

Tracing Female Ancestors in America

Class 3: Researching Women in the Archives

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Women make up the more genealogically challenging half of our ancestry. As we move further back in time, we often find increasingly less about our female ancestors. Women's stories and experiences, traditionally, were hidden from the historical record and their perspectives were often overlooked or deemed to be of little importance. When they survive, diaries, letters, account books, family bibles, samplers, organization records, and more can reveal more about a woman's daily life than any government document. Getting started and locating archive and manuscript collections can sometimes feel like a daunting task, but the results can be very rewarding.

What are Archives?

While libraries and archives both exist to make their holdings available for use, archives differ in types of material and access. Archives seek to preserve history for posterity.

Types of Materials:

- Archives can hold both published and unpublished materials, and those materials can be in any format.
- Materials in archives are often unique, specialized, or rare objects, meaning very few of them exist in the world, or they are the only ones of their kind.

Access to Materials:

- Since materials in archival collections are unique, the people (archivists) in charge of caring for those materials strive to preserve them for use today, and for future generations of researchers.
- Archival holdings have specific usage guidelines for how people may use collections to protect the materials from physical damage and theft, keeping them and their content accessible for posterity.

How do I Locate Archives and Archival Collections?

- 1) Define your research goal
 - a. Find that elusive birth, marriage, or death date? Determine a maiden name?
 - b. Identify parents or other female relatives?
 - c. Add context to your female ancestor's life?
- 2) Gather information about your Ancestor
 - a. Note locations, surnames, societies, religion, ethnicity associated
- 3) Focus on location to find local repositories
- 4) Focus on surnames to find collection associated with the family
- 5) Find ethnic or women-focused archives



Where are they located?

Cultural Institutions

- Libraries
- Museums
- Historic Houses
- Historical Societies
- Genealogical Societies

Other Locations to Consider

- Colleges
- Government Facilities
- Corporations
- Religious Institutions
- Social clubs
- Personal Collections

What Materials should I look at?

Unpublished Materials in Archives

- Diaries/Letters/Personal papers
- Photographs/Postcards/Scrapbooks
- Material culture (samplers, quilts, clothing, etc.)
- Business/Society/Organizational papers
- Social Club Records/School Yearbooks, etc.
- Video and Audio files
- Oral Histories
- Genealogical Research papers

Published Sources in Archives

- Local histories
- Genealogies
- Domestic Guides and Cookbooks
- Newspapers
- Organization or Society Pamphlets
- City Directories

TIPS:

- Follow the men! Sometimes we must look at records our male ancestors created to extract potential clues to find our female ancestors.
- Look for records of clergy, physicians, and justices of the peace in the areas where your female ancestors lived.
- Look for manuscripts of women living at the same time, the same place, or of a similar circumstance to add context to your ancestor's life.
- Speak to the archivist to learn more about a repository's holdings or a specific collection. Archivists have in-depth knowledge of their collections and can be of great assistance to genealogists.

Accessing manuscript materials at NEHGS

Start with the Library catalog

- Where you will find information about our Research Center's holdings.
- Searchable by title, author, subject, call number, and keyword.
- Keyword search only searches the catalog & not the full text of an item.



Digital Library and Archive

- An online "virtual" library & archives for any type of researcher.
- Browsable materials & some with searchable transcriptions.
- Materials *not* indexed like a genealogical database.

American Ancestors Databases on AmericanAncestors.org

- Designed for genealogical research on individuals and families.
- Data is indexed & allows searches through defined genealogy-focused fields.
- Includes records from NEHGS (some manuscript material) & external organizations.

Putting it all Together

- Identify Archives that may have records that could reveal more about your ancestor's life.
- Consider a variety of different types of archival material (letters, oral histories, photographs, material culture, etc.)
- Utilize records of other's whose lives may have been similar to learn more about the world of your ancestor.

By carefully preserving the records created by and about our female ancestor and relatives, archives ensure that their lives will not be lost to history.

Bibliography:

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