

Researching Female Ancestors

Women & Records

There are several factors that impact the availability of records about our female ancestors:

Time - Records are lost and damaged over time; prior to record-keeping laws, a record may not have been made.

Roles - Historically, women held more limited 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 during her lifetime.

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). Use the [FamilySearch Research Wiki](#) to learn more about records by location.

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 and nicknames, unusual family names, and research naming traditions.

Construct a timeline

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

Research the people in her life

Research her FAN club (Family, Associates, and Neighbors; i.e., cluster research) and her/your indirect relatives (i.e., collateral research).

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 and other family members!

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 (esp. bride), had their first child, and was 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 most likely to be listed in male relatives' records by their married name, but possibly by maiden name, or just as "wife" or "daughter."

Search the [Ancestry Card Catalog](#) and FamilySearch's [database](#) and [unindexed images](#) using terms like "estate," "will," or "probate" and include state/county.

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

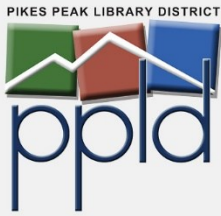
Obituaries, marriage and engagement announcements, and notices of birth, death, anniversaries, local news, or divorce and court filings provide vital and biographical information as well as clues to other records.

Search [free PPLD databases](#) and the Library of Congress' [Chronicling America directory](#) and [database](#).

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Records for Researching Female Ancestors (continued)

Land records and deeds

Feme sole (widowed, single, or divorced) - may have bought or sold her own property.

Feme covert (married) - more often listed in property sales (for dower rights release), rather than purchases, so search for male relatives, esp. her husband and father.

Search the [Ancestry Card Catalog](#) and FamilySearch's [database](#) and [unindexed images](#) using terms like "deed," "land," or "patent" and include state/county.

Common Law	Civil Law
English colonies (most of the U.S.)	French and Spanish colonies (Louisiana & Quebec)
<i>Dower</i> - a woman's right to part of her husband's estate to support herself.	<i>Dowry</i> - the property a bride brings to her husband in marriage.

Military records

If your ancestor lived during a war or shortly after, she may have her own military records. However, it is more likely that she would be included in the pension records of her male family members. Veteran and widow's pension application records may contain supporting documents like letters and vital records, as well as bounty land records.

Church records

Before government standardization of record-keeping, churches often (depending on denomination) recorded births, baptisms and christenings, marriages, and memberships. 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 (few before 1962). For a fee, you may [request a copy](#) of a Social Security Card application (SS-5 form).

City directories

Changes in a household or address can provide clues about deaths, divorce, and relocation. While working women and widows may be listed independently, wives and daughters might be listed alongside male heads of household.

Search the [FamilySearch images](#), [Ancestry Card Catalog](#) (keyword "city directory"), [local repositories](#), [Google Books](#), [Internet Archive](#), [Hathi Trust](#), and [WorldCat](#).

Local histories & biographies

County histories provide a historical overview of a given area and can include maps, illustrations, and biographies which, though typically about men, may still provide information about women over several generations.

Check the city directories resources listed above.

Immigration/Emigration and Naturalization records

Immigration/Emigration - the amount of information collected on passenger lists at a port of entry generally increased over time. In 1820 the U.S. required all U.S-bound ships to keep passenger lists. Search using both maiden and married name, and try various spellings.

Naturalization - Prior to 1922, wives shared the citizenship of their husbands (after 1922, women needed to apply for citizenship separately). Beginning in 1906, naturalization records ask for wife/children's names, dates and places of birth, and residence. Woman and children are less frequently mentioned prior to 1906.

Bible records

Many family bibles include pages for recording vital events. In some cases, these may be the only record of a birth, death, or marriage

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

Tip! A few more options to explore include:

- Mother's pensions
- Women's club records
- DNA testing
- Public family trees from websites like FamilySearch, Ancestry, and MyHeritage (take with a grain of salt!).

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