

Genealogical & Historical Societies to the Rescue

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Understanding Genealogical and Historical Society Records

There are thousands of county, town, and state historical and genealogical societies across the United States. While some societies have large research facilities, while others have little room to store records they house.

Records of these societies may contain valuable information for genealogists; they exist primarily to preserve materials relating to the history and genealogy of their region. A society's record collection grows when they receive material donated by private individuals or other organizations. Often the local historical society will house research notes and other materials of the regions prominent genealogists.

The society may receive grants from government institutions, corporations, or individuals but generally exist primarily because of their membership. Becoming a member of a society is generally easy, and can often be completed online, by e-mail, or phone. Membership dues vary from society to society, but most local societies' annual dues are under \$20.00. Benefits of membership generally include access to research facilities, discounts on products, publications, and seminars and workshops.

Most local societies record lineages of their members and undertake special projects (such as an original settler program, cemetery transcriptions, vital record indexes, and court record extracts).

Finding Genealogical and Historical Societies

- The USGenWeb Project (<http://www.usgenweb.org>).
- The Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) (<http://www.fgs.org>).
- General Internet Searches (www.google.com)

Common Record Collections

Guides and Reference materials

Societies purchase major genealogical reference books that can be used in their facilities. These collections also contain maps and other general genealogical method guides.

General, State, County, and/or Local Histories

A state society will generally house a large quantity of local histories regarding that state, its counties, and towns. Often the main "county history" for a local society will not be housed with other books but will instead be located in a special location.

Major Genealogical Periodicals

Larger societies' subscribe to major genealogical periodicals, keeping them in-house for their members and visitors to use.

Local Genealogical Periodicals

A society often participates in publication exchanges with other societies' in order to increase their collections. Often exchanges occur between societies that share common factors. For example, the town of Germantown, Pennsylvania would exchange periodicals with a society dedicated to Pennsylvania German Research.

Local Newspapers and Publications

While local libraries generally house town and county newspapers, a local society sometimes houses microfilms of newspapers. Genealogical societies often index the obituaries from their town or county. State societies regularly have a large collection of newspapers from their state, but do not frequently index them.

Local Compiled Family Histories (Privately Published)

A compiled family history section of a societies' research facility contains private printings of family histories regarding local families. Often these family histories are small, but not available at major genealogical repositories.

Record Inventories

A local society will inventory records that exist within their region. These inventories may include a listing of courthouse, library, cemetery, or other records available to visitors. Inventories are a valuable starting point for beginning research in any area.

Local Directories

Societies hold city and county directories in their collections. These directories are usually unavailable anywhere else in the country, and lead to clues about finding dwelling locations of individuals.

Surname Files

A vital collection of any historical society is their surname files. Files contain extracts, correspondence, documents, photographs, and other miscellaneous documents pertaining to a particular surname.

Original Local Records

Occasionally societies' will actually hold original records normally found in government repositories (such as courthouses) including; court, land, probate, and vital records.

Cemetery Locations and Listings

A local society will may "walk" cemeteries within their region, publishing an index of that particular cemetery. Most local societies have listings including identifiable burying locations within their region and short summaries or histories of the ground.

Correspondence Files

Genealogical and historical societies almost always keep every piece of correspondence they receive. Correspondence is organized by surname or in a separate correspondence file.

Photographs

Societies collect historical photographs of places and individuals. These collections are rarely indexed and take some time to examine.

Prominent Figures in Local History

Collections often include extensive history on prominent political, religious, social, or business leaders of the community.

Manuscript Collections

Research notes and journals often contain multiple surnames and localities. To avoid misfiling these records, they are listed in societies' manuscript collection. Records contain information that is unavailable in other locations and extremely useful in breaking down brick walls.

Extracts and Transcripts of Local Records

Like cemetery transcriptions, societies' extract and transcribe deed, probate, court, will, and vital records from their region. These records are often fully indexed.

Miscellaneous Files

Because societies are a record repository for a variety of items, they often create miscellaneous files containing information that does not fit into any other collection.

Preparing to Research Onsite

- Collect basic information about the location of the society including the address, driving directions, and hours.
- Determine what types of records are available at the facility (if an online catalog is unavailable, an e-mail can often help collect this information). If an online catalog or inventory is available, look for call numbers of resources you want to examine.
- Learn about research procedures and policies within the society.
- Discover what the prices and policies are regarding making photocopies or digital images of documents.
- Know requirements for researching in the facility and special benefits you may have as a member of the society upon your visit.
- Contact someone from the society and inform them you will be coming. Include names, and other data that you plan on searching, and ask what resources within their collection they recommend you search.

Onsite Research Strategies

- Begin with a broad search objective; even though you might be looking for information regarding a specific ancestor explore resources pertaining to surnames, locations, dates, etc.
- Bring a laptop to take notes, look at data, and transfer electronic files. Some societies allow patrons to use scanners and digital cameras instead of paying for paper copies of records. Always make sure you select a research area with good lighting before you take digital photos.
- Do not hesitate to copy something that you think you "may" need, this could be the only opportunity you have to copy that information.
- Follow the guidelines and procedures of the society, if you have questions ask.
- Make sure that while you are citing your sources and compiling your research log and you make notes regarding the organization system the society uses to catalog materials.