

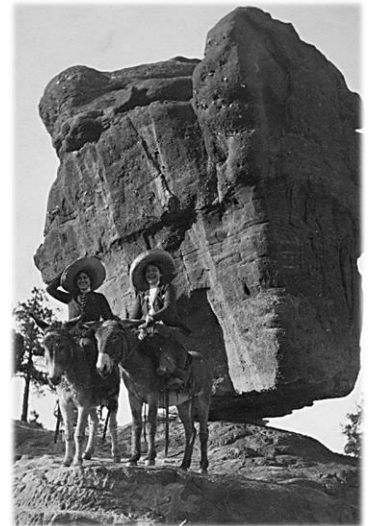
Female Ancestors A Beginner's Guide

Researching your female ancestors can be a difficult, yet rewarding, process. Use records in creative ways to discover the women of your family.

Women are more difficult to find in the records

The value structures of people from different eras varied greatly over time. Women were not counted in the same way as men and, as a result, their records can be harder to trace.

- Many early U.S. colonies adopted English common law which meant women held no independent legal status (unless they were single, widowed, or divorced).
- Legal rights of women (including creating contracts, going to court, child custody, voting, and managing their inheritance and citizenship) varied by location and changed over time.
- Usually, a woman's married name was used in documents. It can be difficult to locate a woman's maiden name and, if a woman married multiple times, she may have had more than one surname.



Strategies for researching female ancestors

You may find there are few records listed under your female ancestor's name. Consider how she might be included in the records of others. Focus especially on the records of male relatives – husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons, uncles, and cousins. Look for the usual sources, but cast a wider net to include your ancestor's FAN Club (Family, Associates, and Neighbors).

Vital Records

- Marriage license, certificate, bann, or bond
- Death certificate/register (and husband's)
- Records of her children (often list mother's maiden name) or siblings (may include parents' names)

If you have trouble locating marriage records, check the county where: the couple lived prior to marriage; their first child was born; the couple was first listed in the census.

Census Records

- Search every census (federal and state) during your ancestor's lifetime
 - Also search for relatives, who may have lived with or neighbored your ancestor
 - Check the pages before and after your ancestor's listing to find neighboring relatives
- Note that, prior to 1850, the federal census only listed the (usually male) head of household.*

Will and Probate Records

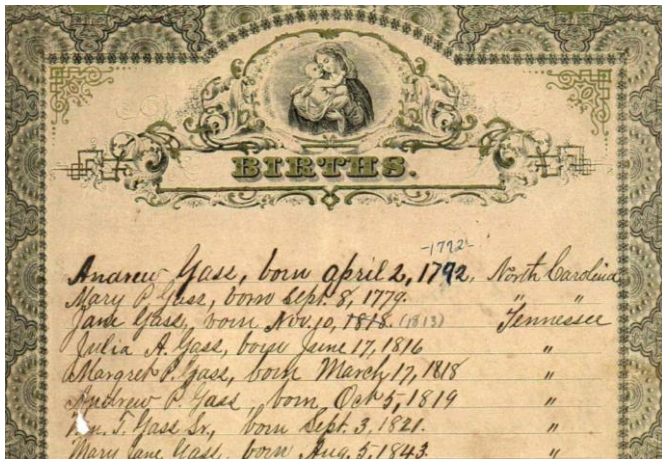
- Search for male relatives, especially her husband, father, and brothers
- If a woman was single, divorced, or widowed, they may have records under their own name
- Search by married name (more common in records) first, then by maiden name

Search [Ancestry](#)¹, [FamilySearch](#)², and the [FamilySearch Catalog](#)³ using terms like “estate,” “will,” “probate,” and include the state/county.

Bible Records

- In some cases, bible records may be the only record of a birth, death, or marriage

Check local repositories and the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#)⁴, [Bible Records Online](#)⁵, and the [Family Bible Preservation Project](#)⁶.



Family Bible page including family names and dates and locations of birth.

Cemeteries

- In addition to searching for your ancestor, check nearby burials for family members
- Search [Find A Grave](#)⁷ and [BillionGraves](#)⁸, or contact local cemetery offices.

Newspapers

- Obituaries (search for family members too!), birth, marriage, or social announcements, divorce and other court filings, and local news

Search [Pikes Peak Newfinder](#)⁹, [Newspaper Archive](#)¹⁰, [19th Century Newspapers](#)¹¹.

Military Records

- If your ancestor lived during a war or shortly after, she may be listed in her father or husband’s pension or bounty land records

Social Security Records (beginning in 1936)

- Social Security card applications (SS-5 form) can list details such as parents’ full names
- Search this [index](#)¹²; use [FamilySearch](#)¹³ to locate Social Security numbers; [Request SS-5 forms](#)¹⁴.

Land Records and Deeds

Search for male relatives, especially her:

- husband - before land was sold, his wife had to release her land dower rights (inheritance)
- father - following his death, daughters were listed by their married names

Search [Ancestry](#)¹, [FamilySearch](#)², and the [FamilySearch Catalog](#)³ using terms like “deed,” “land,” or “patent” and include the state/county.

Church Records

- Records of birth, baptism and christening, marriage, membership, and church groups
- Godparents/sponsors may be relatives

Use the [FamilySearch Wiki](#)¹⁵ for records by state.

City Directories

- Changes in a household or address provide clues about deaths, divorce, and relocation
- Wives and daughters might be listed alongside male heads of household; working women and widows could be listed independently

Check the [FamilySearch Catalog](#)³ and [Ancestry](#)¹⁶ (keyword search “city directory”), the [FamilySearch Wiki](#)¹⁷, and [local repositories](#)¹⁷.

Local Histories

- Histories often include biographies of residents (usually men, so search for male relatives)

Use [WorldCat](#)¹⁸ and the [FamilySearch Catalog](#)³ to search for published histories and biographies.

Naturalization and Immigration Records

- Prior to 1906, naturalization records rarely mentioned women or children
- Search passenger arrival lists by both maiden or married name (varied by ethnic group)

Also look for husband and children.

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

Tip: Look for naming patterns. A woman may have been given her mother’s surname or the name of a grandparent. Unusual family names are great clues too.