

Finding Your Elusive Female Ancestors

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INTRODUCTION: In the early history of many countries, women came under the legal status of their husbands, so they are not always listed in the records. It is important to understand which records were created about women. Then the focus needs to shift to records of the men they were related to: husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons, and even uncles or cousins.

Why are women harder to find in the records?

- Under English common law, which many early U.S. colonies adopted, married women were covered under the legal status of their husbands. Because the men took care of many of the legal matters, the women were not always mentioned in the records.
 - It is very important to research all the men related to your female ancestor.
- If a married woman was mentioned in the records, for most of her life this would be under her married name, so it is harder to document her maiden name.
- Widows, divorced women, and single women who had come of age had their own legal status and may be easier to find.
- The legal rights which varied for women over the years include the custody of their children, inheritance, voting rights, entering into contracts or going to court, and citizenship.

Sources to Check First:

Records are listed in general order of priority, starting with the records most likely to be successful due to record content and ease of access.

▪ Vital Records - General Principles

- Check availability in the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) - search for the [name of state] and "birth" etc.
- In most states, marriage records start when the county began (or the town in New England.)
- Birth and death certificates usually began in the early 1900s. If the family was born in the 1800s then search first for the death certificates for those children who might have died in the 1900s.
- Always note the names of the witnesses or informants because they are often close relatives.
- Find Vital Records:
 - [FamilySearch](#), [Ancestry](#) (\$), and [FindMyPast](#) (\$) have many vital records.
 - [FamilySearch Wiki](#): search [name of state] and "online records."

- **Vital records where women are listed:**
 1. **Their marriage license or certificate**
 - Check the county where 1) the couple was first listed in the census, 2) where their first child was born, or 3) where the individuals lived before marriage.
 - Check several census records after 1850 to determine her state of birth and check there.
 - Look for marriage banns and bonds in earlier time periods.
 2. **Her Death certificate and her spouse's** – especially for those deaths after the early 1900s.
 3. **Find the birth, marriage and death certificates/license for each of her children.**
 - These will often include the maiden name of the mother.
- **Census Records** - Find your female ancestor in each census record she was alive.
 - In 1850 and later, the U.S. Census lists each person by name, and from 1880 on they listed the person's relationship to the head of household.
 - Sometimes a young couple might be living with her parents, or an aging parent or one of her siblings might live with the couple.
 - After 1850, find the husband in a census just before he was married. Search for women with the same first name and of the right age who lived in the same or nearby towns or counties.
 - See if they disappear from the census about the time of marriage.
 - Prior to 1850, look for possible families who lived nearby who had a female who was age 15-29.
 - Remember to look for state censuses as well. Check the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) for availability.
 - Always view the original record for additional details that might provide evidence.
- **Published family trees** – use these trees only as a suggestion to confirm with further research.
 - [FamilySearch Family Tree](#), [FamilySearch Genealogies](#), [Ancestry's Public Member Trees](#), & [MyHeritage Family Trees](#).
- **Probate/Estate Records:** wills, inventories, guardianships, etc.
 - If you have a possible surname, check for probate records in the area because daughters are often listed under their married name.
 - Search for a daughter's married name in online probate indexes.
 - Find probate records:
 - [Ancestry Database Catalog](#): type [name of state] and "probate" or "will" or "estate."
 - [FamilySearch Historical Records](#): type "probate" in "Find a collection."
 - [FamilySearch Catalog](#): search on the county level.

Tips for Searching each Record Type

1. **Use the catalogs of major websites:** In the major websites, your search results will be much more effective if you narrow your search down to individual collections.
 - Bookmark the catalogs listed below. Type in the name of the state and the record type or other key word. Example: North Carolina probate.
 - [Ancestry's Card Catalog](#);
 - [FamilySearch Historical Records](#);
 - ["FindMyPast "A-Z of Record Sets"](#)
2. **Digitized Records:** For a quick way to see what microfilms and books have been digitized in the FamilySearch Catalog, use the "Keyword" search and then in the left column choose Availability>Online.

