

GENEALOGY RESOURCES and RESEARCH METHODS

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I. Primary Records

When researching a family line, begin by obtaining primary records, at least for the most recent generations (usually the most recent three or four generations). Primary records include birth, marriage, and death certificates. Many lineage societies now require such primary records for the first three generations. I recommend that these documents be obtained *now*, if they are available, because with mounting identity concerns, these documents may not be available in the future. Be sure to make copies of such documents to submit to lineage societies; do not submit originals.

Primary records, particularly birth and death certificates, *usually* must be ordered from the department of vital statistics of the state of birth. Remember to request “long-form” birth certificates, *specifying* that what you are looking for is the version that names both parents. Birth records from county health departments don’t always name parents. Most states required birth and death certificates beginning around 1911 or so. However, there wasn’t always widespread compliance throughout all counties in the first few years. You may be able to find “delayed” birth certificates for individuals born prior to the time when birth certificates were required, which were issued based on affidavits or sworn testimonies from others attesting to when and where the individual was born. The “delayed birth certificate” was then issued. You will see the word “delayed” stamped on most of these birth certificates. These delayed BCs were often issued when people began applying for Social Security Numbers, which required applicants to prove their birth. Another way some individuals proved their birth and parentage was through school censuses. These are a bit more obscure, but are usually obtained at the county level or state archives. Ask about the availability of school censuses by contacting the county public library where the family lived. They should know if such records exist and where to find them, if not at that library. Hospital birth certificates are not always acceptable for legal purposes, like applying for a passport, for which you will need a certified, state-issued, birth certificate, but for lineage societies, they are usually acceptable. Since often the parents’ names are on the *backs* of hospital birth certificates, be sure to flip it over to copy both sides. Church baptismal certificates are also acceptable, but should contain both parents’ names, including the mother’s maiden name.

Marriage and divorce records are usually available at the county courthouse, even very old ones. To obtain such records, it is helpful (and sometimes, required) to have the exact date of marriage. Contact the county courthouse (usually you can discover how to contact the right department by accessing their county website) to find out how to request such records, if it is not spelled out online. These records are typically fairly cheap to order. Some lineage societies require the actual record, as opposed to an index or transcription of a marriage record. Many are available on ancestry.com and familysearch.org, as well as on county records or county genealogy websites.

Church records, if you are fortunate enough to find them extant (or transcribed in books), are very valuable. These may include baptisms, marriages, and/or deaths, and some can be found long before any “legal” records.

Bible records are considered to be primary sources, but the title page of the bible is needed, showing publication date, and the relationships of the people recorded in the bible should be explicit.

II. Secondary Sources

Censuses. Once you have exhausted your search for primary records and have gotten to the point prior to when primary records were routinely issued, particularly for birth and death, you will want to find your family members on census records. Beginning in 1850, all members of the household were enumerated. Prior to 1850, only heads of household were listed; however, censuses *before 1850 can* help place families in a particular location and may aid in finding the proximity of family households to each other. Beginning with the 1880 census, relationships of each person in the household were listed. Census records are not always totally reliable, though, so you will often need corroborating evidence to substantiate some connections.

Obituaries, tombstones, cemetery records. Obituaries should include the masthead of the newspaper (the name of the publication, the location, and the date of publication). Some news articles that have been microfilmed might not include the publication's masthead, but usually include the name and date of the publication. Tombstones can be photographed, but must be readable and must have been erected around the time of death. Tombstone photos should include the name and location of the cemetery. Books that contain cemetery listings of tombstones have some drawbacks. They usually do not state when a tombstone was placed much later than the time of death. Also, without seeing a photo of the tombstone, a relationship stated in a cemetery book may or may not be inscribed on the stone. Many cemetery books were annotated by well-meaning authors or data contributors, resulting in undocumented relationships being cited.

Family histories. These are sometimes the only source for one connection. Family genealogies have more "weight" if they cite sources and if the author was in a position to have personal knowledge of the data the book contained. They are also more acceptable if they contain a lot of details. The title page of the book, including publication date, is necessary. If there are footnote pages, they must be included, as well. It is advisable to also find as many primary and secondary documents as possible to support what is included in the book.

County histories. Many of the county histories published in the mid-to-late 1800s and very early 1900s usually contained family genealogies furnished by people alive at the time the information was gathered and has personal knowledge of the data they furnished. And, as with other books containing genealogies, it is advisable to also find as many primary and secondary documents as possible to support what is included in the book.

III. Other Sources

Wills, probates, deeds, etc. These will most often be maintained at the county courthouse, unless they have been archived elsewhere. Many such records are now available on familysearch.org and ancestry.com, and except in cases of records destruction, can help you trace your lineage further in the past than some other records. Sometimes records destruction (courthouse fires, floods, etc.) may have destroyed some records (such as wills/probates), but not others (such as deeds and other land records), the latter of which may help piece together your family members. You can search for the availability such records and discover if any destruction of records have occurred by going to familysearch.org and searching their "wiki" menu for that county. Sometimes via interlibrary loan arranged through your local public library, you can order microfilm from another state's archives. This is particularly useful for deeds, as those records aren't usually as easily indexed as wills and probates, so those are not usually available online. Your local LDS Family History Centers can also be very helpful in helping you locate records or books not otherwise easily available, usually by ordering microfilm or microfiche that you can view in their Family History Center.

