

Prospecting for Family History in Unexpected Places

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Many records of genealogical value are hiding in places we might not think to look for them. How do we discover those hiding places? Like a prospector searching for the mother lode, we can employ a search strategy to help us uncover a gold mine of information in unexpected places. We will look at some examples of genealogical records and resources—both online and not—found in unexpected places as we learn about strategies for uncovering these hidden treasures.

NOT EVERYTHING IS ONLINE

I've heard a number of genealogists estimate that only 10 percent of records are online. Whether that's accurate or not—and I'm not sure there's any way of knowing how many useful records exist out there anyway—most records are not online.

Where are the rest of them? In libraries, archives, special collections and many other locations. Tracking them down can sometimes be easy: go to the locality where our ancestors lived and search for their names among the records. But often there's more to be found if we think widely about how to search.

FANS AND WANDERING RELATIONS

A mistake that researchers often make is to focus too narrowly on their direct lines. Often, the road to our ancestors leads not straight back, but wandering like a switchback up a mountain. Family, Associates and Neighbors (FANs) and collateral relations (those not in our direct lines) can lead us to information about our direct ancestors. And when relatives wander away from the old homestead, so do family papers and artifacts, as with the example of the papers of a Wheeling, West Virginia, newspaper family that I found in a Denver, Colorado, archive.

In order to enlarge your search possibilities, think about the places your direct line family members lived, even for a short time, and places your collateral relations moved to, as well as other non-related people with whom your family members interacted. There may be traces of your ancestors associated with people and places you wouldn't expect.

HOW TO SEARCH

1. Search for your ancestor by name in Google and in other resources listed in the "Resources" section below.
2. Once you've done that, it's time to search in other ways, particularly by searching for places, others of the same surname, and FANs. Try searching

for surname + place, for example, Hundey + Gratiot looking for my Hundey family members in Gratiot County, Michigan.

3. Search for a place with the word *history*, as in [Gratiot County history](#). Also search for the town and state. Be sure to search for all locations that may be associated with FANs and collateral lines.
4. Search for the town, county, and state with the word *archives*. Then search within the archives, particularly in manuscript collections, for names, dates, places, events associated with your ancestors.
5. Search for libraries in the areas you're interested in and then search within their special collections. Check to see if they have area newspapers on microfilm.
6. Be prepared to browse collections. Not all are well-indexed or have finding aids.
7. Remember that sources that don't specifically mention your ancestor can still help you fill in his or her story.
8. Remember that sources can wander even farther than relatives can. If you turn up a search result in a repository that's located in a place nowhere near any of the places where your family lived, don't disregard it.

WHERE TO SEARCH

Google. <https://www.google.com/>. A Google search is a great place to start.

Janet Meydam, "6 Uncommon Places to Find a Missing Birth Date for Your Ancestor," *Family History Daily* <https://familyhistorydaily.com/genealogy-help-and-how-to/birth-date-ancestor/>

Aaron Goodwin, "In Defense of the Curious Meander," *NGS Monthly* <https://ngsmoonthly.ngsgenealogy.org/in-defense-of-the-curious-meander/>

Examples of Catalogs

WorldCat. <https://www.worldcat.org/>. WorldCat bills itself as the world's largest library catalog. When you search for books, microfilms, manuscripts, or other library materials and enter your zip code, it shows you a list of member libraries that have the resource. They are listed in the order of nearest to you first. If no nearby library has it, you can order it through inter-library loan.

ArchiveGrid. <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>. "With over 1,000 different archival institutions represented, ArchiveGrid helps researchers looking for primary source materials held in archives, libraries, museums and historical societies."

“National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections” [NUCMC]. *Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>. U.S. repositories have contributed descriptions of their manuscript holdings to this catalog.

Google Books. <https://books.google.com/>. Books in the public domain are downloadable as PDF files. Books still under copyright have previews only.

HathiTrust. <http://www.hathitrust.org/>. “HathiTrust is a partnership of academic & research institutions, offering a collection of millions of titles digitized from libraries around the world.” Many books can be downloaded or read on line.

Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/index.php>. “Internet Archive is a non-profit library of millions of free books, movies, software, music, and more.”

Digital Public Library of America. <https://dp.la/>. “Discover 42,414,520 images, texts, videos, and sound from across the United States.”

