

Alternative Records and Genealogical Research

Regardless of your effort and expertise, brick walls are an inevitable fact of life for all genealogists. The society our ancestors lived in did not place the emphasis on paper trails, documentation, and legalisms that are part of our modern life in the 21st century. It was not until the post-World War II era that many of the modern security and legal requirements began to appear that required documentation on the scale today. Events such as 9/11, and the rise of identity theft have magnified these trends.

Dead-ends, discrepancies between records, and research roadblocks tend to be the rule rather than the exception in genealogical research. Genealogy is the most popular hobby in America today. In 2006, the Today Show estimated that over 60 million Americans are involved in some level of genealogical research. However, there are people who will use every trick in the book to stonewall queries about the past. The odds favor that some members of your family will fit this pattern. Inconsistencies in record keeping practices from bygone eras will also present challenges as you search for genealogical records.

Primary genealogical sources such as birth certificates, marriage records, census returns, and death certificates are only as useful as the determined accuracy of the information by the family member or individual provided at the time when the record was created. The information provided may fall short of expectations or raise issues that were completely unexpected. The ancestor may not appear on any existing records for the time period or locality. When any of these situations arise, genealogists must turn to other avenues to overcome these issues. The good news is that various methods exist which can enable the researcher to overcome these barriers.

Alternative records are defined as documents or records that provide the same basic or similar types of information that would normally be contained in the more common primary genealogical records. Some professionals refer to these alternative record types as corroborating testimony. Alternative records may not always be as detailed and reliable as primary sources as records issued by a governmental entity, but they can serve as guides to other localities and record types which might have been otherwise overlooked or ignored.

The following list contains record types that have a proven track record success when conventional genealogical records fall short of expectations:

Cemetery Inscriptions: Inscriptions found on graves may provide clues in finding newspaper obituaries, religious affiliation, military service, cause of death, or life interests. These clues may point to more information available in military records, church records, county civil records, funeral home records, school records, and vital statistics.

Church Membership Records: Church records can confirm the migration of ancestors from one place to another. They may also cover time periods that are missed by federal and most state censuses since many churches took annual censuses of their congregations

or parishes. Church records often list all members of the congregation, including children and adults attending Sunday school classes. Since most churches divide Sunday school classes by age groups for adults and children's, this information would provide names and clues to ages. Even children of pre-school age would be included because they usually attend church and were under the supervision of a staff person while Sunday school was going on.

Church records are especially relevant if they operated a school. Church school records would normally shed light on the following pieces of information:

1. Ages of each child in the family of school age
2. Place of residence of the family
3. Names of parents and sometimes the grand/God parents
4. Occupational and income status

City Directories: The information in directories often lists the name, address, and occupational information for members of the household. Depending on the quality and accuracy of the entries, the information may lead researchers to additional sources, such as land and property records at the local courthouse, occupational licenses, and vital records.

Deeds: Deeds can point to a buyer or seller residing in another place. They can also confirm the name of a spouse and the names of other owners of the adjacent properties. Since families were once much closer than in our modern family structures, these adjacent property owners were frequently related to one another. Deeds have proven to be far more reliable than census records as a source for verifying the location of particular persons at a specific point in time.

Diaries: Diaries can shed light on the most personal or private thoughts of a person. They may contain observations that the owner would never share publicly with family members, friends, or anyone in general. Observations of this nature have shed light on some or all of the following:

1. Relationships
2. Migration decisions and the issues/reasons that prompted them
3. Religious worship
4. Events that impacted the family or individual
5. Employment experiences
6. Educational experiences

Employment Records: If you are lucky enough to identify companies or businesses where your ancestors worked, this can be a useable resource if they are still operating. If the company or business no longer exists under their old name, we have resources in our collection that may help you find out if they were taken over by another company. This is a frequent occurrence. These sources may help you trace their history of name changes down to the current company name and ownership.

Two of the main reference sources used to track this type of information are the ***Capital Changes Reporter*** and the ***International Directory of Company Histories***. Both titles are mentioned in the bibliography located at the end of this study guide. While it is true that many employers have stringent guidelines concerning access to employee records, many of these applicable guidelines may or may not pertain to older records. This is especially true if you have a death certificate and can prove some connection to the deceased employee.

