

Finding What You Need and Making the Most of What You Find

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Check All Related Records

Many types of records contain multiple pages or consist of several different but related documents. Often only a portion can be found online or will be provided as the result of a record request unless you specify that you want everything connected to that record. Land, probate, marriage, and naturalization records are examples of this. Ask for the complete file and any associated records, along with "loose papers." And if you are looking at records online, be sure to turn the page!

Look for Hidden Records

Records may be stored in separate files, boxes, or databases because they were cancelled for some reason, but they contain all of the same information as the regular records, and sometimes even more. Examples include cancelled homestead, voting, and naturalization records, and cancelled indentured servant's contracts. They may also be labeled as rejected, relinquished, annulled, disapproved, suspended, disapproved, delayed, or refused, so search for these keywords in your ancestor's location, and ask about them in repositories.

Explore Miscellaneous Records

Your ancestor's state, county, or town may have a Miscellaneous or Public Record file that abounds with genealogical information of all sorts, from birth and death records to deeds to licenses and more. Also search for the word "duplicate" in case the only remaining copy was filed separately because it was not the original.

Explore the FAN Club: Friends, Family, Associates and Neighbors

Researching the people in our ancestor's lives can often provide information we won't find directly. Get hold of a map of graves from your ancestor's cemetery to see who is buried nearby, possibly a relative or someone from the same overseas church or village. See who appears in the census (or any other record) on nearby pages. Look for married daughters or remarried mothers by given name, and find others with the same profession or place of origin who might have been part of your ancestor's social circle.

Follow the Money

Who paid the bills? Who put up the marriage bond or paid for the funeral? This was probably a relative. Who provided free labor? Chain carriers who helped survey property were often the buyer's children. Sale of property for an amount well below market value can also indicate a personal relationship.

Decipher Codes

Many documents use internal codes, and learning what these codes mean may provide further information or clarify what is meant when handwriting is illegible. A Google search for codes in a particular type of record, such as "codes in New South Wales 1828 census," will often provide answers. One easy resource for understanding U. S. census occupation codes is Stephen P. Morse's "Deciphering Codes Appended to 1930 to 1950 Census in One Step" tool at <https://stevemorse.org>.

Learn More About the Records

Many documents were created according to specific rules, and understanding those rules can help us more accurately interpret the information we find. Census enumerators, for example, were given specific instructions about how to record information, and understanding those instructions can help you to know what the entries meant. "Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000" is a good place to start.

https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2002/dec/pol_02-ma.pdf

We may also learn whether the records were comprehensive or whether some areas were missed, and in some cases, we'll discover whether that ancestor qualified for inclusion at all.

Search for Name Variations

- Consider spelling variations when searching by name, but also include a separate search for abbreviations and nicknames.
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Traditional_Nicknames_in_Old_Documents_-_A_Wiki_List
- https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Abbreviations_for_English_given_names
- <http://www.genealogyintime.com/dictionaries/list-of-first-name-abbreviations.html>
- "Guessing a Name Variation." Modified from G. David Dilts, "Guidelines for Finding Misplaced Names in Census Indexes", in the "Censuses and Tax Lists" chapter of Meyerink, Kory L. *Printed Sources: A Guide to Publish Genealogical Records* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1998), 339. Available online at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Guessing_a_Name_Variation.
- Case, Julia M., Myra Vanderpool Gormley, CG & Rhonda McClure. "Why U Can't Find Your Ancestors, Misspeld Knames - A Commun Problem for Reeserchors," Rootsweb's Guide to Tracing Family Trees, Guide No. 8. <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~rwguide/lesson8.htm>

Hunt for Evidence of Name Changes

Many printed and online resources identify name changes. Search for the term "name changes" along with the city, county or state to find them. Name changes in the US and parts of Europe were historically granted by the government in a private law. In the US, these can be searched online by name at the Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation (<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/hlawquery.html>) if the private law was federal, but check state laws as well. Other records may exist in courthouses, but also in books and newspaper articles online or in print.

