

The Silent, the Invisible, and the Unimportant: Finding Female Ancestors

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**Washington, DC Family History Conference
May 4, 2019**

Our female ancestors lived in the shadow of her male relatives, her father, her husband and her sons. They were often **Silent**, creating few if any records of their own. **Invisible**, often mentioned only by title, (daughter, wife, and mother) or if we are lucky by their given name. More often, they were not mentioned at all, the seemingly **Unimportant**. Identifying female ancestors often presents a challenge to the genealogist, but it can be done.

Prior to the twentieth century our female ancestors were prohibited by law from participating in many of the activities that their male counterparts did routinely. Many of these activities generated the records we use in our genealogical research. They were often not allowed to buy and sell real estate, own a business, vote in elections, hold public office, pay taxes, serve on juries, witness legal documents, or serve in the military.

The social and economic positions of her husband in the community often determined the number of records he created. This often limits the number of records she may be included in with her husband. Searching for female ancestors often requires careful examination of her husband's records. Often clues to her identity can be found in his records. If her husband's records do not reveal clues to her identity then her other known male relatives should be searched. Although it can be a lengthy search, the identity of most female ancestors can be uncovered.

Examining What You Know

Gather all you know about your ancestor including:

- What were her dates and places of birth, marriage and death?
- What were her husband's dates and places of birth, marriage and death?
- What were her children's dates and places of birth, marriage and death?
- Where did she live during her lifetime?

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- What records have you examined? (Including both records for her and any relatives no matter how Distant.)
- What was her religion and what church did she attend?
- How did the laws of the time period affect her life?

Questions to think about:

- How did she meet her husband?
- Was he older and by how many years?
- Did she know him for only a short time?
- Was he a distant cousin?
- Did they later divorce?
- Did he die before her?
- How did her husband's death affect her legal status?
- Did the husband provide for her in a will? Did he die intestate? What did she inherit?
- How did she support herself?
- Did she remarry after his death or their divorce?
- How did her legal and social status change?

Examining the Records

- Examine every record that is available for your ancestor and **all** of her relatives.
- Never dismiss a record because you do not believe you will find your female ancestor in the record. Example: Examine probate records even if you do not believe she made a will or left an intestate estate.
- Never dismiss a record because you do not believe you will find new information in the record. Example: Examine every census available during her lifetime. This should include Federal Population Schedules, Special Schedules and State Censuses (if they are available).
- Check both original and derivative sources.
- Check both published and unpublished sources.
- Take the approach of leaving no record unexamined.
- Reexamine records often. Newfound information may shed new light on records you have examined before.

Record Groups to Examine

Cemeteries and Funeral Homes

- If possible, visit the cemetery where your ancestors are buried.

- Check for vital statistic information on the tombstone. (Dates of birth and death.)
- Check for information about relationships included on the tombstone. Often older tombstones were inscribed with information like “wife of _____” or “daughter of _____”.
- Determine the relationship between your female ancestor and everyone buried in the family plot.
- Married woman, who died young, may have been buried with her family.
- Check for any relationship between your female ancestor’s family and the other families buried around the family plot.
- Check the cemetery office for records of who purchased the family plot. Your female ancestor may be buried in a plot owned by a family member other than her husband.
- Gather any information available in the records of the cemetery office about your female ancestor and her family.
- Funeral homes keep a variety of records depending on the laws of the state where they are located and the time period they were created.
- The information in the records will include information about the funeral arrangements, the cemetery where the deceased is buried, the cause of death, and information about surviving relatives.
- They may also have a copy of the death certificate, death notice, and/or obituary.

Censuses

- Check all censuses available during your female ancestor’s lifetime. She may be found living with other family members at any time during her life.
- Your female ancestor will only be listed as a statistic in the 1790-1840 unless she was head of the household.
- The 1840 census will indicate if she is the widow of a Revolutionary War veteran.
- She will be listed in the 1850 to the 1930 censuses by her name. Remember her relationship to the head of the household will not be found until the 1880 census.
- If state censuses are available for the state(s) where she lived, examine them.
- Check for service and pension records if either her husband or her son(s) are listed on the census as a veteran.
- Check to see where she and her parents were born and what was their native tongue. This may assist in finding immigration records.

Church Records

- Try to determine the denominations and the names of any churches your female ancestor attended. Remember she may have changed her religious denomination more than once during her life.
- Check any type of record kept by the church for information about your ancestors.
- Do not limit your search to records for the sacraments of the church.

- You ancestor may have been active in church offices, served on a committee, or taught Sunday school.
- There may be information about her in the business records of the church.
- If your ancestor was a Quaker, check both the men's and women's meeting minutes.

City Directories

- Some directories list all adults, including adult children, living with parents.
- The directory may list occupations, names of employer, home address, spouse's name.
- Female ancestors may be listed as the widow of her husband.
- Indexes by street may be helpful in finding other female family members.

Court Records

- Female ancestors may have been accused of crimes like witchcraft, gossiping about her neighbors, refusing to go to church, etc.
- In New England some churches would not baptize children born less than 7 months after marriage unless parents confessed their sin.
- C. F. found in baptismal records indicates that the parents "Confessed to fornication".
- Female ancestors may have been witnesses for her friends and neighbors.

