



HOMESPUN & CALICO
Researching Our Foremothers
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"Well-behaved women seldom make history"...Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

There are two basic categories of sources you will seek in the course of researching female ancestors:

those created by a woman herself

those created about her

Sources created **by** women include:

Letters

- usually contained news items about births, marriages and deaths in family

Diaries and Journals

- diaries tend to record people's feelings
- journals are more likely to enumerate activities and events
- diaries are autobiographies of ordinary women
 - may be the only existing records of their lives
- read carefully the notations on the diarist's birthday and at the beginning of a new year

Relatives' and Friends' Letters and Diaries

- women usually spent more time with other women than they did with their husbands
 - female relatives and friends attended births, marriages and deaths

How do you find these items?

- contact all living relatives
- place a query in one of the local genealogy society quarterlies
- write or visit state historical society libraries or archives, university and public libraries that may have local history or special collections.
 - ask if they have any "papers" for your ancestor or her relatives or neighbors
 - women's "papers" could end up anywhere. How do you find them?
 - start with National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

Family Bibles

- women most likely recorded family vital records in a Bible
 - men and women who applied for military pensions had to prove births of their children and/or their own marriage. They may have torn out pertinent pages from the family Bible since there was no way to make a copy.

Family Artifacts and Heirlooms

- sewing was part of women's daily work and pastime. Check for samplers
- antique jewelry – check all jewelry for any inscriptions. Locketts may contain photographs or a lock of hair. Mourning jewelry was often created from the deceased's hair and made into rings, broaches and bracelets, or even wreaths.

Sources created **about** women include:

Daughter: check for records of her parents – wills.

Wife or widow: check for records where her husband names her – pensions

Widow: her legal and social status changed, so she may create records under her own name

Mother: look for documents on her children, such as death certificates

Grandmother: she may be living with one of her grandchildren and can be found on the census

Sister: you may find mention of her in a sibling's diary

Niece: she may be an heir to an unmarried uncle

Granddaughter: she may inherit something from a grandparent

Friend: she may be discussed in a letter

Neighbor: she may own the adjoining property and be named in a land deed

Published Family Histories

- check to see if someone has already published a family history.
 - Many old New England families have printed genealogies

Cemetery Records and Tombstone Inscriptions

- cemeteries may sometimes be the only place where you will find proof that a female existed – especially if she died young
 - sometimes young wives who died within the first few years of marriage were buried with their own families instead of their husband's
 - if a mother and baby died during childbirth, they were usually buried together

Church Records

- check if local churches kept baptismal records
 - These can predate state birth certificates.
 - Quaker women were very active in their religion.
 - Look for religious holidays and observances your family has celebrated. Do they stem from a certain religion?

Census Records

- between 1790 and 1840, censuses listed only heads of household. Sometimes this was a woman.
- for later entries, look carefully for all censuses your ancestor would have appeared on.
 - was her husband listed as disabled, perhaps from a farming accident or military service?
 - were any children recorded as deaf, blind, idiotic or insane, or having another physical or mental handicap?
 - were there aged parents or other dependent relatives living in her home?
 - was there a servant living in the household?
 - how many children did she have? How closely spaced are their births?
 - if she was an immigrant, did she speak English? What was her native language?
 - did her husband have slaves? Were there mulatto slaves mentioned?
 - who were the women living in the household listed before and after your ancestor? Could they have been friends or relatives?

Passenger Arrival Lists

- many women came to the colonies as ex-convicts, petty thieves, prostitutes, vagrants and indentured servants.
 - indentured servants worked off the indenture over a period of seven years, unless she became pregnant. Usually one more year was added.
- many Catholic Italians and French used maiden names in all legal documents. When traveling, children were listed by their father's surname, but mother was listed by maiden name.
 - if maiden name is unknown, look at indexes for children under father's surname. You'll find her listed with them.

City and Rural Directories

- most city directories were first published during late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - generally list names of adults, including adult children living with parents.

Voter Lists and Registrations

- women were granted right to vote in 1920, later in some southern states.

Military Records and Pensions

- women have served in the military throughout history – nurses, spies, disguised as men, etc.
- many women continued to pursue pensions and/or bounty lands long after their husband's death.

Orphan's and Guardianship Records

- when a woman was left a widow with minor children, the children were considered orphans and in need of a legal guardian.
 - guardian was almost always a male relative who would ensure child's welfare until reaching majority.
 - even fathers of motherless children sought guardianship, usually because his children were entitled to an inheritance (mother's child).
- if both parents were living, guardian may have been appointed to protect an inheritance from another relative.
 - many are recorded in probate court.

Land Records

- some of the earliest records you will find are land records.
 - even when courthouses burned, many deeds were recorded since land ownership was sacred.
- since married women were "covered" by their husbands (femes covert), they could not legally engage in contracts or land transactions without their husband's approval.
 - transacting her own land sales.
- watch if a man, or a husband and wife, sold property to a woman, or a husband and wife for one dollar (or some other small amount). Sellers (grantors) could be woman's parents or other close relatives.

Marriage Records

- in some states, no license was required for marriage.
 - many took out a license or a bond, but never made it to the altar.
 - the groom and either father or brother of bride posted bond.
 - if a woman posted bond, it may be bride's mother (father deceased).
- in colonial marriage records, you may find a man marrying a *Mrs. Mary Smith*.
 - does not necessarily mean she was married previously.
 - the term Mrs., which is originally an abbreviation for Mistress, used in both married and unmarried cases. Denotes a social position.

Divorce Records

- in our nation's early history, more men than women filed for divorce.
 - after Revolution, women petitioners outnumbered men.
- Indiana was reputed as a divorce mill – easy divorce laws and short residency.
 - migratory divorce was common. Look for Gretna Greens.

Wills and Probate

- wills of fathers and husbands are important documents.
- always check for probate packet.
 - may contain papers for each step in the probate process: inventory, estate distribution, whereabouts of heirs, etc.

Court records

- why would couples would willingly admit to court they engaged in premarital sex?
 - many New England churches would not baptize a child born less than seven months after marriage unless couple publicly confessed.
- illegitimate children were a financial burden on community, so officials tried to coerce a mother to name the father of her child.
 - check for these records in bastardy court.

School Records

- most girls in rural communities attended one-room schoolhouses at some time in their lives. Education was not always a big priority for girls.
 - middle – upper class girls attended boarding schools.
 - check internet for availability of these records.

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