Accessible Archives. <http://www.accessible-archives.com/>. Digitized versions of primary source material, including newspapers, magazines and books.

Examples of Indexes

Cyndi’s List. <http://www.cyndislist.com/>. An index of links to pretty much all things genealogical.

“Archives and Manuscript Collection Databases US & Worldwide.” *University of Chicago Library*. <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/collections/usworldwide.html>.

Examples of Finding Aids and Research Guides

“Search Finding Aids.” *Library of Congress*. <http://findingaids.loc.gov/>. Search the finding aids for the Library’s archival collections, including the papers of people and organizations.

“Research Our Records.” *National Archives and Records Administration*. <http://www.archives.gov/research/>. Guide to searching online for NARA records.

Examples of Regional, State and Local Archives

“Genealogical Research Illinois State Archives.” *Office of the Illinois Secretary of State*. <http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/services.html>.

Kansas Memory. <http://www.kansasmemory.org/>. Digital archives of the state of Kansas.

Wichita Photo Archives. <http://www.wichitaphotos.org/>. Digital archive of historic photos of Wichita, Kansas.

Rocky Mountain Online Archive. <http://rmoa.unm.edu/index.php>. Guides to collections in 27 repositories in Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Online Archive of California. <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>. Guides to the collections of over 200 participating archives.

Michiganology. <https://michiganology.org/>. Digital archives of the state of Michigan.

“Records and Archives.” *Missouri Secretary of State.*
<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/resources.asp>.

“Archival Records.” *Oregon Secretary of State.*
<http://sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records.aspx>.

“Utah State Archives.” *Utah Department of Administrative Services.*
<http://www.archives.state.ut.us/>.

“Harris County Archives.” *Harris County Texas.*
<http://www.harriscountytexas.gov/archives/>. An example of a county archive.

“Longmont Archives.” *City of Longmont Colorado.*
<http://longmontcolorado.gov/departments/departments-e-m/museum/collections/longmont-archives>. An example of a city archive.

Examples of University Archives Collections

“University Archives & Manuscripts.” *K-State Libraries.* <http://www.lib.k-state.edu/depts/spec/archives.html>.

“Columbia University Archives.” *Columbia University Libraries.*
<http://library.columbia.edu/locations/cuarchives.html>. One collection contains biographical files on anyone who has ever had any connection at all with the university.

“Special Collections & University Archives.” *Stanford University Libraries.*
<https://library.stanford.edu/spc/university-archives>. Many items in their special collections have been digitized.

“University of Illinois Archives.” *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*
<http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?settheme=illinois&setrepositoryid=0>. Unlike some archives, this one has an online database of all their holdings.

Examples of Library Special Collections

“Research Guides: Genealogy, African American & Western History Resources.” *Denver Public Library.* <https://history.denverlibrary.org/research>. Guides to photo, manuscript and other collections. Many items are digitized.

“Special Collections.” *University Libraries, University of Washington*. <http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcollections>. Their special collections include some funeral home records.

“Special Collections.” *The University of Iowa Libraries*. <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/>. One manuscript collection contains letters describing pioneer days in Montana.

Herbert Hoover Presidential Library & Museum. <http://www.hoover.archives.gov/>. Among other things, contains a collection of historical information about Cedar County, Iowa.

“Digital Library.” *Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University*. <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/>. This is a project of Dickinson State University to gather and digitize the records relating to Theodore Roosevelt that are scattered in repositories around the nation. It contains many surprising collections.

“Oral Histories.” *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home*. https://eisenhower.archives.gov/research/oral_histories.html.

“Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.” *Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/>

“Digital Collections.” *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>

Examples of Historical Society Special Collections

Gratiot County [Michigan] Historical and Genealogical Society. <http://www.gchgs.org/>. They have an online, searchable listing of their holdings.

Washington State Historical Society. <http://collections.washingtonhistory.org/>. One collection contains letters about the Klondike gold rush.

The Filson Historical Society. <https://filsonhistorical.org/>. A private historical society in Kentucky.

Examples of Museums

“American Vaudeville Museum Collection.” *Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries*. <http://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/collections/american-vaudeville-museum-collection>.

“Overview of Museum Collections.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. <http://www.ushmm.org/research/research-in-collections/overview>. Manuscript collections cover a broad range of subject matter from pre-war to post-war.

“Collections.” *The National World War I Museum and Memorial*. <https://www.theworldwar.org/explore/collections>