

Researching Female Ancestors

Tracing female ancestors has often been a frustrating experience for many genealogists. Individual identities of women who lived prior to the twentieth century, both by law and custom, are often tangled in those of their husbands. Hence many genealogists refer to many of their female lines of research as their “invisible ancestors”.

The following serve as examples of activities that most women were prohibited from performing under normal circumstances:

1. Purchasing real estate in their own name
2. Signing legal documents
3. Making legally binding decisions
4. Raising children without male supervision
5. Participating in political or governmental activities
6. Participating in any meaningful church activities
7. Severe restrictions of non-homemaker activities related to outside employment
8. Neglect of female ancestors in family histories and genealogies – listed with only a first name and approximate dates for birth and death

Men held the balance of power in all aspects of life. Examples included the following:

1. Men wrote and signed all legal and historical documents
2. Held all meaningful jobs
3. Paid taxes
4. Participated in the military
5. Made out wills and made legal decisions
6. Male surnames were carried into the next generation by the children
7. Men could legally overrule any decisions that women made concerning parenting of the children

Women were generally restricted to the following occupations and responsibilities:

1. Child bearing
2. Household chores
3. Passing on family traditions
4. Raising the children and keeping up the house
5. When permitted, outside employment was usually limited to being teachers or nurses
6. Woman’s jobs were to be primarily mothers, wives, neighbors and friends

On many primary documents, such as wills, deeds, and inventories, the wife and/or daughters were only mentioned as though they were an appendage of the husband/father. Fortunately, many females in previous generations kept diaries of their experiences. Women also kept letters from their families and friends as cherished keepsakes. That is the only way, in many cases, to obtain information on the life of the women and the roles that they played during this period.

If you are fortunate enough to find any surviving diaries and letters, this can provide you with a gold mine of information. Unfortunately, most of these items have been discarded over a period of time. If you are unable to locate any diaries or letters, there are some other avenues that may assist you in your research:

1. Begin searching for specific information, (genealogical or biographical), about your female ancestor; her husband, her parents, her siblings, her neighbors, or friends that may still be alive. Even if you discover that only the children of the friends or neighbors are living, they are often unexpected and helpful sources of information.
2. Formulate specific questions concerning what you want to know about your female ancestor by doing some background work in order to formulate the questions. For some researchers, this would include reading a history book about the time period involved and focusing on the social customs for women of the era in question. Family Bibles, diaries, and letters (if they survived) would also be another source to assist you in this process. Our companion study guide, ***Oral History and Genealogical Research***, is a good starting point for information and ideas for what types of questions to focus on.
3. Take notes on the information you feel will answer your questions. As you are taking notes, you will formulate more questions. Be sure you cite your sources and log them into a reference sheet so you can quickly and accurately refer to your source should any questions arise which you will need to clarify.

The most beneficial documents containing information on female ancestors are listed in the following sections.

1. Probate Records

Probate records are generated during the process of settling the estate of a deceased person. In previous generations, probate records might be one of the few official documents where wives and females are mentioned by name. Researchers must know the husband's name. If you know some other male members of her family, you might check their probate files for clues. To access these records, you must know the county where the deceased lived at the time of death. Ensure you are checking the correct county, as many county lines may have changed over the years.

2. Vital Records

Marriage records contain the full name of the groom and the maiden name of the bride. Birth records contain the full names of both parents. In some jurisdictions, the mother is listed by her maiden name. Divorce records contain the complete name for the husband and the wife would be listed under her maiden name. Death records might also list both the husband and wife by name. To access these types of records, it is necessary to know the county and approximate date when the particular event took place.

3. Census Records

Beginning with the 1850 census, each individual family member, male and female, and their relationship to the head of the household was recorded. To effectively utilize census data, you

must know where the individual was living at the time the census was taken. The federal census was taken every ten years. Census indexes exist for 1850, 1860, and 1870 and are arranged by state. The Soundex was created beginning with the 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920 censuses. The Soundex code is based on the letters in an individual's surname. Our companion study guide *Genealogical Research Using U.S. Census Data* provides information on the Soundex in greater detail.

4. Family Bibles

Bibles are excellent sources of family information. The names of children and wives are frequently mentioned. Many families will have at least one member who considers him or her the guardian of history. You should inquire about the existence of such a Bible. Many local genealogy collections have access to indexes of Bible records or of donated Family Bibles. One should never make the assumption that if an ancestor was Roman Catholic, Jewish, or a member of a non-Protestant denomination, nobody in their family maintained a family Bible. This assumption has been proven wrong time and time again.

5. Church Records

Records pertaining to baptisms and christenings will frequently mention both mother and child. One must remember that certain denominations do not practice infant baptism, while others do not recognize baptism altogether. The publication by Frank S. Mead listed in the next section under the title *Handbook of American Denominations* is an excellent source for researching the religious protocol of any religious denomination.

