

Tracing Female Ancestors in Your Family Tree

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 historical records, and their perspectives were often overlooked or deemed to be of little importance.

Archives can help fill the gaps. Diaries, letters, account books, family bibles, samplers, church records, oral histories, and textile artifacts such as samplers and quilts can reveal details about a woman's daily life, relationships, education, work, and community involvement that are unavailable elsewhere.

Researching archival collections requires patience and creativity, but these unique records often provide the richest insights into an ancestor's life. 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. They differ in the types of materials they collect, and there is often greater security around access and usage.

Types of Materials:

- Published and unpublished materials in any format
- Unique, specialized, or rare objects

Access to Materials:

Because archival materials are often one-of-a-kind:

- Researchers typically use archival materials in a supervised reading room.
- Handling rules help protect fragile items.
- Collections may have restrictions due to privacy, donor agreements, and preservation concerns.
- Increasingly, archives are digitizing materials and making them available online

How do I Locate Archives and Archival Collections?

Define your research goal

- Find that elusive birth, marriage, or death date? Determine a maiden name?
- Identify parents or other female relatives?
- Add context to your female ancestor's life?
- Document migration patterns?
- Reconstruct a woman's life story?
- Understand her social, religious, or ethnic community?

Gather what you already know

Create a research profile including:

- Full name and variant spellings
- Married names
- Residences
- Religious affiliation
- Ethnicity or nationality
- Occupation
- Organizations and clubs and educational institutions

Think beyond the individual

Women often appear in records as members of:

- Families
- Churches
- Schools
- Women's clubs
- Fraternal societies
- Social movements
- Labor unions and reform organizations

Focus on Place

Identify repositories located where your ancestor lived:

- Historical societies
- Local libraries
- State and University archives
- Religious archives

Tip: Local collections may preserve information unavailable anywhere else.

Search by Surname

Look for:

- Family papers
- Genealogical collections
- Local history collections
- Business records
- Correspondence collections

Tip: A family collection may contain references to women whose names do not appear in the collection title.

Where are they located?

Cultural Institutions

- Libraries
- Museums
- Historic Houses
- Historical Societies
- Genealogical Societies
- Special Collections Libraries
- Women's Histories repositories
- State and/or University Archives
- Religious repositories

Other Locations to Consider

- Government Facilities
- Corporations
- 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, 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

General research 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 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.

Accessing manuscript materials at American Ancestors

Start with our 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 and allows searches through defined genealogy-focused fields.
- Includes records from American Ancestors (some manuscript material) & external organizations.

Finding Aids: Your Road Map to Archival Collections

A finding aid is a guide to an archival collection and often include:

- Biographical information
- Collection history
- Scope and contents
- Folder lists
- Subject terms
- Dates covered

***Tip:** Always read the entire finding aid. Women may be mentioned in correspondence, family files, or related materials even if they are not listed in the collection title.*

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 those whose lives may have been similar to your ancestor's

Major Online Tools for Finding Women's Records

ArchiveGrid provides access to millions of archival collection descriptions held by thousands of libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies. It is one of the best starting points for locating family papers, diaries, letters, and manuscript collections <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

CLIR (Council on Library and Information Resources) Hidden Collections Registry helps researchers discover rare and unique libraries, archives, and museum collections. It includes projects funded by CLIR's Cataloging and Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives programs, along with many other special collections across the U.S. and Canada. <https://registry.clir.org/>

Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Provides access to millions of digitized items from libraries, archives, and museums across the United States, including photographs, diaries, letters, and local history collections. <https://dp.la>

FamilySearch Catalog Search by place to identify manuscripts, church records, women's records, and local collections that have been microfilmed or digitized. <https://www.familysearch.org>

Harvard University, A library research guide to for finding manuscript and archival collections, <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/archives/us>

WorldCat Search for manuscript collections, family histories, local histories, and archival materials held worldwide. <https://www.worldcat.org>

In conclusion

Remember that women's records are often hidden rather than absent. Successful research requires:

- Looking beyond vital records
- Studying families and communities
- Exploring manuscript collections
- Using local repositories
- Investigating organizations and institutions

The key to finding women in the historical record is often finding the records they created, preserved, joined, or influenced. Archives provide some of the best opportunities to discover those stories.