

Understanding the Historical Context of a Record

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When working with the variety of records we use in tracing our family history, there are times when we should pause and get a better understanding of the historical context of the period or locality. Doing so can supply us with answers to questions we have about our ancestors and the information we find about them in records.

Historical Context

History is often considered to be the study of the past by individuals of the present. There is a validity to this definition. However, in his book *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, Zachary M. Schrag suggests, “history is not about the past but rather about the people: *history is the study of people and the choices they made.*”

This definition fits in perfectly with what we, as family historians, are doing. We are seeking the connections of generations through the individuals in our family. However, in order to truly trace them we must understand the history they lived through and the choices they made. This could include indentured servitude instead of jail, for instance. It could include not taking up arms against the British during the American Revolution because they believed in remaining tied to the mother country, or because their religious beliefs called for pacifism.

As a result, we must not only understand the records that supply us with information about our ancestors but also understand how they were living within their time period and the choices they made that either offered us more records or less records.

Historical context can support our family history research by:

- Assisting in the analysis of the sources and records we use
- Helping us to understand the attitudes of our ancestors
- Offering insight into why certain questions were asked on certain records
- Helping us to understand if records are available
- Leading us to non-traditional sources

According to *Meanings.com*, the term *historical context* is:

- “a concept that is used in the social sciences to define the set of circumstances and situations in which an object of study is found.”
- “allows us to better understand its reason for being, its importance and its relationship with its environment.”

Types of Context

If we were to consider all of history from the dawn of time and every historical subject studied by scholars, we would certainly never get anything accomplished. However, there are specific sub-categories of history that certainly had direct effects on our ancestors and the choices they made, including:

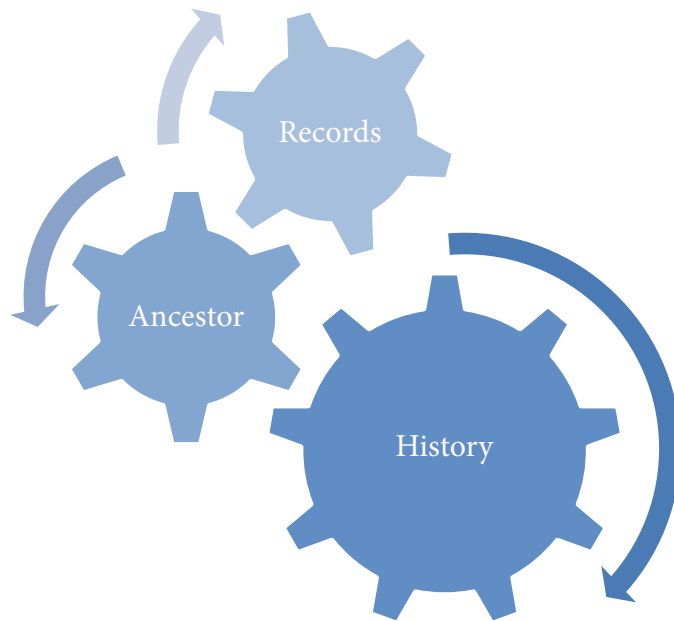
- Political
- Economic
- Social
- Cultural
- Religious

It is likely that not all these avenues of thought would be needed for each record you find or each place your ancestors removed. They are subjects, though, that certainly play a role in everyday life for every individual.

History, History, History

History is a topic taught throughout schooling that many of us may not have embraced during that time. As such, when we get interested in tracing our family history, we may be at a loss as to why our ancestors moved to certain places or made certain choices.

Books about historical events help to fill the gaps and may offer insight into the why and how of the decisions our ancestors made. They could suggest origins for immigrants, based on when a person immigrated. They most definitely help us to better understand the places and time periods of our ancestors. In addition to all of this, the footnotes (or endnotes) and the bibliographies likewise may offer insight into records that could help us with our family history research.



There is a constant interaction between what we call history, our ancestors, and the records that were generated from that history.

Tip: Ask yourself questions about records you have of your ancestors.

Understanding History

Regardless of the record or resource that you are examining, look beyond the names, dates, and places supplied. Ask questions not only about your ancestor, but about the record and about the time period in which the record was created.

the country that we do. Governments from hundreds of years ago wanted to increase their reach by claiming lands on other continents. This required sending troops, men to build a community, and ultimately women for the men to marry so they could start families.

Both “push” and “pull” factors play roles in why our ancestors left Europe or moved from the American Colonies to what became Canada. The examples above of the 1926 passenger list and the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 had their roots in Americans’ fear of an influx of “new immigrants.”

Even the religious beliefs of your ancestors could have affected their opinions and actions during any wars that took place where they lived during their lives. For example, Quakers are known for their pacifism. To those fighting in the American Revolution, this was seen as siding with the British government. The more you understand about the history of the period and place coupled with the overall history of your ancestor, the better a picture you have of your ancestor.

Tip: Books contain references that lead you to records.

Perhaps you find an article in a genealogical journal about your ancestor. It makes mention of something they may have written or an event they were involved in. Don’t stop there. Seek out the original records. The more you do this, the easier it is to find things when you are really struggling to research an ancestor.