6. Personal Diaries, Journals, Family Photograph Albums

If one can locate any of these items, the information written in the pages or on the back of the photographs can often open up unexpected research possibilities. Diaries and journals often contain the most private thoughts and feelings of a female ancestor. The female ancestor may have written down facts about a person or family member that they would never have said publicly. Photographs are useful because they often provide us with a face to attach to names and can lead to a close date when the event occurred. Even if the photographs are not labeled, the background behind the person, house, or building may provide clues. Two prime examples of background information that have been especially useful for research purposes are water towers and church signs. Water towers often have the name of the town or county prominently displayed. Church signs may have both the name of the church and the town as well.

How to Locate Maiden Names

One of the most common problems in researching female ancestors is locating a woman's maiden name. The following documents are usually the best opportunities for success:

Marriage Certificates

The marriage certificate is normally the best place to locate a woman's maiden name. Marriage certificates are available from either the county or state where the marriage took place, depending on the year of the marriage. If the marriage certificate is not available, many counties and states have similar vital records, such as marriage bans, marriage intentions, marriage bonds, marriage applications, marriage licenses, consent papers for marriage, marriage contracts,

marriage returns, and marriage registers. You may also use other records such as death or divorce certificates.

Church Records

You can usually find a woman's maiden name on church marriage registers. In addition, baptism and christening records often record the maiden name of the child's mother. If you know the child's name and can locate the child's baptism or christening records, you may be able to locate the maiden name of the female ancestor in question. Once you locate the records that belong to your ancestor's church, the current custodian of the records should be able to direct you in your search for the marriage, baptism, or christening record that you need. The largest collection of both American and foreign church records is among the microfilmed records held by the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. Their church records are organized first by state, then county, then town. Unless the town that you are searching for had very few churches, knowing a denomination will make your search easier.

Newspapers

Both wedding announcements and obituaries usually list a woman's maiden name. The most interesting part about looking up obituaries and wedding announcements is the possibility of finding a picture of the couple or individual. Fort Myers-Lee County Library has two directories which may help you find the current owners of old newspapers from the time and place where your ancestor resided. Fort Myers-Lee County Library has two directories in our reference collection that allows patrons to search for newspaper contact information. The titles are **Editor & Publisher International Yearbook** and **The Standard Periodical Directory**. Both titles are listed in the bibliography at the conclusion of this study guide.

Bible Records

Family Bibles often include the maiden names of women who marry into the family. Make sure that you have asked your family members whether or not they are aware of any old Bibles that are still in the family. When you find information in these Bibles, be sure to check the publication date of the Bible as one simple way to check the accuracy of the information. When you have a woman's full married name and cannot find family Bibles among your own family members, check with genealogical societies in the area where the family lived. They may be aware of other locations where Bible records have been compiled and kept for public research. Two other libraries with extensive collections of Bible records are:

1. The DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) Library in Washington, D.C.
2. Family History Center Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah

Military Records

Veteran's Benefit Records may show a woman's maiden name if either she or her spouse served in the military. For information on research techniques, and how to order information, please refer to our companion study guide **Military Records Research**.

Probate Records

Probate records are records of dispositions of a deceased individual's property and may include an individual's last will and testament. The maiden name of a wife is often listed in these documents. Probate records are normally found in the courthouse located in the county where the deceased person lived at the time of death. If you have some clues as to what her maiden name may have been, you could try looking for a will that may have belonged to her father or a male member of her family. The daughters, even those who are married, are often named in these wills. To obtain a copy of an individual's probate packet, contact the county clerk, town clerk, or the clerk of the probate court where the individual lived at the time of death.

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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 Regional 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.

Compiled By Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library, 1/9/2014

Genealogical Research and Tracing Female Ancestors Research Outline

Prior to the 20th century, identities of women were, both by law and custom, often interwoven with that of their husbands. Hence, many genealogists refer to their female lines of research as their “invisible ancestors”. This research outline has been compiled as a supplement to our other more detailed study guide *Researching Female Ancestors*, which includes a bibliography of additional resources for research. Listed below are several examples of activities that most women were prohibited from performing under normal circumstances:

1. Purchasing or owning real estate in their own name
2. Signing legal documents (deeds were sometimes an exception)
3. Making legally binding decisions
4. Raising children without male supervision
5. Participating in political or governmental activities
6. Participating in any meaningful church activities
7. Facing severe restrictions in non-homemaker related activities regarding outside employment
8. Female ancestors were neglected in family histories and genealogies and were listed with only a first name and approximate date for birth and death

Men held the balance of power in all aspects of life. Examples include the following:

1. Men wrote and signed all legal and historical documents
2. Held all meaningful jobs
3. Paid taxes
4. Participated in the military
5. Made out wills and made legal decisions
6. Male surname was carried into the next generation by the children
7. Men could legally over rule any decisions that the women made concerning parenting of the children

Primary historical responsibilities of women:

1. Child bearing
2. Household chores
3. Passing on family traditions
4. Ran the household in terms of raising the children
5. When permitted, outside employment was usually limited to being teachers or nurses. Women’s roles were primarily mothers, wives, neighbors and friends.

