



Beyond the Brick Wall: Strategies for Pre-1850 U.S. Research

Julia A. Anderson, MA, AG®, AGL™

United States and Canada Research Specialist, FamilySearch Library

Researching in the United States prior to 1850 presents unique challenges. Records contain less information, are seldom indexed, and can be difficult to find. In this class, we will introduce strategies for identifying relationships prior to 1850 and demonstrate advanced research skills, record analysis, and evidence correlation.

Objectives

- **Introduce** pre-1850 research
- **Review** common pre-1850 record types
- **Explain** some helpful strategies for pre-1850 research
- **Present** some helpful tips for pre-1850 research
- **Demonstrate** how this process can work in real life with a case study

Introducing Pre-1850 Research

When researching an ancestor born pre-1850, make sure to search the three different time periods associated with their life.

- **Marriage to Death.** Start by locating all of the records created about your research subject, their spouse, and any known siblings. Also research the lives of any additional spouses of both your research subject and their spouse.
- **Trace the Children.** Identify all of the children of your research subject. Then trace each children to their death. The records of children may include clues about their parents' lives.
- **Birth and Parents.** Use the information gathered by researching the other two time periods to identify surnames, locations, and people of interest that may be connected to your research subject's birth and parents. Also use records created near the time of their birth and marriage to identify others with similar surnames. Research each of these people in their entirety.



Pre-1850 Record Types

When researching post-1850, most researchers rely on census and vital records. Though census records do exist pre-1850, they are more difficult to locate and evaluate. Expand your search to include a variety of records. Common record types by time period include:

- **Early-1776** – probate records, land records, court records, tax records, church records, town records (New England), vital records (New England), proprietor records (Mid-Atlantic), family Bibles, manuscript collections, and more.
- **1776-1850** – additional record types include census records, marriage records, Federal land records, military records, naturalizations, passenger lists, voter registrations, Legislative records, newspapers, city directories, and more.
- **1850-1950** – additional record types include birth and death records, homesteads, draft registrations, institutional records, obituaries, funeral home records, cemetery records, school records, passport applications, Social Security applications, and more.

Use the FamilySearch Research Wiki to identify common record types used in U.S. Research.

Strategies for Pre-1850 U.S. Research

Most pre-1850 research involves searching for maiden names or parents. For each of these research questions, consider the records available in each of the three time periods.

Identifying a Maiden Name. Determine a woman's maiden name first so you can identify parents.

- **Marriage to Death.** Some records provide direct evidence of a woman's maiden name include marriage, death, church, obituaries, county histories, and more. If no maiden name is listed, compile a list of potential relatives using census neighbors, land, probate, court, tax, and more. Also trace a woman's husband and siblings (known or possible).
- **Trace the Children.** A woman's maiden name may be listed on the records of her children. For each child, search for marriage (including second and later marriages), death, church, county histories, obituaries, and Social Security Applications.
- **Birth and Parents.** Identify individuals with names similar to possible relatives (identified while researching marriage to death) .

Identifying Parents. Once you have a surname, search for parents.

- **Marriage to Death.** Clues about parents are found on census (1880-1930 and 1940-50 sample lines), marriage, death, church, and obituaries. Also, identify possible relatives using census neighbors, land, probate, court, tax, guardianships, and more. Trace the spouse (including previous and future marriages) as well as siblings (known or possible).
- **Trace the Children.** Clues about your ancestor's early life and birth may be found in the records of their children. Search for each of the children's 1880-1930 censuses, newspapers, obituaries, county histories, and more.
- **Birth and Parents.** Research possible relatives identified by researching marriage to death. Also identify and research individuals with the same surname living in the same area.

Pre-1850 Research Tips

- **Get Organized.** Start with a research goal and a complete census survey. Learn about the localities identified in the census records. Use that information to create and follow a research plan. Keep a research log and save copies of all documents located while researching.
- **Finding Records.** Focus first on records most likely to answer your research goal. Start with searchable online collections but verify they cover the time period and location where your ancestor lives. Use advanced search strategies and search for alternate spellings. If the collection is an index, locate the original records. Browse through collections which are digitized but not yet indexed. Request copies (or visit archives) to locate records only available onsite.
- **Research Every Record Type.** Search for every record type in every locality (and surrounding localities) where your ancestor lived. Don't neglect record sets just because they aren't online.
- **Search every jurisdiction and contact every repository.** These include city and county libraries, genealogical societies, historical societies and museums, cemeteries, town halls and archives, county courthouses, regional archives, university libraries and special collections, state libraries and archives, state genealogical societies, specialty libraries, church archives, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
- **Evaluate and Analyze.** Read through each document carefully. Transcribe, abstract, or extract all information. Evaluate the information. Determine how the information relates to your research goal. Correlate information from multiple records. Resolve conflicting information. Write your conclusion.
- **Beyond the Ancestor.** Search for ancestor's family and community. Identify their FAN Club (friends, associates, neighbors). Learn about the location in which they lived. Identify prominent community members and determine whether they left manuscript collections.
- **Other Tips.** Work from the known to the unknown. Ask many questions about your ancestor, their lives, their documents, and more. When you finish your research, write your conclusion and ask for feedback. Remember that pre-1850 research problems are often solved with indirect evidence.