Likewise, when you are working with online databases such as AmericanAncestors.org, Ancestry.com, or FamilySearch.org, be curious about the images to the left and right of the one that the database site has taken you to. Many times, you will find multiple images that make up a single record of an event in the life of your ancestor.

Insight into Questions

With the exception of published family histories, almost all other sources and records that we use for the compiling of our family history were created for entirely different reasons. Census records are created to track populations for the purposes of boundaries and voting precincts and representation within the government. Draft cards are created out of the need for a list of men of fighting age who can be called upon when more soldiers are needed.

Events that take place within a country result in additional questions being added to forms like the census or passenger lists. Some of those historical events include:

- Colonization
- Emigration and Immigration
- Control of Certain Individuals or Populations
- War

- Assassination
- Depression
- Epidemics and Pandemics

Some of these questions may be subtle within a form you have used frequently, such as the addition of questions about ability and right to vote that appeared in the 1870 U.S. census. Ask yourself why those questions exist? The 1870 census is the first federal census to be enumerated after the U.S. Civil War. The 1930 census had a question about radios and referenced an unemployment schedule. Why? The U.S. government wanted to know if they could reach the majority of the country's inhabitants with radio broadcasts. Likewise, unemployment was rampant in 1930 as a result of the Stock Market Crash of 1929 that sparked the Great Depression. As shown above, history, ancestors, and records are all intertwined.

The assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz prompted the inclusion of anarchists as an excluded class of immigrants in the Immigration Act of 1903, and thus a question was added to the passenger lists asking if the immigrant was an anarchist.

Record Availability

When we find something on a record that suggests an additional source to be researched, we must then begin to look for the new records. It is important to branch out beyond the most traditional of genealogically rich records such as vital, census, and probate records, or military records, passenger lists, and newspapers.

The very brick wall you are attempting to break down may rely on seeking out new records.

In reading several scholarly articles on the Immigration Act of 1924 (which included new quotas), I learned, via footnotes in one of the articles, that there were records in the National Archives pertaining to the Quota Board. This was huge for me as I am always on the lookout for documents about immigration. I set about identifying the collection so that on my next trip to the National Archives I would be able to request the records and photograph them so I could examine them after I returned home.

It is because of questions like this that you may be required to do some creative searching. Much of what has been recommended above offers insight into taking on this research. The more you ask questions and find answers the more skilled you will be at this research approach when it matters the most—seeking new records that others may not have used before.

Non-Traditional Sources

If you have a family story that you may be related to a Hollywood actress or actor, have you ever considered seeking out interviews by that person in magazines? Many interviews allude to their parents or may mention another relative. This is an example of a non-traditional source.

Non-traditional sources are basically any source that you would not immediately consider for genealogy. I often find incredible information within theses and dissertations. I used a thesis on the waterways of what was *Illinois Country (Pays du Illinois)* when I was seeking guidance into the research of fur trappers who went there. Why? Because the individual who was studying that area used diaries and reports from those who were there in the 1600s, including Jesuit Priests and military individuals. These sources are included in footnotes and in a compiled bibliography at the end.

When thinking about non-traditional sources, it becomes much less about the main focus of these sources and more about what the compiler of that non-traditional source used when completing their research. If the place and period are correct, or the overall subject (i.e., servants, fur trappers, immigrants) is correct then it becomes of interest and should be examined.

Applying to Your Family

When you are researching your family history, there may be things that pop up that cause you to go, “Hmmm.” These are the times when you want to ask the questions and seek out additional information.

For instance, perhaps you have been researching a family line, and someone mentions to you that the surname in question was associated with staunch Quakers. Yet as you have been working the line back, no one appears to be Quaker. This should prompt you to ask why your line so far has had no Quakers in it. The obvious answer would be that your line broke away or is unrelated to those Quakers all together. However, instead of just accepting that at face value, perhaps you should look for more information. Ask the five Ws and the H questions (mentioned above) and seek answers.

Read about the history of the community in which your ancestors resided. Does it mention they were Quakers at one time? If so, what happened? Does it allude to some event that perhaps caused a rift?

Tip: Always dig deeper for a better understanding.

Timelines

In addition to asking questions, timelines are an excellent method for not only tracking what you know about your ancestor(s) but also tracking historical events and putting the family you are researching in the context of the events around them.

To effectively work both into a single timeline, you may want to consider the following:

- When creating the timeline
 - Begin with ancestral events
 - Then add general events pertinent to period and locality
- Consider color coding (may want to include a key)

- One color for ancestral events
- Additional colors as appropriate for specific events of importance (i.e., attacks, epidemics, battles, town settlements)
- Include a column for notes (may want to color code text in the notes)
 - Red for questions or conflicts of information
 - Blue for thoughts or resolutions
- Include source citations for all facts listed in the timeline

Suggested Bibliography

Books

Anderson, Robert Charles, *Elements of Genealogical Analysis* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014)

Mills, Elizabeth Shown, *Evidence Explained; Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 2024)

Schrag, Zachary M., *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021)

Websites

Academia (Books, scholarly works), <https://www.academia.edu/>

Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/>

Archive Grid (Manuscripts), <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

Chronicling America, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america/>

FamilySearch.org, <https://www.familysearch.org/en/united-states/>

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