

Documenting Difficult Cases

Edited by Genealogist General Jim Faulkinbury - 30 March 2020

Wills & Deeds Before 1850

More and more of these types of records 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 clerk's offices.

The Family History Library in Salt Lake City is no longer loaning microfilms to their branch libraries but instead is in the progress of digitizing their microfilmed records and putting most of them online for access by the public. The best way to access these records is to use the "Search" / "Catalog" selection rather than the "Search" / "Records" selection. In the search window that is provided by the "Catalog" page, enter the name of the county or city of interest (most records are at the county level) and a choice of possibilities is provided. Select the appropriate possibility. A list of all of the record types for that location are then provided. The most useful categories are "Probate Records", "Vital records", "Land and Property", and "Court records" but there are other categories such as "Church records", "Cemeteries" or "Voter records" that may also be useful. By selecting one of those categories a listing of all of the records pertaining to that category that are in the possession of the FHL is provided. Some are books that are only available at the SLC main library but others that have been microfilmed are shown with an icon to the right of the entry. If the icon is a camera icon, that film contains digital images that can be viewed at home. If the camera icon has a key above it, that means that it must be viewed at a branch or main library due to copyright restrictions. If there is only an icon that looks like a text page, that means that only an abstract of the records is available. Some camera icons will have a magnifying glass icon next to the camera icon which means that a search capability is available. If the icon is a reel of microfilm, that film has not yet been digitized and currently unavailable.

County and town records may provide documenting of 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 annotate the source of the copy.

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.

Court records or probate records cover cases in which a person died intestate, a minor child was orphaned and had to be assigned to a guardian or 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. Many State or Special census records are available on microfilm at the ten federal Branch Archives or online and larger genealogical libraries or now online. 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 need to note the bibliographical source on the copy. Also underline the entries pertaining to your ancestor in red and mark the generation number that it pertains to in the margin to help the Staff Genealogist find your ancestor's name.

Federal censuses have included different details from one to the next. Since the enumeration data was not necessarily provided by the individual named, and could be from other family members or even neighbors, the accuracy of dates and places may be off based only on the knowledge of the informant.

- The some of the original 1790 census records were destroyed when the British burned Washington, D.C., in 1812, although it was reconstructed from local records. It is indexed and 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 with their relationship to the head of the household and is 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 their relationship to the head of household and is indexed.
- The 1910 Census includes all family members and their relationship to the head of household.
- The 1920 Census includes all family members and their relationship to the head of household and is indexed.
- The 1930 Census includes all family members and their relationship to the head of household and is indexed.
- The 1940 Census includes all family members and their relationship to the head of household and is indexed.

Note: The indexing of the census records was done by volunteers who made their best guess at many names, often in hard to determine handwriting. In addition, the census enumerator would phonetically often enter the name as he heard it. It is recommended to consider other possibilities for how the name might have been spelled. Occasionally, the first letter of a surname was misinterpreted by the volunteer indexer and it can sometimes be useful to take the name and approximate age of someone in the household with an unusual first name and do a search for all possibilities for that given name and age in the locality. If you have the family of interest in one census, you might also see if you can find their neighbors in another census in case they were all still living in the same place. 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 images 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, [these mortality](#) 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. Note that mortality schedules do not exist for all census jurisdictions.

Many of these census indices can be found online at [Ancestry.com](#), [Fold3.com](#), [Familysearch.org](#), 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 that a copy of the page that lists the publisher and the date of publication is required for any published source used, including family Bibles.** Historical certificates or notes 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. Underline all of the facts on the document that pertain to facts stated on your application regarding your ancestor(s) in red, and also annotate the margin with the generation number in red, to help the Staff Genealogist find the facts supporting your application.

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. Another useful source for family as well as local histories is <https://archive.org/>. They have many digitized PDF searchable volumes of out-of-print and copyright books that can be found with their search engine. Note that acceptable evidence from any published volumes must contain a source reference to where that information was found. However, the information found without sources can often be used to locate acceptable evidence. If acceptable evidence is found and used as documentation for your application, be sure to include the page with the book title and publication date and underline all of the facts on the document that pertain to facts stated on your application regarding your ancestor(s) in red, with the generation number that it pertains to also in red in the margin. This is needed to help the Staff Genealogist find the facts supporting your application.

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.

Ancestry.com, LDS and Other User Submitted Sources

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) and in other patron submitted databases as well. Ancestry.com family trees and similar online sources are also just user submitted information. 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 these sources and many unsupported family traditions were included and some dates and places were misspelled or swapped. While these sources are valuable initial resources that can be used as clues for further research leading to acceptable evidence, they also have a fair number of errors and is not acceptable documentation as evidence.

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 their digitized records or databases to locate any additional information concerning a known ancestor. 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 often be viewed online at home or at a branch FHL library. 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 provide the bibliographical source on the copy. Be sure to underline all of the facts on the document that pertain to facts stated on your application regarding your ancestor(s) in red and put the relevant generation number in red in the margin, to help the Staff Genealogist find the facts supporting your application.

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. Some states provide both a short and long form version of these records. 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. If both options are available, please note that when requesting copies of vital records, be sure to get the “long form” of a certificate.

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 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 on the copy. Underline all of the facts on the document that pertain to facts stated on your application regarding your ancestor(s) in red and put the generation number that the fact(s) pertain to in red in the margin, to help the Staff Genealogist find the facts supporting your application.

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

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 on the copy. Underline all of the facts on the document that pertain to facts stated on your application regarding your ancestor(s) in red and put the generation number that those fact(s) pertain to in red in the margin, to help the Staff Genealogist find the facts supporting your application.