Locating Female Ancestors

While tracing female ancestors will present challenges, many can be overcome with patience and creative thinking. The following records have a proven track record for success in assisting researchers tracing maiden names of female ancestors. The discovery of the maiden name of your female ancestor often opens up several new avenues to research, such as new surnames, new families, and new connections. The twelve records

and resources listed below are the most common places to find the maiden name of any given female.

1. Marriage Records:

- a. Most direct option to locate a woman's maiden name
- b. May include potential records such as:
 - (1) Application
 - (2) Bann or announcement
 - (3) Bond
 - (4) License
 - (5) Certificate
- c. You must know the spouse's name, marriage location and approximate date of marriage in order to find these records.

2. Cemetery Records:

- a. Cemetery plots may be the only place where you will find proof of the existence of a female ancestor.
- b. Tombstones may list women under their maiden names, with "wife of so and so," as the record of their married name, or may include the wife's maiden name as a middle name or initial.
- c. When no mention of the female's maiden name is found on any of the tombstones in your initial search, check nearby plots for possible family members.

3. Federal and State Census Records:

- a. Check every census year available for your female ancestor, up until the year that she died
- b. Young couples may be found living with the wife's parents; an elderly parent may have been added to the household; or brothers, sisters, or other family members may be found living with your ancestor's family.
- c. Clues may also be found in the names of families living nearby since family members tended to live in close proximity to each other.

4. Land Records:

- a. The concept of the common man having the opportunity to own their own land has always separated America from every other country in the world.
- b. Land was extremely important, and often passed down from father to daughter. Examine deeds for your ancestor and/or her husband and check for the Latin phrases "et ux.",(and wife), and "et al.", "and others".
- c. Deeds may provide the names of females, siblings or children.
- d. Watch for a man or a couple selling land to your ancestors for a dollar, or other small amount. The ones selling the land are more than likely the parents or relatives of your female ancestor.

5. Church Records:

- a. Church Records tend to be good sources for locating birth or christenings.
- b. The record usually states names of both parents, and sometimes includes the maiden name of the mother.
- c. The spouse's maiden name may be listed with the spouse's name in marriage records.

- d. Church records are considered the best alternate source of marriage information for periods before the advent of civil registration or formal vital records.
 - e. Many churches issue a variety of certificates for ceremonies related to sacraments.
 - f. Church bulletins often document major events in member's lives including a list of those participating in sacramental ceremonies.
- 6. Probate Records and Wills:**
- a. If you have a possible set of parents for your female ancestor, search for their probate record or will.
 - b. Married names of female children, along with the given names of their spouses, are often listed.
 - c. Since estates often involved the division of land, deed indexes for your female ancestor may be able to lead you to probate proceedings.
- 7. Newspaper Records:**
- a. Check newspapers for the ancestor's locality for birth, marriage announcements or obituaries.
 - b. Even if you can't locate an obituary for your female ancestor, you may find notices for siblings or other family members that provide helpful clues.
 - c. Combining a list of your ancestor's siblings with census research can help determine potential families.
- 8. Death Certificates:**
- a. If your female ancestor died recently enough to leave a death certificate, this is potentially one of the few places where her maiden name may appear.
 - b. Since death certificates can often include inaccurate information, check the certificate for the name of the informant, who was often a family member.
 - c. The closeness of the relationship between informant and the deceased can help you assess the accuracy of the information provided.
- 9. Military Records:**
- a. Pension applications and military service records often include good biographical information.
 - b. Family members often signed as witnesses and/or provided depositions..
- 10. Naming Patterns:**
- a. It is only a clue, but the maiden name of a mother can sometimes be found buried somewhere among the names of her children.
 - b. Unusual middle names, among boys or girls, might be the maiden name of a mother or grandmother.
 - c. Eldest daughter might be named for her maternal grandmother.
- 11. Divorce Records:**
- a. Prior to the 20th century, divorces were often difficult (and expensive) to obtain, especially for women.
 - b. Divorce records may provide clues to maiden names when no other sources exist.
 - c. Even if your female ancestor never received a divorce, that doesn't mean she didn't file for one.
 - d. It was common for women to be denied a divorce, despite claims of cruelty or

adultery but the paperwork from the filing may still be found among the records of the court.

