

And Now...The Rest of the Story

Getting beyond the vital statistics for a peek into our ancestors' lives.

By Jack Butler

www.genjack.com

JB@genjack.com

I knew almost from the very beginning of my genealogy research that I was not going to be satisfied with simply compiling a list of ancestral vital statistics - I wanted a peek into their biographies.

This presentation is designed to address the use of both traditional and non-traditional genealogical records to get a peek into the lives of our ancestors. It will review those traditional records most likely to provide biographical information and will introduce several less traditional sources that can aid in our understanding of our forebears.

Traditional Sources:

Finding biographical material in traditional genealogical sources is more common than you probably think – but it requires that the material be viewed in a new light and that you pay close attention to the detail in each record. Think about the record's context and the reason that the record was created – as much as we would like to think so, they were not created to make our search for our ancestors easier.

You can find tidbits to help you understand your ancestor's lives in a wide variety of traditional genealogical sources, but the following sources may hold your best chance:

Interviews – Talk to People

I suspect that many genealogists overlook interviews altogether when considering traditional genealogical resources – but they belong at the head of your list. In many cases, people can tell you more about the lives of some of your ancestors than any formal record can. Who should you talk to? Everybody! Consider everyone who may have been alive when the ancestor you are chasing was alive – or even the children of those who were alive then. Stories of the ancestor's life may just be stories – or they may be the key to a new record that unlocks your ancestor's life.

Court Records

- **Wills and other probate records:** Aside from the direct bequests, estate inventories are among my favorite records for clues of my ancestors' lives. Inventories can tell you if an ancestor was wealthy or poor, what his occupation may have been, and can shed light on what the family's daily life might have been like.

Other things to look for are a list of debts, both those owed by your ancestor and those owed to him/her. Circumstances of the ancestor's death, if included, can also be important – was the death natural, accidental, or criminal?

Look for death or funeral costs – were they paid from the estate, by the family, by the county? These items can add to your understanding of his or her life.

- **Land and Tax records:**
Land records can provide locations, dimensions, value, and quality of your ancestor's real property. Did they own farm land or lots in town? Was the land 1st quality or maybe 3rd rate? These kinds of things made a difference in how they lived their daily lives.
Tax records reflect the ancestor's financial position. At various times and in various tax jurisdictions, you will find that in addition to property and slaves, personal items such as horses, wagons or buggies, jewelry, and other "luxury" items were taxed.
- **Lawsuits:** We think of our own times as being contentious and legalistic, but lawsuits are nothing new. And a lawsuit can range from the ridiculous to the tragic – but nearly all offer elements of a life that cannot be found anywhere else. Did your ancestor have a dispute with one or more of his neighbors? Was an ancestor's property seized and sold by the Sherriff to settle an unpaid debt? In my own research I found one ancestor being sued by a neighbor for letting his cattle get into the neighbor's corn fields and another who sued a man for time and money lost because the man had lied in court about an unrelated issue and my ancestor was called to court to give testimony that proved that the man had lied.

Where to find them: As the name suggests, court records are typically found in County Courthouses, but most are also available via microfilm held by the Family History Library in Salt Lake. These can be rented and reviewed at your local Family History Center.

Very early records are sometimes found in State Archives or State Historical Societies – some very early records can be found in the *Territorial Papers of the United States*. This multi-volume collection contains a very wide variety of records kept by the Federal Government during the periods that the various states were Territories prior to becoming states. Major libraries and university libraries often have these volumes. You can check your local library or Google the title to locate the volumes in a site nearest you.

Military Records

- **Compiled Service Records:** Compiled service records consist of an envelope containing card abstracts taken from muster rolls, returns, pay vouchers, and other records. They will provide you with your ancestor's rank, unit, date mustered in and mustered out, basic biographical information, medical information, and military information. These usually include locations where your soldier enlisted and served, and his ranks. They may tell you about pay rates, leaves, wounds, illness, or death.

Compiled Service Records are held by the National Archives and Records Administration, but most are available via microfilm.

- **Pension Applications** – Military pension applications are frequently gold mines of biographical/personal information about our ancestors. These files often contain supporting documents such as narratives of events during service, marriage certificates, birth records, death certificates, pages from family Bibles, family letters, depositions of witnesses, affidavits, discharge papers and other supporting papers.

