

# Finding Your Family Online at the Library of Congress

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Researchers are always looking for resources that will aid current and future projects. One of the best, and surprisingly least known about, is the American Memory Collection at the Library of Congress. Even better, since it is online, you can research the collection anytime from the comfort of your own home.

The Mission Statement for the collection is:

*"American Memory provides free and open access through the Internet to written and spoken words, sound recordings, still and moving images, prints, maps, and sheet music that document the American experience. It is a digital record of American history and creativity. These materials, from the collections of the Library of Congress and other institutions, chronicle historical events, people, places, and ideas that continue to shape America, serving the public as a resource for education and lifelong learning."*



*Image of The Library of Congress, Washington D. C. 1902, Available on Wikimedia and the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division.*

This amazing collection began as a competition among research institutions to create digital collections for research and educational purposes. It ran from 1996-1999 thanks to a \$2 million gift from the Ameritech Corporation. Thanks to this initial seed money, 23 collections were created. By the year 2000, 5 million items were available on the website.

Digital items contained in the collection cover a wide variety of historical eras and subjects. For many researchers, access to primary documents makes the site more than priceless to their family history research. Those who enjoy researching the social history of their ancestors will be able to find an amazing amount of information. Pictures, audio recordings, broadsides, pamphlets, etc., all add to the history of a person's life.

You can read more about the history of the project here:

<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/about/index.html>

## **American Memory: Remaining Collections**

The migration of collections from American Memory to the Library of Congress Digital collections began in 2020. If you have used the collections from the American Memory

home page, be warned that the collection may no longer be located there. This is a slow integration into the main digital collections page at the Library of Congress.

For now, the only databases you can access from the American Memory home page are the following:

- [African American Odyssey](#)
- [The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920](#)
- [A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875](#)
- [The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920](#)
- [Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912](#)
- [Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929](#)
- [Words and Deeds in American History: Selected Documents Celebrating the Manuscript Division's First 100 Years](#)

### **Library of Congress Main Search Page**

As the American Memory Collections are updated and transferred to their new sites, you will be able to use the main search page for the Library of Congress website. It allows you to search all digital items (or even non-digital) on the entire site. Couple this with the Library of Congress online catalog, and you can find anything.

### **Search Features**

The easiest way to search the Library of Congress website, if you need help finding where to go, is to use the search box at the top of the Digital Collections home page. Simply enter a word or a phrase and the search feature will pull up all possible items from the American Memory Collection. It is a general search of the site's bibliographic records, like what you would find if using a card catalog. If you look at the collections topics on the left side of the main page, you can go directly to that page and search within the collection.

When searching, it is important to remember a few things. Thankfully the search is not case-sensitive, so you will not need to worry about capitalization or non-capitalization. In addition, the search feature ignores all common words (of, the, and) and accents. Most importantly, and one thing many people do not think about, you need to understand the historical and modern uses of words. Knowing what you are looking for, how it was spelled, or what it could be called will make your searches more successful.

### **Some Genealogically Interesting Collections**

Below are a few of the sites genealogists may find interesting for their research. Obviously, this is just the tip of the iceberg as to what you could find for your research at the library. My suggestion is that you spend time just exploring and learning what the site has to offer before you start searching for surnames and places. Only some names or places are indexed and you may miss something.

**American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940 - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/>**

During the Great Depression, this project was part of the WPAs work program. The 300 writers who participated were from 24 states and they compiled the life histories of those they interviewed. This collection will give you information on people, historical events, places, life experiences, immigration, and much more. Information about your ancestor may not be in the collection but information about what they did, how they lived, or what they witnessed may be.

**American Notes: Travel in America, 1750-1920 - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/travels-in-america-1750-to-1920/about-this-collection/>**

This collection is the fifth in a series by the Library of Congress to document American life. The other's are "*California As I Saw It*," *Pioneering the Upper Midwest*, *Puerto Rico at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, and *The Capital and The Bay*. There are 253 manuscripts by Americans and foreign visitors cataloging what they saw when visiting the United States.

**Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>**

An amazing collection of 2,300+ first-person narratives about being an enslaved person. This digital collection is from the original 17-volume set published in 1940 and includes images of the people and documents recorded.

**Chronicling America - <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>**

Free access to some historical newspapers from across the US dating 1777-1963. These papers were digitized at local and state libraries and then sent the digitization to the Library of Congress. Learn more about the project here:  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/about/>

**Panoramic Maps - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/panoramic-maps/about-this-collection/>**

Genealogists love maps, or at least I do. These maps, also known as "bird's eye view" maps, are of the US and Canadian locations of the late 1800s to the early 1900s. Maps are a great way to add images for context to your family history by "seeing" where your family lived, worked, and traveled to.

**Sanborn Maps - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps>**

These maps are from the Sanborn Fire Insurance company and can be invaluable for researchers. If your family had a policy with Sanborn, this site would allow you to see information on their home(s) in great detail. Additional information includes neighborhood information, building descriptions, and town layouts.

**Quick Links:**

The following links were discussed during the presentation, plus a few helpful links for newer researchers to the site.

- American Memory: Remaining Collections  
<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
- Ask A Librarian: <https://ask.loc.gov/>
- Catalogue Quick Search: <https://catalog.loc.gov/>
- Connect With The Library: <https://www.loc.gov/connect/>
- Library of Congress Digital Collections: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>
- Help Resources: <https://www.loc.gov/help/>