

Tracing Female Ancestors in America

Class 1: Finding the Elusive Maiden Name

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Objectives

1. Be able to list records that typically include a maiden name.
2. Learn to expand your search beyond the tried-and-true sources of information.
3. Learn to use finding aids to supplement original document sources.
4. Become familiar with the strategies of learning as much as you can about the husband's family and immersing yourself in the history and record-keeping of an area.

Find the Marriage Record

Getting started. As always, work from the known to the unknown. The first record to locate is the marriage record. To find a marriage record, you typically need to know:

- Where the couple married. This is often the town of the bride's family. Check old maps for boundary and community name changes.
- When the couple married. Keep in mind that record availability varies by time and place. Educate yourself about record losses: fires, floods, theft. What alternatives exist?
- Finally, is this a first, second, or third marriage? Do you need to look for a different name?

Records that indicate marriage:

- Evidence of intention to marry. Before mid-1800's these included marriage intentions, marriage banns, marriage bonds. Marriage bonds were particularly popular in the south. By the mid-1800's these documents were replaced by the modern marriage license.
- Evidence of marriage include certificates, marriage returns, and marriage registers maintained by a town clerk and personal records such as Bible records.

Other Records That May Have the Maiden Name

If you can't find the marriage record, or it doesn't provide what you need, try looking for a woman's death record as the parents may be named. The birth, marriage and death records of the woman are the next source you should locate as these often include the mother's maiden name. However, keep in mind that with respect to birth records in the colonial time period, records tended not to give the woman's maiden name. For that time period, you are most likely to see, "Jonathan, son of Abel and Sarah."

Devise a search strategy that moves from likely sources for finding a maiden name to less well-known sources. After a marriage record, look for, in the following order:

1. Woman's death record (especially in the 20th century)
2. Children's birth, marriage, and death records
3. Less familiar sources

Still More Records

Census: Starting with the 1880 census and forward, look for "mother-in-law" or "son-in-law" or "sister" (with a different surname in the household of her brother).

Newspapers: Late 19th century and of course, 20th century announcements of marriages and deaths tend to have more information than earlier such announcement.

Deeds: When a parcel of land that has been left to children and then sold, the daughter should be listed in the indices by her married name. A reading of the deed then makes plain any relationships, e.g., parent passing land to children.

Military pension files: especially "Widow's Pension" for 1812, Mexican War, Civil War (Union), Indian Wars, Spanish-American War

Tombstones: may have maiden names

Parent's will: This strategy only works if you have a hypothesis regarding the maiden name

Social Security Application: the SS5 will include the applicant's name as well as the name and maiden name of parents.

Manuscripts: Letter and diaries

Finding aids

- Every name index to *Register* and other genealogical journals
- Periodical Source Index (PERSI)
- Torrey's New England Marriages Prior to 1700
- County histories
- Naming patterns: unusual middle names may be the maiden name of the mother or grandmother

Learn as much as you can about the husband

- Use the FAN club principle: Family, Associates, and Neighbors of the husband and the husband's family
- Migration pattern, including for husband's ancestors
- Religion/Church
- Occupation

Immerse yourself in the local history

Settlement Patterns

The settlement history of a location reveals not only the names of the early settlers but also provides clues as to the origins of settlers. Families tended to move in groups and families of the bride and groom may have traveled together before the couple married. At least the families would be known to each other. Identifying the surnames of the town of origin and the town of settlement can be a helpful strategy for identifying a maiden name.

County Histories

County and Town histories often give clues that cannot be found anywhere else. Seek a digital version of your ancestress's town or county history and read up on the families who settled the town and whether the husband is named with other associates.

Changing Boundaries

- Familiarize yourself with the geography and county boundaries of a state. This dictates where to look for records.
- Explore www.mapofus.org, a website that shows the year-by-year boundary changes for each state.
- What did the town clerk track for your area?
- Make sure you know the record start dates for your location, as well as record losses.

Main Messages

- As always, work from the known to the unknown
- Your ancestress had a life and a name before her marriage; when she married her family didn't go away – they probably lived in the area
- Learn all you can about the husband and his family; they probably interacted with the bride's family
- Immerse yourself in the history, geography, and record-keeping of the area: *know what is available*

Resources

FamilySearch.org, "Maiden Names in the United States," Wiki article,

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Maiden_Names_in_the_United_States

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo, *Finding Female Ancestors*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2013.

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo, *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestors* (Cincinnati Ohio: Betterway Books, 1998).

Schaefer, Christina Kassabian, *The Hidden Half of the Family*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1999.

Rhonda McClure, *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, 6th Edition (Boston: New England Historical Genealogical Society, 2021)

For digital books (County and Town Histories as well as Genealogies) see:

- <https://www.hathitrust.org/>
- <https://archive.org/>
- <https://books.google.com/>