- **Social Security Records** (The Social Security Act passed in 1935)
 - The Application for a Social Security Card (SS-5 Form) often includes genealogical information, including the full names of the parents.
 - Find Social Security Records:
 - Ancestry (\$): [U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007](#) this indexes the SS-5 applications, as well as claims, so it includes the names of the applicant's parents.
 - Alternate option: For ancestors who may have applied for a Social Security card, identify their Social Security number in [FamilySearch: United States Social Security Death Index](#). Then order the SS-5 Form by filling out the "Request for Deceased Individual's Social Security Record" at <https://www.ssa.gov/forms/ssa-711.pdf>.
- **Cemetery Records**
 - Look at people buried nearby because family members were often near each other.
 - Find Cemetery Records:
 - [FamilySearch or Ancestry\(\\$\): Find A Grave Index](#)
 - [FamilySearch: BillionGraves Index](#)
 - Other cemetery records: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Cemeteries
- **DNA Testing**
 - Test or upload your data at the big five testing companies.
 - Autosomal DNA can often provide evidence for ancestors in the 1800s. Earlier than that can take more advanced analysis or may not be available for particular ancestors.

NEXT SEARCH IN THESE RECORDS:

- **Obituaries** – Check for an obituary of the person, a spouse, a child, or a sibling.
 - Find Obituary Records:
 - [FamilySearch: Obituaries](#)
 - [Ancestry: U.S., Obituary Collection, 1930-2015](#)
 - [Cyndi's List: Obituaries](#)
 - [www.newspapers.com](#)\$, [www.GenealogyBank.com](#)\$, [LOC - Chronicling America](#), etc
- **Land Records**
 - Especially check Grantee records - when the husband sold land, the wife often had to give consent to release her dower right (inheritance).
 - When a man died, often his real estate was divided among his children and the daughters were listed under their married name. Search for them in the grantor-grantee indexes.
 - Especially watch for a deed of land to your ancestor for a small amount of money.
 - Find land records:
 - [Ancestry Database Catalog](#) – type [name of state] and "land" or "deed" or "patent," etc
 - [FamilySearch Historical Records](#): Choose Location and name your state
 - [Family History Library Catalog](#): search on the county level
- **Military Records**
 - Pension records typically provide the most genealogical information and can include the name of the wife or daughter.
 - If the female ancestor you are looking for was born around the time of a war and up to 20 years after, then check for a pension record for the father.
 - Bounty land warrants can also list the name of the spouse

- Find military records:
 - [Fold3](#) (\$) is the best site to start looking for military records.
 - [Ancestry](#) (\$) and [FamilySearch](#) also have military collections.
 - See also [United States Military Online Genealogy Records](#)
 - Many [state archives or libraries](#) have online military collections, especially for the Civil War.
- **Church Marriage or Christening Records**
 - Check [FamilySearch Wiki: United States Church Records](#) for the state you are researching in.
 - Check for birth (include baptisms/christenings) or marriage records
 - Note any changes in lists of church membership
- **Newspapers** for birth, marriage, or social announcements
- **Perform a Google Search**
- **City Directories** –have been published usually yearly since the early 1800's.
 - An alphabetical listing of inhabitants arranged by name, address, and occupation, with the wife sometimes listed in parenthesis.
 - Widows, working women, and sometimes adult children at home were listed.
 - City directories are a good place to check possible surnames nearby. Find city directories:
 - [Ancestry \(\\$\): City Directories](#)
 - [United States Online Historical Directories](#)
 - [Family History Library Catalog](#): [state, county, city]; or [name of state] and “city directory.”
- **Local and County histories**
 - Also check histories for siblings, children or grandchildren. Find the histories:
 - [WorldCat Library](#) is an online catalog for many libraries around the world. It will also reference online sources for some books. If not available online, try interlibrary loan.
 - [FamilySearch Catalog](#) lists books available at the FHL and includes a link to digital versions.
 - **Google search**: [county, state] and “history”
- **Immigration or Naturalization records**
- **Watch for Naming Patterns** - Especially watch for unusual first or middle names
 - A name could be given the name of a grandparent or the mother’s surname
- **Research her Extended Family, Associates, and Neighbors (FAN Club)**
- **Bible Records**
 - DAR [“Bible Records and Transcriptions”](#) – over 60,000 records or [Bible Records Online](#)
- **Court records**
 - If a female was widowed, she might use a male relative as a witness or to give a surety in a bond.
 - Court records can include guardianships, divorces, trials, etc.

Other Resources

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestors: Special Strategies for Uncovering Hard-to-Find Information about Your Female Lineage*. Betterway, 1998.

Cyndi’s List. “Female Ancestors.” <https://cyndislist.com/female/>.

Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Schaefer, Christina K. *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women’s Genealogy*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub., 2006.