

Genealogy: Tips for finding females that matter to you

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Identifying females is one of the hardest challenges genealogists face.

It might be that only the first name and married surname are known. Or perhaps a daughter disappears from census records and it is not known whom she married. The biggest obstacle when researching women is that their name changed when they married. This is compounded by fewer records. Before the 20th century, women did not have the same rights as men and, therefore, they generated considerably fewer records. Although few research problems are as difficult as finding the identity of females in our family history, there are records and strategies that can be used to overcome the challenges.

Often the answer to identifying a woman can be found in the records of her husband, son or brother. Men owned the land, they ran the businesses and their lives were recorded in more detail than women's. Look for clues about women in the records of the men in their lives.

Records relating to a child's birth, marriage and death will often give the mother's maiden name. Even a child's name can be a clue about a mother's maiden name. Children are often named after grandparents, uncles and aunts. A clue to a maiden name might be in a child's unusual first or middle name when the name is typically a surname.

Women can be found as witnesses on records. Marriage, baptismal and other legal documents are all examples of the types of records a woman might have witnessed. Making a connection between the woman witnessing the event and the names in the documents can lead to finding a woman's identity.

Some records that can be useful in finding female identities are:

- 1. Marriage records** are the most obvious place to look for a maiden name and names of parents. This could be a civil marriage license or bond, a church marriage record or marriage announcement. If the name of parents is not included, be sure to check the marriage records for all known siblings, since they might have information not included in the record for your direct line.
- 2. Death records** usually include the maiden name of the deceased. They also might include the mother's maiden name. Again, checking for all the siblings of your direct line will increase the odds of finding the names of parents.
- 3. Church records** usually list the maiden name of the mother in the baptismal record and the maiden name of the woman in a marriage record. A closer examination of church records will reveal that women were often witnesses for the baptisms and marriages of close family members.
- 4. Land records** frequently show the passing of land ownership from one generation to the next. These records provide the names of wives and married daughters, and in some cases, the names of the daughter's husband.
- 5. Wills and probate** records are one of the most useful records when looking for a woman's identity. Parents usually named each child in their will and it is common for each child to receive a portion of the estate. A woman also could have been named in the will and probate of grandparents and other relatives. Married names are usually used, and the name of their spouse also might be listed.
- 6. Pension files** might include the maiden name of a pensioner's wife. They also can include affidavits

from close family members who might be related to the wife. Widow pension files should have the maiden name in the proof that the woman was married to the pensioner.

7. Obituaries frequently list the maiden name of females or give the names of their parents. Additionally, a married name will be given when a woman is listed in her the obituary of her father, mother or sibling.

8. Letters and diaries can be a source of information about females and their families. These are usually found in family records, either immediate family or that of a collateral line. If you suspect letters and diaries exist for a female in your genealogy but have not located the items, perhaps they have been donated to a repository. Check for these treasures in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), which is available online.

9. Census records are easily accessible and are full of information on female ancestors. Although census records do not ask for a maiden name, they give many clues about a woman`s origins. It is common to find children living with parents directly after they marry and for parents to live with married children as they age.

10. Cemetery records might list maiden names and they often hold clues about a family. People often bought cemetery lots close to other family members or bought lots large enough to accommodate extended family members. Look for the relationship between the deceased and the owner of the cemetery lot, which may be listed on the cemetery record.

Females make up half of our ancestry, yet they are often neglected. Be sure you don`t shortchange the females in your family just because the research takes a little extra effort.

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