

# Using Occupations to Trace Ancestors

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## Why should you care about your ancestor's occupation?

Every ancestor is unique, but sometimes it can be hard to identify the uniqueness, especially if they have a common name for their patch of historic time and space. Finding your ancestor's occupation may help distinguish your Ebenezer Smith from other Ebenezer Smiths, particularly if your ancestor's occupation was less common, such as blacksmith, carpenter, or minister.

Perhaps one of the most useful clues provided by knowing an occupation is location. Some of the location clues are obvious. You won't find your 19th century miner ancestor in the river deltas of the Potomac or Mississippi rivers. Pennsylvania coal belts in the northeastern and western parts of the state are more likely locations. Your mariner ancestor from the 18th century will most likely be found in one of the major ports on the eastern seaboard.

Other location clues rely on a town versus rural split. Blacksmiths, carpenters, and coopers are likely to be found in places where there is enough demand for their services, e.g. in areas where the population is concentrated.

As our ancestors migrated, they followed a fairly predictable pattern where the farmers and tillers of soil arrived in a location first. Next, those occupations that support the farmer arrive. These include the blacksmith and the cooper. Tavern keepers would be found where roads or canals were being built.

A valuable genealogical research tool, especially when facing a brick wall, is cluster analysis, or the FAN club technique, per Elizabeth Shown Mills. The FAN club refers to the family, associates and neighbors of your ancestor. Your ancestor's occupation will help you identify their associates. A grocer will be associating with wholesalers and shipping agents. The blacksmith may have associated with carriage makers or wheelwrights.

Some occupations, by the nature of the work, created a body of records. If your ancestor was a railroad man or a canal builder or a mariner you may find traces of them in records held by the railroad companies or the canal owners or the port authorities, respectively.

## Where to Find Your Ancestor's Occupation

### *Census*

One of the easiest places to look for your ancestor's occupation is the U.S. Federal Censuses from 1850 onward. These censuses ask about the occupation of each member of the household. Of course, the information provided is only as accurate as the informant and the diligence of the census enumerator.



**American Ancestors**

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In addition to the population schedule, three special schedules fielded between 1850 and 1880 may have information about your ancestor's occupation: Agricultural Schedule, Industry or Manufacturer Schedule and the Mortality Schedule.

### ***City Directories***

US City Directories provide a gold mine of information about occupations. Some cities such as Philadelphia (since 1785), New York (since 1786), and Boston (since 1789), began publishing directories shortly after the United States was established. The earliest directories included the head of household's name, occupation and address. Trade Association directories are another source of information. These tend to date from the mid-19th century. See <https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite/Home/usa/>.

### ***Vital and Church Records***

Vital records such as marriage and death records, frequently mention occupation. The town clerks' registers of the 18th and 19th century typically include a column for occupation. Church records of marriage and death do not usually include occupation, except for the records of Quebec in the Drouin Collection, which usually include the groom's occupation.

### ***Passenger Lists***

Since 1820, ship captains have been required to file a manifest in the port of destination of all passengers transported. The manifest included the passenger's name, age, country of origin, destination and occupation.

### ***Newspapers***

Newspapers may reveal your ancestor's occupation either through an article about his or her profession or, more likely, an advertisement posted by your ancestor announcing goods or services for sale.

### ***Local Histories***

Local histories such as county or town histories include short biographies of the significant citizens of the town or county. In addition to a genealogical summary of the individual, the person's contribution to the town is typically featured.

### ***Decoding the Occupation***

Sometimes you will need to decode an occupation as it is now a defunct line of work, e.g. sawyer, hog reeve, or fence viewer. A sawyer is a person who saws wood. I first found this occupation when my 2nd great grandfather married in Montreal and the priest documented his occupation as "bottom sawyer." This meant he was the man in the pit handling a two-person blade to saw logs. A Hog Reeve was a town official responsible for rounding up stray pigs and making sure their owners paid for any damage they caused, and it frequently found in New England town records. And a fence viewer was a town representative responsible for attesting to the state of the fences in the community.

## **Occupations with Records**

Some occupations generated records which have survived to the present day.

