

# Beyond Names and Places: Filling in the Stories of Our Female Ancestors

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Because women generated far fewer records than men throughout much of history, we may find little information about them, but with a little digging, we can still find ways to tell their stories. Here are some places to look:

**Newspapers:** From articles to obituaries to ads, newspapers can provide some of the best information about women, but we have to be cautious about what we accept as truth, since accuracy varies widely. Quite a few collections are available online and without charge, such as *Chronicling America* at the Library of Congress (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>) and Google News (<https://news.google.com/newspapers>). To locate the papers published at the time and place your ancestor was living, try Stanford University's Rural West Initiative ([http://web.stanford.edu/group/ruralwest/cgi-bin/drupal/visualizations/us\\_newspapers](http://web.stanford.edu/group/ruralwest/cgi-bin/drupal/visualizations/us_newspapers)). Newspapers.com, GenealogyBank.com, and NewspaperArchive.com are some subscription sites that you may be able to use free of charge at your local library, genealogical society, or family history center. But many newspapers will have to be researched in the town where they were published or ordered on microfilm by interlibrary loan.

**Migration:** If we know that an ancestor lived in more than one location, we can research each location through local, county and state histories, and also migration routes during that time. There are many resources that cover migration, but a good place to start is the FamilySearch wiki ([https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main_Page)). Search for "migration" to find all kinds of articles, from state by state immigration to transportation information. Cyndi's List (<http://www.cyndislist.com/migration>) is another great resource, with topics ranging from the Santa Fe Trail to Orphan Trains to Railroads.

**Life-changing Events:** Consider stops along the way and significant or traumatic events that might have had an impact on your ancestor's travels, why she left and where she stopped, such as epidemics, financial crises, droughts, etc. GenDisasters.com (<http://www3.gendisasters.com>) is a great starting point for this kind of research.

**Town, County, and State Histories:** Local histories may provide information about your ancestor. Even if she's not mentioned by name, these records may offer unique information about events that may have shaped her life. They can be found online, in books and newspapers, and in local repositories such as genealogical societies, historical societies, and public libraries. But again, take what you read with a grain of salt, for some of these embellish or sanitize the stories to provide more glowing accounts of local residents than they may deserve. As in all areas of genealogy, gather evidence and then try to corroborate or refute it with more research.

**Law:** Court records can a goldmine. If your ancestor was a pauper, a divorcée, or if she was charged with a crime, detailed records may still reside at the courthouse or in an archive.

The law determined what rights your ancestor did or did not have, what she was allowed to do, and what was forbidden. For example, for much of American history, women in most states lost the right to control their property when they got married. They became *femes covert*, "covered" by their husbands, and he controlled both real and personal property, even the clothes on her back. The law attempted to provide a measure of protection through dower rights, which gave women limited control over the sale of property during the marriage and protected them from being tossed out on the street if they became widows. Generally, they were entitled to 1/3 of the real property, and although they couldn't sell the land themselves, in some cases, they could refuse to agree to a sale during the marriage. Dower lasted only during a widow's lifetime and didn't allow her to control who would inherit the property upon her death. Of course, a husband could also leave more to his widow, granting her complete control or at least a better deal than the law provided. A wonderful published resource about coverture and dower is MaryLynn Salmon's *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, University of North Carolina Press, 1986. To learn more about this or other legal topics from the past, consult local, state and federal statutes, often available online at Google Books ([www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)), Hathi Trust ([www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)), or Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)). You may also find Black's Commentaries and Black's Law Dictionary helpful for clarifying the meaning of the statutes. I also recommend subscribing to Judy Russell's excellent blog, The Legal Genealogist (<http://www.legalgenealogist.com>), which is available online without charge and explores all kinds of useful topics related to genealogy and the law. Oregon residents can register (for free) with the Oregon State Law Library's feature, Fastcase (<http://soll.libguides.com/index>). Search for any topic and use the interactive timeline to find laws applicable to your ancestor at the time and place in which she lived. Although the focus is on Oregon law, some cases from other parts of the country are included.

**Land Records:** Even in the early days of the United States, women's names appeared in land records. Deeds are usually kept at the county level, and although some have been digitized, most must be requested from the agency in charge. Google "historical deeds" or "historical land records" for your county and state to find how to research or order them. You may also find homestead records for your female ancestor, since women were permitted to apply for federal land patents in their own right. Search the Bureau of Land Management's website (<http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/search>) to find information and often copies of the actual land patent. But don't stop there. Look at *Related Documents* to find neighbors and other family members who can be researched. Also, there may be more records available than what you find on the website because homesteaders had to document the improvements they made to the land, so contact the local BLM office where your ancestor lived to see if there is more information available.