Divorce Records

- Early divorces may be a divorce vinculo matrimonii, an absolute divorce. The parties were free to remarry.
- Divorce a mensa et thoro, a separation from bed and board, but neither could remarry.
- Some southern states did not allow divorce.
- Until mid 1800s divorces were legislative acts granted by the state legislature.
- Grounds for divorce varied from colony to colony and state to state.
- Grounds for divorce included desertion, cruelty, adultery, homosexuality, and bigamy.
- Some states had both legislative and chancery court divorces at the same time. Delaware was the last to drop legislative divorce in 1897.
- Prior to the Revolutionary War more men filed for divorce. After the War more women filed for divorce.
- In some states it was easier to divorce and waiting periods were often shorter. Spouse may not be notified until after the divorce was granted. Check state laws in the states around your ancestor for easy divorce laws.
- Not all divorces were granted, you should always check to see if your ancestor filed for divorce.

- Female ancestors may have been witnesses for friends or neighbors seeking divorces.
- Men sometimes placed public notices that they were no longer responsible for their wife's debts or ads for run away wives.

Family Bibles

- Check with other family members to see if any of them have possession of the family bible.
- Check the collections of historical and genealogical societies to see if the family bible has been deposited in their collection.
- If a family bible is available examine it for any references to family members. Members of the female ancestor's family may be mentioned in other family bibles.

Guardianship Records

- Mothers often had to seek guardianships for their children, when their husbands died. Check state laws for the location where your ancestors lived.
- Fathers may have had to seek guardianship, if children were to inherit from the wife's family.
- Sometimes both parents may be alive and a guardian may have been appointed if the children were inherited from any of their grandparents.
- Check Black's law dictionary for different types of guardianships.

Land Records

- Check the laws of the state for time period where your ancestors lived to determine what the laws were governing land ownership.
- Was the wife covered by law under husband (femes covert) or could she own land in her own name?
- Women widowed, divorced, or single (feme sole) may have purchased or sold land in their own name. Many women took advantage of Homestead Act of 1812.
- Even burned courthouses may have early deed records. Often the landowners had their deeds rerecorded after a courthouse was burned.
- Sales of land for small consideration may indicate sale from woman's parents or a close relative.
- Look for releases of dower in the land records of the woman's husband. The wife might not be mentioned in deed, but her release of dower may follow the recording of the deed.
- Release of dower should be recorded with the deed of sale, but they may have been recorded later, if the title needed to be cleared.
- Deeds may only give clues to relationships between the people mentioned in them, while others may state their relationships.

Marriage Records

- A marriage license may have been taken out and never used. You must look for the actual record that the marriage took place. The records may give wife's parents names.
- Marriage Bonds were agreements between groom and a male relative of the bride. If a female is listed in the bond, it may be her mother, if father is deceased.
- Colonial Records – Mrs. is short for mistress and used for married and unmarried females to denote social position.

Military Records and Pensions

- Early service by women in the military included serving as nurses, spies, disguised as men, cooks, seamstresses and laundresses.
- Some early women served and received pensions for their service in early wars.
- You are more likely to find women as widows or mothers of deceased veterans in pension files.
- Men's pension files usually contain more information on their military service and engagements, than personal information. Women's applications tend to give more details about their lives. This includes the wives of African American soldiers.
- Women had to provide proof of their marriages and the births of their children. Pension files often contain a variety of supporting documents to prove these vital statistics.
- Loyalist women during the Revolutionary War also made pension claims.

Naturalization Records

- Between 1855 and 1922, females (wives and daughters) automatically became naturalized if they married a citizen or if their husband or father became a citizen. You will not find naturalization records for them.
- Single females, however could apply for naturalization and you will want to look for records for those females.
- After 1922 all females had to apply for their own citizenship.

Passenger Arrival Lists

- Prior to 1800s - passenger arrival records contain little information.
- Check passenger lists to see if other family members or people from the same village came with your female ancestor.
- See if they became neighbors or relatives on the censuses.
- She may still be using her maiden name even if she is married because of religious or ethnic customs when she travels to the United States. Especially if she is catholic and of French and Italian descent.

Vital Records

- Check all available birth, death, and marriage records for every family member.
- Although vital records may not be available for your female ancestor, later records of family members may contain the answer you are searching to find. Example: a sister's death certificate may contain her maiden name.

Voter Lists and Registrations

- Most states did not allow women to vote until the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920.
- Some exceptions do exist. In New Jersey women were allowed to vote in elections between 1776 and 1807.
- In some states, mainly in the west, women were allowed to vote in school elections. The states of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming all allowed women to vote prior to the passage of the nineteenth amendment

Wills and Probate

- The wills of her relatives may name women as wives, daughters, granddaughters, sisters, or nieces.
- Rarely do husband's wills name the wife's maiden name and they may only say "my wife" and not give her first name.
- "My now wife" means the husband's wife when the will was written. It does not mean he was married before or that she is still his wife when the will was probated. She may have died after the will was written.
- Men's wills may name son in-law, but not their daughters.
- Check probate packages, other records in the package may include information on relationships.
- How did the husband's death affect her legal status?
- Did the husband provide for her in will? Did he die intestate? What did she inherit?

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