If the company no longer exists and there is no evidence that it has survived under the jurisdiction of another company, or if the current owner no longer has the records, check with the local genealogical or historical society. The old records may have been donated to their societies or they may know another repository or source where they can be located.

Researchers may locate some or all of the following types of information in these records:

1. Name of employee
2. Place of residence
3. Name of dependants
4. Dates of employment
5. Jobs performed
6. Salary
7. Performance evaluations
8. Promotions
9. Awards
10. Post retirement contact information
11. Pension information (if applicable)

Family Bibles: Religious worship was the cornerstone of American family life until the post World-War II era. The Family Bible was a memento handed down through generations in many families. Major events within the life of a family were usually recorded. The events often included some or all of the following:

1. Birth dates
2. Baptisms
3. Confirmations
4. Bar-Mitzvahs
5. Marriages
6. Deaths
7. Religious certificates/awards
8. Graduations

Some families also recorded major non-religious events if they had a major impact on the family as a whole or individual family members. Examples would include the following:

1. Migrations
2. Political events
3. Social events

4. Economic events
5. Significant events affecting close family friends/neighbors

When using Family Bibles, one should be aware that the quality of information is dependant on the honesty and accuracy of those who compiled the entries.

Family Heirlooms: Older knick-knacks in the possession of family members or relatives may contain clues about the history of your family or an event or circumstance that influenced the family circle.

Funeral Home Records: These records may contain detailed death and family information, statements from attending physicians, coroner's reports, notes concerning death notices and obituaries, and places of internment.

Legal Papers: When a family members passes away, the process of cleaning up the residence often provides opportunities to locate old documents that contain significant amounts of genealogical information. Potential examples of what may be uncovered may include some or all of the following:

1. Marriage Certificates
2. Death Certificates
3. Birth Certificates
4. Naturalization and Citizenship papers
5. Job applications (carbon copies of originals)
6. Resumes, Curriculum Vitae, or Statement of Qualifications
7. School Transcripts or Report Cards
8. Military Discharge Papers
9. Court Papers

Military Service and Pension Records: The quality of information in these records varies greatly by time period and how accurately the information was recorded. Please remember that in most cases, the information contained in these records was recorded by a third party, not the individual ancestor.

In the best case scenario, these records would provide some or all of the following types of information:

1. Name of soldier
2. Birth date
3. Physical characteristics
4. Rank
5. Rate of pay
6. Names of all places where the soldier served (including the names of military bases)
7. Names of soldier's parents
8. Name of spouse
9. Children's names, ages, and birthplaces

The older pension records covering conflicts prior to World War I may be especially helpful, since soldiers and widows had to produce documentation to prove their service. Widows who filed pension claims on behalf of deceased soldiers were required to furnish a higher degree of proof than surviving servicemen.

In modern times, most of the information is stored in computers and former servicemen/women need only to produce identification and certain discharge papers to gain access to information.

Newspaper Clippings: Many families will have at least one member who is interested in the traditions and history behind the family name. These individuals are the ones who always take pictures at gatherings or reunions, write holiday cards on a regular basis, maintain the Family Bible, or maintain photograph or memory albums of major events in the lives of the family. These albums often contain newspaper clippings of articles or announcements that mention important events or ceremonies in the lives of family members.

Obituaries and Death Announcements: Obituaries may provide a thumbnail biographical sketch of essential facts about both the deceased and his or her family. Detailed obituaries mention dates and times when major events occurred during the lifetime of the deceased.

Death announcements are usually two or three sentences long and mention the age of the deceased, name the church where the funeral takes place, and the funeral home handling final arrangements. Death announcements are seldom as detailed as obituaries. In modern times, many families choose to run simple death announcements, while others run both. The death announcement is usually published in the newspaper within a day after the death; the obituary runs the following day.

One of the most important pieces of information found in death announcements and obituaries is the name of the funeral home that handles final arrangements. Funeral homes are required to provide information that is transferred to the official death certificate. Many funeral homes obtain copies of the official death certificate for the surviving widow or spouse as part of their service package for final arrangements.

If genealogists fail to obtain a copy of the death certificate through normal channels, the funeral home is another possible source. Funeral homes maintain packets on all decedents processed. They are an especially good source for next-of-kin information. Most funeral homes are willing to assist researchers who contact them for help. However, in the post 9/11 world, an increasing number are requiring the researcher to furnish some form of proof of kinship to the deceased before full access to information is granted.

