

Researching Female Ancestors

Women & Records

Several factors may impact record availability.

Time

Records are sometimes lost/damaged over time; prior to record-keeping laws, a record may not have been created.

Roles

Historically, women held more limited official roles than men, resulting in fewer records about them. Women were not always recorded or counted in the same way as men, so locating women in records can be difficult.

Names

Documents typically recorded women using their married name, so discovering their maiden names can be difficult. If a woman married more than once, she may have had several surnames.

Laws and rights

Many early U.S. colonies adopted English common law which meant women held no independent legal status (unless they were single, widowed, or divorced).

Research Strategies

Search records thoroughly

Look for all records and read the entire record (note the names of everyone!), question your assumptions about what you might find and where, and try different name and keyword combinations in database searches.

Be mindful of names

Keep a list of spelling variations, nicknames, and unusual family names - and investigate naming traditions.

Construct a timeline

List her and her family's major life events, along with national/historical events and changes in record-keeping laws. Do new theories, gaps in knowledge, or intriguing questions rise to the surface?

Research the people in her life

Try cluster research (i.e. research her family, associates, and neighbors - her FAN club) and collateral research (i.e. research your indirect relatives - her siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.).

Records for Researching Female Ancestors

When researching female ancestors, we look for many of the same records as we do for men - we just need to be a bit more creative to find clues!

Vital records

Records of birth and death are more common beginning in the early 1900s, while marriage records often begin at the county's founding. If you can't find marriage records, check the county where the couple lived prior to marriage, had their first child, and were first listed together in the census. Also look for her husband's death records, records of all her children and siblings, and note informants and witnesses.

Census records

Search for every federal and state census from her lifetime, and pay attention to neighbors who may be relatives. If you can't find your ancestor, search for people she may have lived with at different periods of her life.

Probate records

Women are likely to be listed in male relatives' records by their married name, but possibly by maiden name, or just as "wife" or "daughter." Search [Ancestry's Card Catalog](#) and [FamilySearch's database](#) and [unindexed images](#). Use terms "estate," "will," or "probate" and include state/county.

Records for Researching Female Ancestors cont.

Court records

Records might include divorces, guardianship, inheritance disputes, crimes, etc. Even if an ancestor didn't divorce, she may have petitioned for one that wasn't granted.

Newspapers

Obituaries, marriage and engagement announcements, notices of birth and death, anniversaries, local news, divorce, and court filings provide vital and biographical information as well as clues to other records. Search the [Library of Congress' Chronicling America database](#) and access [newspaper databases via PPLD](#) at no cost to resident card holders.

Land records and deeds

If your ancestor was widowed, single, or divorced (i.e. feme sole), she may have bought or sold her own property. If she was married (i.e. fem covert), she may be listed in property sales for dower rights release. Search for her male relatives. *TIP: A dower was a woman's right to a portion of her husband's estate to support herself.* Search [Ancestry's Card Catalog](#) and [FamilySearch's database](#) and [unindexed images](#). Use terms "deed," "land," or "patent" and include state/county.

Military records

If your ancestor lived during a war or shortly after, she may have her own military records or be included in the pension records of her male family members. Veteran's and widow's pension application records may contain supporting documents like letters and vital records.

Church records

Before government standardization of record-keeping, churches often recorded births, baptisms and christenings, marriages, and memberships. *TIP: Godparents/sponsors may be relatives.*

Cemeteries

Find family members or vital details by searching for grave markers ([Find A Grave](#) and [BillionGraves](#)) or cemetery records (local cemetery offices and local/state archives).

Social Security records

The Social Security Death Index includes deaths reported to the Social Security Administration between 1937-2014. For a fee, you [may request a copy](#) of a Social Security Card application.

City directories

Changes in household/address may provide clues about deaths, divorce, or relocation. Widows and working women may be listed independently, wives/daughters with male heads of household. Search [FamilySearch's unindexed images](#), [Ancestry's Card Catalog](#) (use term "city directory"), local repositories (e.g. [PPLD](#)), [Google Books](#), [Internet Archive](#), [Hathi Trust](#), and [WorldCat](#).

Local histories & biographies

County histories provide a historical overview of the area - may include maps, illustrations, and biographies. These are typically about men but may provide info about women in the family. Check the city directories resources listed above.

Immigration/Emigration & Naturalization records

Immigration/Emigration - The amount of info collected on passenger lists generally increased over time. In 1820 the U.S. required all U.S bound ships to keep passenger lists. Search maiden and married names and various spellings. Naturalization - Pre-1922, wives shared citizenship with husbands; post 1922, women applied for citizenship separately. Beginning in 1906, naturalization records ask for wife/children's names, dates and places of birth, and residence.

Bible records

Family bibles were often used to record vital events and may be the only record available. Check local repositories, the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#), [Bible Records Online](#), and the [Family Bible Preservation Project](#).



Use the [FamilySearch Research Wiki](#) to learn more about records - by location, time, and type!