12. Women's Dower Rights:

- a. This pertains to land records but is a very under-utilized research concept.
- b. When a couple sold land in the nineteenth century, the woman is often identified due to her right of dower.
- c. A dower was a portion of the husband's land that was allotted to his wife upon his death.
- d. In many areas this interest was one-third of the estate, and was usually only for the widow's lifetime.
- e. The husband could not will this land away from his wife, and if he sold any property during his life, his wife had to sign a release of her dower interest.
- f. When a widow inherited money, possessions, or property, she was allowed to manage them for herself.

Research Tips for Locating Marriage Records

1. Determine which office holds the marriage records in the locality where the couple was living at the time of their marriage.
2. If they resided in different localities, look in the bride's county or town of residence.
3. Search for all records of a marriage including marriage certificates, applications, licenses, and bonds.
4. In some areas, all documents generated by a marriage will be found combined into the same record, in others they will be listed in separate books with separate indexes for the bride and groom.
5. If you're researching African-American ancestors, some counties maintained separate marriage books for blacks and whites in the years following the Civil War.
6. Remember that the quality and accuracy of the information found in these records will vary depending on the accuracy, honesty, and diligence of both the party providing the information and the person recording the information.
7. If you find a record of the marriage for your female ancestor, be sure to note all pertinent information such as the following:
 - a. Names of bride and groom
 - b. Places of residence
 - c. Ages
 - d. Occupations
 - e. Date of marriage
 - f. Person who performed the ceremony (may help identify the church)
 - g. Witnesses (often related to the bride and groom)
8. If the couple was married at a residence, you may find a notation of the location. (Could provide a valuable clue to the bride's father's name since young ladies often married at home)
9. Women who remarried often were listed by their previous married name rather than their maiden name. However, a maiden name can usually be ascertained

from the father's surname.

European Marriage Records

When searching for marriage records in Europe, the following points are an important part of the search process:

1. Church records are the most common sources for marriage records until the after 1860, depending on the country.
2. Civil registration became the norm in the late 19th and 20th centuries.
3. Civil marriages are often indexed on a national level, though it is very helpful if you know the province, region, parish, etc. in which the marriage took place.
4. In the church, most couples were married by banns, rather than marriage licenses, mainly because licenses cost more than banns.
5. Marriage banns may be recorded in the marriage register or in a separate banns register.

Canadian Marriage Records

Compilation of marriage records in Canada are primarily the responsibility of the individual provinces, most of which were recording marriages by the early 1900s. Earlier marriage records can usually be found in the church registers.

For additional information, please consult our companion study guide *Researching Female Ancestors*.

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Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library, 9/12/2016.

**Tracing Female Ancestors
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Tracing Female Ancestors - Short List of Relevant Internet Websites

Cyndi's List – Female Ancestors

<http://www.cyndislist.com/female/>

Daughters of the American Revolution – Genealogical Research

<http://www.dar.org/national-society/genealogy/using-genealogical-research-system-grs>

Discovering American Women's History Online – Middle Tennessee University

<http://digital.mtsu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/women>

Employments of Women: Cyclopedia of Woman's Work – Scanned Copy of 1863 Title By Virginia Penny – University of Michigan

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=AEB1163>

Family Search Wiki – Best Websites for Tracing Female Ancestors

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Best_Websites_for_Tracing_Women_\(National_Institute\)](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Best_Websites_for_Tracing_Women_(National_Institute))

Family Search Wiki – Maiden Names in the United States

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Maiden_Names_in_the_United_States

Freedom of Information Act Request

<http://www.foia.gov/report-makerequest.html>

Genealogy Insider: Tracing Your Female Ancestors

<http://blog.familytreemagazine.com/insider/2014/03/18/GenealogyTipsForTracingFemaleAncestors.aspx>

Genealogy.com – Finding Female Ancestors and Maiden Names

http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/50_donna.html

Harvard University: Women Working 1800-1930

<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/>

In-Depth Genealogist: Three Ideas for Tracing Your Female Ancestors

<http://theindepthgenealogist.com/three-ideas-for-tracing-your-female-ancestors/>

Invisible Women Ancestors: How to Research the Women in Your Family Tree

http://genealogy.about.com/od/women/a/female_ancestor.htm

Library of Congress – Searching for Female Ancestors – Selected Bibliography

https://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/bib_guid/female.pdf

Society for Women and the Civil War

<http://www.swcw.org/>

Thought.com – Invisible Women Ancestors

<https://www.thoughtco.com/invisible-women-ancestors-1422869>

United Daughters of the Confederacy

<http://www.hqudc.org/>

Votes for Women: Selections From the National Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848-1921

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/naw/nawshom.html>

Women and Naturalization Records – National Archives Prologue Article

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-1.html>

Women and Social Movements in the United States 1600-2000

<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/>

**Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library,
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