

Everybody's Got a Story: Finding Biographical Information About Your Ancestors

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Many of us have ancestors for whom we have only found a few details, perhaps only basic birth, marriage, and death information. And, unfairly, we conclude our ancestors were “boring.” In many cases, however, we haven’t completed a thorough enough search of records to reach that conclusion.

The Genealogical Proof Standard developed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists®, states as the first element, that the researcher conducts:

“a reasonably exhaustive search”¹

Finding biographical information about your ancestor requires such a search and you might be surprised at all the information you can find about your seemingly “anonymous” ancestor.

Use CHECKLISTS to find all the available records

FamilySearch Wiki Resource Checklist:
https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Resource_Checklist

BYU Ancestors Checklist:
<http://www.byub.org/ancestors/charts/oldpdf/checklist1.pdf>

Most genealogy how-to books also have lists and descriptions of the many records available to the family historian.

Find the ACTUAL record

Do not be satisfied with finding the information in a book or website of indexed records. Look at the actual record. Many times, more information is on the record than was indexed.

¹ “The Genealogical Proof Standard,” Board for Certification of Genealogists®,
<http://www.bccertification.org/resources/standard.html>.

Many records are **online**, especially through Ancestry and FamilySearch. Other records may require a **visit** to a courthouse, archives, historical society or library local to your ancestors residence, or may be available on microfilm through **interlibrary loan** at your local library.

Use ALL the information in the records

For example, on census records, depending on the census year, pay attention to:

- street name and number (for city and town dwellers)
- number of children born vs. number living
- whether the individual could read or write
- whether the individual went to school
- whether the individual was employed all year
- what the individual's naturalization status is

For example, on death certificates, look for:

- cause of death
- length of illness
- doctor's attendance on deceased
- informants name and location
- funeral director and burial

For example, in newspapers, look for:

- birth notices
- wedding announcements
- obituaries
- military service news
- court reports
- neighborhood news (who's sick, who's visiting, who's doing what!)
- business news

For narrative biographies of individuals your best bet are biographies in county histories and obituaries, though you may have to separate the actual facts from the florid writing of the particular time period!

Now, it's your task to take all the information you've found and write an interesting biography about your ancestor.

Resource List

Books

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *You Can Write Your Family History* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2003)

Pfeiffer, Laura Szucs. *Hidden Sources: Family History in Unlikely Places* (Orem, UT: Ancestry, 2000)

Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History*. (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000)

Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves (eds.). *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy* (Provo, UT: Ancestry, 2006)

Internet

Newspapers: to find if a newspaper for your ancestor's community exists, go to:

<http://www.loc.gov/chroniclingamerica>

and "search directory" for a state – county - town

Non-Population Census Records

<http://www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation/>

Google Earth: download free program from <http://www.google.com>

You can search for the corners of a particular land section at:

<http://www.earthpoint.us/Townships.aspx>

(you will need township, range, and section #'s)

Cut and past the latitude and longitude in the Google Earth search box to find your ancestor's section.