Pensions. Revolutionary War Pensions often name wives and children, and sometimes even provide dates of birth and marriage – sometimes with bible records submitted. Civil War pensions, particularly for widows, were often very detailed, including names and ages of children, and dates and locations of marriages.

METHODS FOR REMOVING OBSTACLES

Proving the maiden name of a wife: when no marriage record can be found; her maiden name is not listed on her child's birth record (or there is no birth record); her maiden name is not listed (or is listed incorrectly) on her own death record or on the death record of the child:

1. You may be fortunate enough to find her father, mother, or a sibling on a later census living in the same household with her and her husband.
2. The death record of her husband may list his wife/widow's maiden name.
3. An obituary (for her, her children, her husband, her parents, her siblings) may list her maiden name and/or the names of her parents.
4. Her tombstone may state her maiden name.
5. Censuses where the child (in your line) may list other siblings. Tracing records of those siblings may very possibly lead you to the mother's maiden name on death certificates, marriage records, obituaries, etc.
6. A will of the mother's father may name his daughter as the "wife of (her husband)" [or "consort of" or "who intermarried with _____"].

Resolving name differences between generations: If conflicting names occur in a line, those conflicts must be resolved. Often, a child was given a first and middle name, but was known by one name when still in the household of his/her parents, and then was known by another in adulthood. Some family traditions dictated that a child was given the name of a grandparent (first or middle), for instance, but as long as that grandparent was living, did not go by that name. Then when the grandparent was deceased, that child became known as the name "inherited" from that grandparent. In cases where there are conflicting names, gather as many documents as possible with that ancestor's (various) names (or combinations of names and initials) on them: census records, marriage records, death records (of children, spouse, and the individual in question), wills, obits, tombstones, land records, etc. In some instances, it may be necessary to formulate a formal proof argument to prove it is the same person who was known by different names.

Differentiating people of the same name in a family line: This comes into play often with Revolutionary War ancestors – proving which ancestor of the same name performed which service. This is a common reason some patriots are flagged for incorrect service. The best way to do this is to develop a timeline where you follow your ancestor and perhaps another of the same name to show where and when they were placed during a period of time, such as during the Rev War years. This can be done by showing that person witnessing a document, getting married giving consent for a child's marriage, buying property, signing an oath of allegiance, testifying in a court case, etc. These dates and places should align with where you believe the person lived. You may have to do this for another man of the same name, as well, in contrast.

When you have exhausted your usual resources...

Google the county of residence of the generation you are researching. [You can also search on a state of county/state on familysearch.org's wiki search and find a lot of useful information.] I usually add the word "genealogy" to the county and state when I Google it. This should get results that include county historical societies, county genealogical societies, county genealogy websites, and county records websites. Remember that you may have to look at county formation data to see if that county was part of another county previously. Also, the county public library is often one of your best resources for information! In small towns, you may have good luck calling the county library on a Saturday morning, when genealogy volunteers might be there, who might be better able to answer your questions. Larger libraries will usually have a "genealogy" section, so ask if they have such a section first, so that your call is directed to the most helpful librarian. Be as specific as possible with your questions. If onsite searches need to be conducted, the librarian can often provide names of researchers who might help. If not, contact the county historical society or county genealogical society, who might be able to provide you with names of researchers. If you are a member of a lineage society, there may be members who live in the area you need help with, who might be willing to obtain documents for you.

Google the name or names of the ancestors you are looking for; you might strike gold or you might at least find a message board where descendants are sharing information. Occasionally, a descendant will have a Facebook page on the family. Look for the ancestor or the family on findagrave.com. If someone has posted information on the family, contact that contributor and ask if he or she has any actual records. Likewise, if an individual has posted to a website like rootsweb or has placed a family tree on a website, email the person who posted the information and ask if he or she has any actual documentation to share.

On familysearch.org, click on “books” and type an ancestor’s name in the search field. This field will search for names *in* books, names *of* books, names of authors, etc. You can search for county names, towns, churches, and just about anything that might be found in books. Familysearch is a great source for many kinds of books – county history books, family genealogies, records books, church histories, and much more. Sometimes you will not be able to download certain books, usually newer ones, that can only be viewed at LDS Family History Centers.

Remember, sometimes proofs are just not out there, for whatever the reason, and your brick wall is likely permanent. But, also bear in mind that all proofs are *not* online or in books. Sometimes your research requires doing old-fashioned “boots-on-the-ground” genealogy. This will involve onsite “digging” for unpublished documents...in courthouses, deed rooms, church files, state or county archives, libraries, cemeteries, funeral homes, or wherever your clues lead you. If you can’t visit these venues yourself, you will need to locate a researcher in that area.