Pensions were awarded for service in the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, the various Indian wars, the Mexican War, and the Civil War. Union Civil war apps frequently run to 100 pages or more.

Where to Find Them: Federal pension applications are held by NARA, but many Revolutionary War and Civil War files are available online at the Fold3 (formerly Footnote) website (<http://www.fold3.com/>). War of 1812 pension files are currently being digitized and are added to the Fold3 website at they are complete. These will also be available for free at the National Archives.

Confederate Civil War pensions were issued and managed by the individual former Confederate states where the soldier lived following the Civil War – not necessarily the state from which he served. They can usually be found at the state's Archives, but a number of states have digitized the files and made them available online.

Less Traditional Sources

Letters and Diaries/Journals

Letters are an excellent source of biographical data about our ancestors. If you can find a letter written by – or to – your ancestor, it will almost certainly broaden your knowledge of that ancestor's daily life. And something that you should remember about letters and diaries – they do not necessarily have to be by one of your ancestor's to provide a view of your ancestor's life. For example, if your ancestor traveled the Oregon Trail in 1848, *William Porter's Oregon Trail Diary 1848*, will give you a pretty good idea of what that ancestor's trip was like. And if your ancestor served in the 2nd Florida Infantry during the Tennessee Campaign of the Civil War, the letters that Reason Wilson Jerkins wrote to “My Dear Wife and Children” will tell you about the deprivations and hardships your ancestor suffered during that winter war in the mountains of Tennessee.

Here are a few sources for finding letters and diaries:

- **Home** – Check all of the clichéd sources: old chests, desk drawers, etc. But most of all talk to *People*. If you ask someone straight out about old letters, you may or may not get a positive response. But if you get them talking about the old days, you will often remind them of things that they had totally forgotten.
- **Relatives** – Talk to both close relatives and to all of your internet cousins. As a genealogist, I have always profited from “casting my bread upon the waters.” I shared information with almost anyone who asked. Yes, I did run into a couple of people who took my data and posted it to the internet as if they had done the work. But the flood of information – letters, photographs, old family stories, etc. – that I got from the majority of my contacts in return for telling folks about their great, great, granddaddy was well worth a little annoyance from the few inconsiderates.

- **State Archives, Libraries, Local Historical Associations.** As about collections of family letters or records – these are often found as “Special Collections.” At the Florida State Archives, I once located a collection of family memorabilia from 4 generations that had been inherited and later donated to the Archives by the last surviving family member who actually remembered any of the folks who created the records. The Special Collection held about 30 cubic feet of records: nearly 400 letters, post cards, photographs, business papers, land records, and a family bible.
- **Published Letters and Diaries** – Look for small town newspapers, Universities, online collections, local histories. For example, the University of Virginia has a substantial number of letters and diary entries in their Shadow Of The Valley Civil War collection (<http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/>). Check Cyndi’s List (<http://www.cyndislist.com/diaries/libraries/>) for a sizeable list of online collections, or try Internet Archives.org <http://www.archive.org/> where a search on diary returns more than 80 hits. Also, never forget the potential value of a Google search.

Newspapers

- **Vital Statistics** – Births, Marriages, Deaths & Obituaries
- **Legal/Business Announcements** - estate settlement or sales, land sales, divorce proceedings, etc. Also, letting of contracts, rewards for return of lost or stolen property.
- **Public Announcements and Advertisements** - Public sales of livestock, farm equipment, and personal property, also advertisements for new businesses, announcements concerning insolvent debtors, runaway slaves, etc.
- **Gossip/Society** – Anything from a notice of a visit to or from out of town family, a meeting of the local Sewing Circle to a full report of a social event with numerous details about family, relations, etc
- **News** - military events, especially in war time, floods, accidents, crimes, etc.
- **School News** – Often carried detailed coverage of graduation ceremonies or at least lists of graduates; lists of who made the honor roll or won awards, school sporting events, and even school board minutes.
- **Church Announcements** – In many areas, churches routinely submitted lists of new members, baptisms, confirmations, and other church news.