Photograph Albums: Most parents maintain albums showing pictures of their children, parents, grandparents, and special friends. These pictures are frequently supplemented by written information on the back or side of pictures detailing significant details about the picture.

School Records and Census Data: School records normally provide birth dates, parent's names, and information pertaining to the character and performance about individual students. School records were generated for each grade level. Some schools also took a yearly census that asked some of the same questions as the federal census to supplement regular school records.

Siblings: If you are unable to locate information on a specific ancestor, check to see if they had siblings or children. You may need to search each sibling or child from a later marriage to find pieces of information that will hopefully lead you to the ancestor who is your main focus. This technique is especially true if your ancestor resided in a poor, isolated rural area, and one or more of his/her children or siblings later became wealthy and famous in the big city or another locality.

Social Security Records: The SS-5 form is the application for a social security card. When properly filled out, the form will indicate the following information:

1. Applicant's name
2. Age at time of application
3. Parents' name
4. Place of birth
5. Applicant's date and place of birth
6. Place of employment at the time of application

Substitutes for Vital Records

Once you have determined that no useable vital records exist for the ancestor, the records listed below would qualify as alternatives sources that may supply some or all of the missing information. The closer a record was generated to the time of a given major event in the life of your ancestor, the more likely it will be accurate.

Home Sources: These are documents that are most likely found in the homes of siblings, grown children from the ancestor's marriage, cousins, or close neighbors.

1. Baptismal/Christening Certificates
2. Family Bibles
3. Birth Certificates
4. Death Certificates
5. Deeds and Abstracts
6. Diaries
7. Divorce Papers
8. Engagement, Marriage, and/or Anniversary Announcements
9. Estate or Financial papers

10. Family Histories or Personal Papers
11. Family Scrapbooks
12. Letters
13. Marriage Certificates, Newspaper Accounts, or Church Bulletin/Programs
14. Mass or Memorial Cards
15. Obituaries
16. Photographs
17. Professional Licenses
18. School Records
19. Telephone Books (past and present)
20. Wedding Invitations
21. Wills

NOTE OF CAUTION: Errors in writing, typing, printing, and knowledge of the facts may be present in any type of record. In the case of family-generated records, the information may be true to the best of the knowledge of the person creating the record, yet they may not know all the facts. It is also possible that the family member may have their own agenda for hiding or misrepresenting various facts.

State or Local Health Departments: Health departments generate the following types of information and documents:

1. Birth Certificates
2. Death certificates
3. Causalities from localized epidemics
4. W.P.A. indexes of pre-1930 local and church records for a given community and where they were deposited

Courthouse Records: The process of researching your family tree will eventually lead you to a courthouse. The day-to-day joys and hardships of your ancestors' lives can often be found documented among the numerous original records of the local courthouse.

From a genealogical research perspective, the most useful record types are listed below:

1. Marriage Documents
 - a. Consents
 - b. Bonds
 - c. Applications
 - d. Licenses
 - e. Returns
2. Coroner's Records
3. Probate Packets
4. Divorce Proceedings
5. Indentured Servant Records
6. Indigent Soldier's Burials
7. Land Records
8. Property Records
9. Tax Rolls
10. Civil and Criminal Court Proceedings

11. Township or Village Records
12. Veteran's Grave Registrations
13. Voter's Rolls
14. Occupational and Business Licenses

Community Resources: These would be local agencies or repositories that may have records or information pertaining to your family or ancestor.

1. Library Genealogical Collections
2. Church Records
3. Funeral Homes
4. Children's (Orphan) Homes
5. County Homes
6. County Infirmaries
7. Newspapers
8. Schools, Colleges, and Universities
9. Genealogical and Historical Societies
- 10 Local Businesses

State Sources: These would be state level agencies or repositories that may have records or information pertaining to your family or ancestor.

1. State Library and Archival Genealogical Collections
2. State Militia Records
3. Department of Vital Records
4. State Land/Property Records
5. Institutional Records
6. Professional Licensing Records
7. Genealogical and/or Historical Societies
8. State Repository of Church Records for Given Denominations

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NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers-Lee County Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.

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