these databases and thousands of other genealogical records on file for your use. Please contact the SAR Genealogical Research Library for further details in continuing your research.

### **Recent Generations: Back to 1900**

Where do you start if you don't have a family tree available, although your family believes that it goes way back or you think it might due to no "recent" arrival records in the U.S.? Family archives can be a great place to begin your investigation.

Interview the older members of your family to see what they might know about the names of their forebears and the dates and places of their births, marriages, and deaths. For instance, if your grandmother knows the name of her grandmother, you can write a family tree going back five generations, which will get you into the mid-1800s. Older relatives may also have documents or scrapbooks that show the names of ancestors and the dates they were born (birth certificate), were married (marriage certificate), and died (death certificate), with deeds, wills, and other related records.

Family Bibles may be acceptable as documentation, and these books are valuable as family Bibles often list many generations. Please note to copy any page that lists the publisher and the date of publication. Historical certificates or notes like the one above are often thrown out by those who do not realize the value of keeping such documents after the owner passes away. Keep these original family documents or copies of them for your records in a safe place while they still exist.

Please note that the SAR does not require certified copies of these documents. Legible photocopies of the full document are satisfactory in many cases. Though be aware that when copying a page from any of the discussed resources, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side. You may make a pencil mark, on the copy only, to help the reader find your ancestor's name.

Family histories are available for many surnames. These are available at genealogical or historical libraries, college and public libraries, and lineage society libraries. The SAR Genealogical Research Library in downtown Louisville, Kentucky has thousands of such records for your use. Except for the lineage societies, most libraries generally cover only families in the local area. The

Library of Congress has a huge collection of family histories and publishes an index which is available in many of the larger local libraries.

### **Helpers, IGI & Biographical Sketches**

#### **Hire a Helper**

If you have run out of leads and exhausted the potential from other leads, you might have to expand your search radius. This larger scope may be more than you want to do, especially if it means traveling to another state or region for information. Local genealogical researchers can provide an efficient alternative to expensive travel or long-distance research. Many genealogical magazines and local genealogical researchers can assist in your search and will be familiar with the records you seek. Email and online forums make the contact and exchange of information fast and inexpensive.

#### **The LDS and IGI**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) has the largest collection of genealogical source material in the world. The LDS has microfilmed records from churches, government files, and private collections all over the world, and the organization has kindly made this information available to the entire community without charge. Family relationships between tens of millions of people have been placed in the International Genealogical Index (IGI) as well. Please note with a word of caution that in the enthusiasm to find relationships between many people, familial links were sometimes assumed that are not supported by documentation. As several transcriptions of data were involved in producing the IGI database, some dates and places were sometimes misspelled or swapped. While the IGI is a valuable initial resource, it also has a fair number of errors and is not acceptable as documentation.

You may either search for your ancestor in IGI on the LDS website or visit a local LDS family history center. You can then use the microfilm or databases to locate any additional information concerning a known ancestor. You may be able to rent rolls of microfilm or obtain copies for use from the local LDS center for a nominal charge. Beyond the IGI information, there is microfilmed information on virtually all of the types of sources noted here. Even if you cannot afford to visit the necessary records centers in another geographical region, the LDS microfilms containing the deeds, family histories, probate records, census lists, church baptismal records, or tombstone listings that you require to search can be ordered. Please be sure to make the copies that you need for documenting your application and that handwritten summaries are not acceptable documentation.

Please note that when copying a page from any of these resources, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side. You may make a pencil mark, on the copy only, to help the reader find your ancestor's name.

#### **Check a Genealogist's Guide to Records**

There are several resources that can tell you what details are available and where to find them in every county and state in the nation. This search will probably reveal sources that you had not

considered and keep you from going down paths with dead ends. These show the years that state censuses were taken between federal censuses, when vital records began to be required in the state, whether biographical histories are available for the county, the addresses to contact for information, when the county was founded and what county previously covered the area, and more. You may find these books at a local library, college library, historical society, or genealogical society. Several popular books of this sort include:

- Bremer, R. A. (1998). *Compendium of historical sources: The how and where of American genealogy*. Baltimore, Maryland: Clearfield Company.
- Eichholz, A. (2004). *Red book: American state, county, and town sources* (3rd ed.). Provo, Utah: Ancestry Publishing.
- Everton Publishers. (1999). *The handybook for genealogists: United States of America* (9th ed.). Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, Inc.
- Kemp, T. J. (2013). *International vital records handbook* (6th ed.). Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc.
- Szucs, L. D. & Luebking, S. H. (2006). *The source: A guidebook of American genealogy* (3rd ed.). Provo, Utah: Ancestry Publishing.

Most of these have been published in several editions, and while the later ones are more comprehensive, the information in the earlier editions should generally be accurate.

### **Vital Records (Birth, Marriage, and Death Records)**

For many years, states have required hospitals, clergy, and doctors to report these vital records and have them recorded and stored in state record centers. Some states and towns started this practice in the 1600s, while others started as late as the early 1900s. The records are usually available for review at a Bureau of Vital Statistics or the Health Department in your state. Please note that when requesting copies of vital records, be sure to get the “long form” of a certificate. The “short form” simply confirms the birth date, place, and name. The long form has the names of the individual’s parents and perhaps even more information.

The ease and cost of viewing and obtaining copies of these vital records varies from state to state. In some states, you can call the vital records office, ask the clerk to copy a specific record, supply payment options over the phone, and receive the documents within ten days’ time. However, many states require written requests with payments included, which may then take several weeks before a reply is given. If you do not know the exact spelling of the individual’s name or year of the event, it may be difficult or expensive to locate the record. Please note that death certificates may be especially helpful during research as some include the individual’s date and place of death, date and place of birth, spouse or children’s names as next of kin, and parents’ names and places of birth.

Many states use [vitalchek.com](http://vitalchek.com) to provide official copies of vital records.

### **Church, Cemetery, and Funeral Director Records**

These records often provide excellent name, date, place, and relationship information on family groupings over three or more generations. Members of the same family were often baptized or

christened, married, and participated in activities at the same church for many generations. Families had memorial services at the same place of worship and used familiar funeral parlors to arrange for burial in family plots. Please note that when copying a page from any of these resources, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side. You may make a pencil mark, on the copy only, to help the reader find your ancestor's name.

### **Fraternal Associations, Military Records, and Academic Records**

These types of social or professional documentation may provide information on birth date and place, parents' names, and links to other useful records. The names and ethnic affiliations of many fraternal organizations are listed in the genealogy source books noted above. Some of the older, larger ones are B'nai B'rith, Elks, Free Masons, Hibernians, Knights of Columbus, Knights of Pythias, Masons, Odd Fellows, and Red Men.

County biographical histories were very popular in the late nineteenth century. A large percent of the United States' population had immigrated from abroad or moved to new states in recent times and wanted to record their ancestors, previous homes, and present occupations for the benefit of their descendants. While the extended biographies and woodcut portraits were printed only for those who could and chose to afford them, these resources often provide listings of everyone in town. These biographies are often available at county or state history or genealogical libraries and local college libraries.

City directories are also quite useful in genealogical searches: they helped deliverymen and friends locate the homes of residents and provided a means for advertising the products and services of local firms, similar to contemporary phone books. City directories provide circumstantial evidence that a person was alive and living at a certain address. Death dates may be inferred from a dropped listing or a change in listing. Please note that when copying a page from any of these resources, you will need to note the bibliographical source of the copy on its reverse side. You may make a pencil mark, on the copy only, to help the reader find your ancestor's name.