## **Railroad Workers**

The key to finding railroad records is to identify which railroad your ancestor worked for. If you don't know the name of the railroad, try working from your ancestor's living location. What were the railroads that served the community? For example, if your ancestor lived in Cleveland Ohio in 1870, and was a RR worker, he might have worked for the Cleveland and Mahoning Valley Railroad, the Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Indianapolis Railroad, or the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad. Keep in mind that before the 20th century, railroad companies came and went with alarming frequency.

Some of the repositories that may contain records of your ancestors include the Milwaukee Public Library (Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad (aka Milwaukee Road)), Rootsweb (Illinois Central Railroad) and the California Railroad Museum (Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, the Central and Southern Pacific Railroads).

Another source is the *Biographical Directory of Railway Officials of America* issued between 1885 and 1922 - gave a listing of mid to senior employees in the railroad industry. It was followed by *Who's Who in Railroading*, a journal that continues today.

## **Apprentices**

Apprenticeship records have existed since Medieval times. In the apprenticeship system, master craftsmen hired apprentices in exchange for training. When training was completed, a person became a journeyman who traveled between employers to earn wages. After a certain amount of experience had been acquired, the journeyman could become a member of a guild. Boys between the ages of 12-15 were typically apprenticed although orphans could be apprenticed at younger ages.

At NEHGS we have the following apprentice lists:

State	Time Period
Maryland, Carroll County	1837-1927
Illinois, Madison County	1813-1817
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia	1771-1773
Maryland, Harford County	1801-1830
Virginia	1623-1800
Connecticut	1637-1900
New York, New York	1800-1899
Tennessee	1821-1889 (west), 1784-1902 (middle), 1778-1911 (east)

State	Time Period
Canada (from Britain)	1869-1924
Quebec	1660-1815

### **Craftsmen**

A craftsman was a skilled worker who typically had “graduated” from an apprenticeship. The types of records left by a craftsman include account books (search by location), diaries, journals and letters. You may need to read a lot of prose to find the information you seek.

### **Physicians**

Early physicians may have been the local barber or apothecary. Look for “Day Books,” “Account Books” and diaries kept by your physician ancestor.

### **Tavern Keepers**

Taverns and Inn Keepers needed to apply for licenses so you will find two types of records for them: their own account books as well as papers from the licensing entity’s review and decision regarding the establishment of the tavern. Taverns were often referred to as an ordinary and were frequently located near a town church or meeting house. After the Revolutionary War, the demand for taverns increased dramatically due to new turnpikes, the National Road and canal building. Inns every 10 miles or so.

Try doing a keyword search in FamilySearch for “Tavern License” or “Ordinary License.”

### **Merchants**

The General Store owner was another category of occupation that left records. The typical store owner bought merchandise from local farmers and crafts people as well as selling merchandise to town inhabitants. Look for Account Books.

### **Sailors**

Sailors and Ship’s Captains may have left records for you to find. Ship’s captains often kept diaries which may have wound up in a manuscript collection. Even if they didn’t keep a diary, the newspapers at their ports of call probably recorded their arrivals and departures.

For sailors, the Seaman’s Protection Act of 1796 required Custom Officials to keep a record of certificate applications along with accompanying proofs of citizenship. The applications include age, height and coloring.

### **Clergy**

Clergy is another category of occupation that often left records. If the minister himself did not leave a record, then the institution where they were educated probably did. If you know your ancestor’s denomination or their college, you may start your search there. In the 17th century, the major educational institutions for clergy were Harvard, Yale and Princeton. Your resources of choice would be

*Sibley's Harvard Graduates, Dexter's Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College, and Princetonians : A Biographical Dictionary*

### **Farmers**

Sometimes we think our farmer ancestors are lost to history. However, there are plenty of records for our farming kin. First, take a good look the probate records and both the real and personal property left behind. The inventory provides a stark picture of life at the time your ancestor lived. The Agricultural Census began in 1840 and continues to the present day. Until 1920 it was every ten years, then every five years.