Even if the woman didn't own any real property, there may be detailed mortgage records on her personal property, known as chattel mortgages. Check with the county in which she lived. These are often kept wherever the county's deeds are housed.

**Probate:** Estate records, from wills to inventories to petitions to the court, spell out relationships and provide information about the family's assets and lifestyle. Even if a woman had no property of her own during her marriage, she may have inherited property or been

named in estate papers because someone who did inherit was charged with her care. To find them, google "probate records" for your county. Older records are often found in state or local archives.

**Tax Records:** Sometimes we can learn about what a woman owned by checking her tax records. Tracking her assets over time can help us explore changes in her financial situation.

**Military Records:** If her husband served in the military, your ancestor may have filed for a widow's pension. She would have had to prove that she was entitled, and therefore you may find proof of her marriage and other documents that will help to tell her story, even if the request was denied. Sometimes these documents reveal a great deal of personal information about the family. You may find them online at Fold3.com, a subscription site, but libraries and family history centers sometimes provide free access. FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com have some as well, but many of widow's pension records will have to be ordered from the National Archives. That's also where you'll find records of women who served in the military.

**Naturalization Records:** Even American-born women may have left naturalization records. The 1907 Expatriation Act stripped them of their citizenship if they married an alien. The Cable Act of 1922 ended this practice for most of these women, but those who had lost their citizenship had to complete the naturalization process as if they were born elsewhere. To learn more, see Marian L. Smith's "Any woman who is now or may hereafter be married..."; Women and Naturalization, ca 1802-1940," Prologue: Selected Articles, Summer 1998, Vol. 30, No. 2 (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/summer/women-and-naturalization-1.html>). These records may be filed separately from other naturalization files under the heading of Special Naturalizations.

All aliens in the United States were required to register with the government beginning in 1940, so you may find abundant information about an immigrant who didn't become a citizen in an A-File, available from USCIS ([www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)).

**Collateral Research:** Investigate family members, friends and acquaintances whose records may shed light on your female ancestor, even if she left no records herself. Researching the men in a woman's life may be one of the best ways to learn about her.

**Timelines and Inventions:** To get an overview of the events of her life, turn to history. An interesting tool is Judy Jacobson's *History for Genealogists: Using Chronological Time Lines to Find and Understand Your Ancestors*, Baltimore: Clearfield Company (printed by Genealogical Publishing Company), 2009. Use historical reference materials to think about what your ancestor's life was like, what activities occupied her time, and how the innovations of the day or the lack thereof might have had an impact.

**Clothing:** What a woman wore dictated how she moved and what she could do. Many early fashions were restrictive and even hazardous. Find links to learn more about this at Cyndi's List (<http://www.cyndislist.com/clothing/locality>), or google "fashion history." For colonial women, explore the "Dress the Part" activity on the Colonial Williamsburg website ([http://www.history.org/History/teaching/dayInTheLife/interact\\_dress.cfm](http://www.history.org/History/teaching/dayInTheLife/interact_dress.cfm)). For the 19th century, try Old Sturbridge Village's articles on the topic ([http://resources.osv.org/explore\\_learn/document\\_list.php?A=LDS&S=32&T=R](http://resources.osv.org/explore_learn/document_list.php?A=LDS&S=32&T=R)). Theatrical

costume history books, old paintings, and local historical newspaper ads and magazines can also be useful.

**Advice and Etiquette Books:** Hathi Trust (<https://www.hathitrust.org>) has some wonderful books online, such as T. S. Arthur's *Advice to Young Ladies on Their Duties and Conduct in Life*, Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1849.

**Diaries:** Even if your ancestor didn't leave a diary, other women in a similar position or undergoing a similar experience may have left detailed information that can help you understand what your ancestor may have faced. In addition to historical and genealogical society and library collections, many diaries are available online. Google "historical women's diaries" and add specific information about the time and place you seek, such as "Oregon Trail diaries online" or "19th century Connecticut women's diaries online" or "schoolteacher's diaries." For diaries and other unique manuscript collections, try Archivegrid (<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid>).

**Church records:** Even if your ancestor didn't leave any other papers, you may find her recorded in church records. Because women changed their names when they married, this may be one of the few places to identify maiden names. But women also remarried, often fairly soon after burying their husbands, so carefully searching through church records for a year or two following the burial can often reveal those names as well. Don't forget to check church newsletters as well.