

Finding the Elusive Maiden Name

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, dalambert@nehgs.org

Find the Marriage Record

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, marriage registers maintained by a town clerk and personal records such as Bible records.
- Divorce records will include the date and location of the marriage.

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).

- For earlier census records, pay attention to someone that seems unrelated but is of the same age as the wife. They may be siblings.

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

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

Gravestones may have maiden names

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

- Post-Civil War, probate records usually list all surviving heirs in probate (even if they died intestate, without a will)

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

Manuscripts Letters 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

A location’s settlement history reveals the names of the early settlers and provides clues as to their origins. 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 know 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](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Maiden_Names_in_the_United_States)

Bishop, Shelley K. "12 Records for Finding Elusive Maiden Names," *Family Tree Magazine* Available at
<https://familytreemagazine.com/female-ancestors/12-records-for-finding-elusive-maiden-names/>

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).

Savage, James, *Female Index to Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England* (Genealogical Publishing Co., 2008)

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

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

- Hathitrust.org
- Archive.org
- Books.Google.com