Sometimes your ancestor was a farmer but did not own the land he worked. In New York State prior to about 1840, most land was concentrated in the hands of a few hereditary landowners such as the Rennselaer, Cortlandt, Beekman, Livingston and other families.

## **Suggested Resources**

### **Decoding Occupations**

Twining, Andrew and Twining, Sandra *Dictionary of old trades and occupations*. (Kogarah, NSW, 1993).

Schlebecker, John T. *The many names of country people: an historical dictionary from the twelfth century onwards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

Cyndi's List : <https://www.cyndislist.com/occupations/general/?page=2>

RootsWeb – Occupations of Yesteryear <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~wiashlan/occupations.html>

Links to the Past: <https://www.linkstothepast.com/milwaukee/occupations.html#yesteryear>

### **Railroad Workers**

Milwaukee Road Archives: [https://mpl.org/special\\_collections/images/index.php?slug=milwaukee-road-archives](https://mpl.org/special_collections/images/index.php?slug=milwaukee-road-archives)

Rootsweb: <http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~sponholz/genealogy/icrrrosters.html>

Minnesota Historical Society Library, “Railroad Records Research: Family History,  
<https://libguides.mnhs.org/railroad/fh>

### **Apprentices**

Farley Ward Grubb, *Runaway servants, convicts, and apprentices advertised in the Pennsylvania gazette, 1728-1796* (Baltimore, MD : Genealogical Pub. Co., 1992).

Peter W. Coldham, *Child apprentices in America : from Christ's hospital, London, 1617-1778* (Baltimore, MD : Genealogical Pub. Co., 1990).

Harold B. Gill, *Apprentices of Virginia, 1623-1800* (Salt Lake City, UT : Ancestry, 1989).

Kathy Ritter *Apprentices of Connecticut, 1637-1900* (Salt Lake City, UT : Ancestry Pub., 1986).

Kenneth Scott, *Nineteenth century apprentices in New York City* (Arlington, VA : National Genealogical Society, 1986).

City of Philadelphia, *Record of indentures of individuals bound out as apprentices, servants, etc., and of German and other redemptioners in the office of the Mayor of the city of Philadelphia, October 3, 1771, to October 5, 1773* (Baltimore, Genealogical Pub. Co., 1973).

Alan Miller *West Tennessee's forgotten children : apprentices from 1821 to 1889* (Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Publishing Company, 2007)

Alan Miller, *Middle Tennessee's forgotten children : apprentices from 1784 to 1902* (Baltimore, Md. : Clearfield, 2004).

Alan N. Miller, *East Tennessee's forgotten children : apprentices from 1778 to 1911* (Baltimore, Md. : Clearfield, 2000).

Joy Parr, *Labouring children : British immigrant apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Toronto, Ontario University of Toronto Press, 1994).

### **Tavern Keepers**

New York Historical Society *The Burghers of new Amsterdam and the Freemen of New York 1675-1866* (New York: New York, 1886).

Michael A. Ports *Baltimore County, Maryland Trader and ordinary Licenses 1830-1832* (Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Company, 2013)

Edward Field. *The Colonial Tavern* (Providence, RI: Preston and Rounds, 1897).

### **Sailors**

- Seamen's Protection Resources:  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/results?count=20&query=%2Bkeywords%3ASeamen%20%2Bkeywords%3AProtection>
- Citizenship and the American Merchant Marine: Seamen's Protection Certificates, 1792–1940 - <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/naturalization/405-seamen-protection-certificates.pdf>

Merchant Marine and Coast Guard Documents at the National Archives.

- <https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/merchant-marine-records-document-maritime-service>
- United States Coast Guard Records <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/coast-guard>
- Records Relating to the United States Merchant Marine Personnel  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/coast-guard/merchant-marine-personnel>

US Census 1930 Merchant Seamen Schedule <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1821205>

## **Farmers**

Jane Wilcox, *Looking for Your New York Tenant Farmer* <http://www.4getmenotancestry.com/syllabus-for-looking-for-your-new-york-tenant-farmer-little-used-resources/>

Ancestry.com, “U.S., Selected Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880,” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1276/>