Where to Find Them - Historically, newspapers have proved a challenge to locate and research. But digitization programs and significantly improved search capabilities are providing access to millions of pages of valuable content. Also, large numbers of newspapers were microfilmed and many of these films available through interlibrary loan. Some excellent starting places are listed below:

- **The US Newspaper Program** - <http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>. The United States Newspaper Program is a cooperative national effort among the states and the federal government to locate, catalog, and preserve newspapers published in the United States from the eighteenth century to the present. programs.
- **The Catalog of Periodical Publications, 1880 United States Census** - This supplement to the 1880 U. S. Census gives us a state by state and county by county listing of the newspapers that were in operation during the census year of June 1, 1879 to May 31, 1880. The lists provides the county, the town in which the newspaper was published, the name of the newspaper, how often the newspaper was published, the character of the newspaper (what its primary content was), the year it was established, and the annual subscription cost. This census supplement is online as follows:

Appendix B Catalog of Periodical Publications [Alabama to Minnesota]

http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1880a_v8-05.pdf

Appendix B Catalog of Periodical Publications [Minnesota to Wyoming Territory]

http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1880a_v8-06.pdf

- **Ancestry.com** - Ancestry’s subscription sites (free at many libraries) provide searchable access to a collection of 1007 newspapers.
<http://www.ancestry.com/>
- **Genealogy Bank.com** - Genealogy Bank is a subscription web site that, in addition to its collections of historical books, historical documents, and obituaries, offers access to more than 1300 newspapers published between 1690 and 1977.
<http://www.genealogybank.com/gbnk/keyword.html>

- **Small Town Papers** - Allows you to choose from over 250 small town newspapers from around the United States. Some issues of some papers go back to 1865, while others are more recent.
<http://smalltownpapers.com/>
 - **The Olden Times, Historic Newspapers Online** - Links to digital images of scanned from a private collection of original issues of 18th, 19th and early 20th century newspapers from the U. S., England, Scotland, Australia & Ireland. Most of the newspapers date between 1788 and 1920.
<http://theoldentimes.com/index.html>
- Newspapers Online** - This site provides a series of links to newspapers all over the world – most are more recent newspapers. <http://www.newspapers.com>
- **Cyndi's List – Newspapers** - Provides a large number of links to newspaper and newspaper related web sites. <http://www.cyndislist.com/newspapr.htm>
 - **World Vital Records** - A subscription site that provides a large number of links to newspaper web sites
<http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/contentlisting.aspx?cat=news&kbid=1117>
 - **Godfrey Memorial Library** - A subscription site that provides access to a broad variety of genealogical resources, among which are links to a large variety of early American newspapers.
<http://www.godfrey.org/>

Local Histories, Military Unit Histories, “Mug” Books, and Travelogues

- **Local Histories** – County or City histories often provide information about citizens. While these are most often the more well-off or “important”, this not always the case. Even if your ancestor is not named, you can get info on events that occurred while they lived there.
- **Military Unit Histories** – These histories tell of where the units served and of battles and other unit operations. They typically name officers and may mention casualties, etc.
- **“Mug Books”** – This is an admittedly unflattering name for those books that proliferated all across the country in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Often called “histories,” they did frequently include some local history, but most of the content was made up of short biographies of local men and/or local families – the publishers made their money selling to folks who were in the books. As with all such sources, you should expect errors, but they are still very useful sources.
- **Travelogues** – People have been travelling to foreign lands and writing books about their travels since very early times. These books often provide information about the lands and cities visited. These writing typically include details about the people encountered – their housing, their typical meals, their clothing, their work, and so on.

Timelines

Timelines - chronological listings of historical events - offer insight into events, situations and surroundings which probably had some sort of impact on your ancestors. Creating a timeline for a particular ancestor or family group shows not only what events may have influenced their lives, but can also help you to spot further avenues for research.

Major events (wars, epidemics, natural disasters...) may have caused families to move or may explain the disappearance (or death) of a particular ancestor. Boundary changes may explain why you can't find your ancestor in the records of a particular area at a particular time. You can even use social timelines, such as timelines of food and meal time habits, or clothing to provide details on how your ancestors lived.

There are many timelines available on the internet, but one good general timeline site to begin with is Our Timelines.com (<http://www.ourtimelines.com/>). Here are a few others:

- The History of Health (http://www.relife.com/history_1.html)
- The Food History folks have an interesting food timeline: <http://www.foodtimeline.org/>
But this site also has links to the Food History A-Z website <http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodfaqindex.html> where you can find all sorts of fascinating things about the evolution of human meals and meal times.
- Cyndi's List has a number of locality oriented timelines at: <http://www.cyndislist.com/timelines/locality/>