

The Secret Lives of Women: Researching Women Using What They Left Behind

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Research Involves Five Aspects of a Woman's Life:

- The woman herself
- The woman's family
- The locality where she lived
- The time period she lived in
- The neighbors and community

And it involves researching what she did that would document her life. Including:

- Signature or friendship quilts
- Needlework Samplers
- Community Cookbooks
- Membership in auxiliaries to men's groups
- Membership in women's benevolent groups
- Their writings (journal, diaries, women's publications)

Female ancestors are different and shouldn't be researched exactly like our male ancestors. Historically, women did not leave the same type of paper trail due to not having the same legal rights. Researching female ancestors can be challenging. While you should start with the same methodology as you would when researching male ancestors, there are some additional strategies to consider.

When thinking about a female ancestor, the first thing you should do is create a timeline to help guide you as you consider what she did that could have left a paper trail. Aside from filling in her birth, marriage, and death dates, start asking yourself questions about her life. What clubs, churches, and membership organizations existed in her community? What was historically happening, that may have affected her life? What records exist for the place/s she lived? Once you have your timeline, you can then start filling in the events of her life. With your timeline started, your next step is to begin your research.

Start at the Beginning

As you start your project, make sure that you exhaust all of the usual sources you typically check before moving on with your research. First, start with home sources, but don't limit that search to your own house. Ask around about home sources that family members own. These sources can provide valuable clues to your ancestor's life. You can expand your home source search by utilizing social network websites, looking for potential cousins that have family heirlooms. Consider using message boards, Twitter, and Facebook to find researchers working on the same family line.

Once your search for home sources is out of the way, move on to searching genealogy websites, both free and fee-based. Some to consider are Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, Library and Archives Canada, and Newspapers.com. Not sure what websites to check? Make sure to explore Cyndi's List < <https://www.cyndislist.com/>> for links to other websites. Cyndi's List has a page just for links to websites that help you research your female ancestors < <https://www.cyndislist.com/female>>.

Expand Your Research

It can be easy to rely on searching just on a person's name as you use genealogy subscription websites. But as you continue to research, you may find more relevant information if you expand your search beyond the person. Research should include the clusters that were a part of the person's life, including extended family members. In researching women, consider expanding your research to include her community (you can't know all the resources available if you don't know the community she lived in) and her historical era.

Most genealogists start a family history project by focusing their research on the individual woman and her family. Collateral family members can be vital in finding more information about an individual since some family members may have left a better paper trail than others. The research I recommend goes beyond that. Genealogist Elizabeth Shown Mills talks about the FAN Club principle (friends, acquaintances, and neighbors). The idea is that in research, you need to go beyond just searching on an individual if you want to find rich material that detail their lives. Our ancestors were part of a community, and that community may have documented your ancestor through business records, correspondence, a scrapbook, or a diary entry.

In addition to this concept, include researching the historical era your ancestress lived in. When researching women, it's vital to know something about the history of her time. Without that knowledge, you may make mistakes in looking for documents that don't exist or making assumptions about the documents you find.

Female Specific Resources

In some cases, there are record collections that are specific to women. For example, a keyword search on the FamilySearch Catalog using the keyword “women” reveals over 5,882 results. Just a few examples from this search are:

- Women in North America: summaries of biographical articles in history journals
- Genealogical Data Relating to Women in the Western Reserve Before 1840
- Many tender ties: women in fur-trade society, 1670-1870
- Index of References to American Women in Colonial Newspapers through 1800
- A nation of immigrants: women, workers, and communities in Canadian history, 1840s-1960s

As you search online catalogs, remember to try searching on various keywords like the name of the church she attended, the membership group, or activity you know that your ancestress was a part of.

Women Centered Activities

Part of why women can be difficult to trace could have something to do with the sources we typically use in genealogy. Because we primarily rely on government documents, it should come as no shock that women are not well represented. As you consider your female ancestor think about what activities she may have been involved in that would result in a record or document. For example, utilizing city directories to get a sense of her community will assist you in learning what membership societies she could have been a member of. What church did she attend? She may have been a member of a benevolent society for that church that could have resulted in membership records or even a fundraising cookbook or signature quilt.

One important place to find records that pertain to women’s lives is through manuscript collections. Utilize archival catalogs such as Archive Grid to find manuscript collections that pertain to the area your ancestor lived in. Also, check the library, archive, and online museum catalogs for the city, county, region, and state they lived. In some cases, repositories have women's manuscript collections that are authored by or pertain to women. These can be a rich source for women's journals, correspondence, church, and membership group records.

The Quilt Index

<http://www.quiltindex.org/>

Library of Congress Science Reference Guide. American Church, Club and Community Cookbooks...:

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/SciRefGuides/americancookbooks.html>

Colonial Dames – Sampler Survey Project

<https://nscda.org/historical-activities/samplers/>

Manuscript Collections and Digital Collections

ArchiveGrid

<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

WorldCat

<https://www.worldcat.org>

PERSI (Available through FindMyPast or Heritage Quest).