Search by Address

Sometimes a name search isn't successful even though the name does appear in the record. To overcome this, search by street address. This is especially useful when searching digitized city directories or newspapers. Also consider searching for that address prior to the time your

ancestor lived there to learn about his house, or after your ancestor's death to see who sold or moved into the property. But don't forget that street names changed as cities grew. Public libraries and local city clerks should have publications that list all of the changes.

Take Fuller Advantage of Google

Improve the quality of your Google searches by using symbols that tell the computer what to look for. Eliminate unwanted words or names by using a minus. Put names or phrases within quotation marks to instruct the search engine to prioritize those words and keep them together. Indicate a range of dates with two dots (and don't add any extra spaces). And don't forget to specify the place you are searching for.

For example, "Robert Lincoln" –Todd Nebraska 1850..1930 will eliminate all Robert *Todd* Lincolns, narrow the search to Nebraska, keep the name Robert Lincoln (relatively) intact, and look for webpages that name a year between 1850-1930.

Recover Missing Webpages

The Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web>) can help you pull up a webpage that can no longer be accessed directly on the internet using an older link. Simply enter the URL (web address) of the missing page, choose one of the previous years listed in the graph below, and click on one of the blue circles. Most of the time, the page will appear, and all of the links it contains should be active.

Consider the Source

Learn about where every record came from in order to determine how much credibility it deserves. Collections such as Ancestry.com's Family Data Collection, for example, rely upon unsourced information compiled for a purpose other than genealogy, and should therefore be used as a point of departure for further research rather than as a reliable source of evidence. Information about digitized records can often be found at the website where the record is available, sometimes by scrolling down to the bottom of the page.

Also, many records, especially death records, stem from the same source at the same time. Make sure you actually do have corroborating evidence.

Label Photos and Documents

Renaming digitized photos to identify the ancestors they depict can help you find them with a quick search. On a Mac, click on the title or image number, press enter, and then type in the name or label you wish to use. On a PC, click on the title or image number, press F2, then type in the name.

Examine Framed Photos

Take photos out of their frames. Somebody may have written identifying information on the back, or the studio in which the picture was taken might be identified, leading you to an ancestor's location.

Download

Downloading documents that you find online to your computer will allow you to enhance and magnify them, making it much easier to read difficult handwriting. Also, since printing whole documents can be problematic because they come out too small to be legible, you can crop downloaded images or take screenshots and magnify just the section about your ancestor, which makes them much easier to read. On Ancestry, choose the green Save button at the top and then “Save to your computer.” On FamilySearch, just click on Download at the top on the right.

Translate Foreign Records

Even if you don't understand your ancestor's native tongue, you can get help with foreign-language records by joining Genealogy Translations, a private Facebook group where volunteers generously help us read our family's ancestral documents at no cost. Request permission to join and be sure to read the rules before you post.

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/GenealogicalTranslations>).

Use FamilySearch Strategically

Go to FamilySearch.org, choose the Search tab, then choose catalog. Although this will open a “Place” search, select a “Keyword” search instead for better results, *even if you are searching for a place*.

Many records on FamilySearch have been digitized but not yet indexed, making it difficult to know where your ancestor's scanned documents might be hiding. A new feature that may help is called "Explore Historical Images" (<https://www.familysearch.org/records/images>). This tool for finding documents will sometimes come up with different records than those found with a keyword or place search of the catalog. It is found in the Search menu under "Images."

Another strategy is to "Browse." Even though it may tell you at you will be browsing a million records, that's really not the case because you will quickly be able to narrow your search to a particular time, place, and type of record.

When doing a "Records" search, you can choose "More Options" and add more specific information. You can also enter alternate names, helpful with finding married names or dealing with spelling variations.

To focus on results that are most relevant, select the filter option at the top of the search results and search by collection.