

Finding Female Ancestors



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"Remember the Ladies" – Abigail Adams

Early Female Legal Terminology:

- **Consort:** A woman who died before her husband.
- **Relict:** A woman who survives her husband, left as a widow.
- **Et al.:** Literally "and others," may indicate a wife in a legal document.
- **Et ux.:** Literally "and wife" specifically indicates a wife in a legal document.
- **Coverture:** Concept under which a woman's separate legal rights ended with her marriage including property & citizenship.
- **Femme Covert:** Up to the mid-1800s a married female was "covered" under her husband and could not own her own property. Not often made wills for real property, but did make for personal property.
- **Dower:** Widow's minimum right to 1/3 of her husband's estate.
- **Dowery:** Money and property brought with the bride at the time of her marriage. For a new bride, it is a gift to the husband from the bride's family. For a widow, it is all property owned in her name. Upon her marriage all property automatically passes to the husband. Married women can not own property in their own name. Unmarried women or widows may own property. Continued into the late 1800s.
- **Dower Rights:** Due to the widow's 1/3 dower rights, a man cannot sell property without his wife's consent. Taken by affidavit in deeds, etc.
- **A Note about Familial Relationships:** Relationship terms (sister, daughter, niece, step-daughter) were much more fluid in the past than they are now. A brother-in-law would easily term his sister-in-law simply "sister." The terms in-law and "step-..." were often interchangeable. Be careful to get confirmation of noted relationships.

Grandma, Where Art Thou?

Vital Records: Back to the basics! Check local availability for births, marriages, and deaths (BMD) in your locality. Often, marriage records preceded birth and death records. This should be your first line of inquiry! Put in your research log WHY any BMD might not be available for the time period and locality.

Census Records: Some women (widows or unmarried) can be identified by name from 1790 to 1840. From 1850 to 1870 women and girls were listed as part of the household, without a relationship. After 1880, relationships *to the head of the household* identified women. Often mothers-in-law or other relatives were listed as "boarder."

Family Bibles: The keeper of the family bible was often a woman. Family bibles, in most cases, are as viable as any vital record. Don't have it? Check State and County archives – some are collecting copies of local bible records. Check Ebay or DeadFred.com for listings with your focus surname(s). The DAR is collecting and microfilming Family Bibles from all over.

Letters and Diaries: Generally, letters and diaries are in the possession of family members. Follow descendant lines of your focus family to find living cousins. Check online surname boards such as GenForum.com for your focus family. Use appropriate posting etiquette!

Cemeteries and Funeral Homes: The placement of headstones with other headstones of the same name is as important as what is on the stone. Check the entire marker: Is more information listed on the back. Check for funeral homes in the area which might have inherited the records of previous funeral homes.

Published Family Histories: Follow descendant lines of your focus family to find living cousins. Some of these family histories are published in personal family histories (or county histories). Use Google, local genealogical societies, the DAR, the LOC, or the FHC catalog to check for these.

Church Records: If BMD are not available for your time period and locality, check church records. Often the woman of the house was the religious force in the household. Check baptisms, christenings, marriages, burials, minutes of meetings, removals, excommunications, letters of introduction, etc. Go to the source or check the FHC catalog.

Deeds: Remember that deeds were some of the first records used in the US. Because of the dower rights, you may find (at least) a woman's first name with her husband. Look also for deeds of gift (with low consideration amounts) from possible parents. Look for phrases such as "for the love and admiration we feel..." etc.

Wills and Probate: If you have a clue to a female ancestor's surname, check all the wills for people of that surname in the locality and/or surrounding counties. Check for wills that list your female ancestor as (for example) "to my daughter Phoebe, wife of Josiah Hancock" or "to my grandson William Hancock, son of my daughter Phoebe."

Military Records: Look for widow's or fathers/mothers pension records. Often these types of records will record the marriage and maiden name of the widow or mother of the soldier. Children may also be listed.

Newspapers: Look for obituaries, marriage announcements, births (listing the happy parents), etc. Look for women in business or "run-away women."

Associations: Use "cluster genealogy" techniques to follow your female ancestor's associations with:

- Children & In-laws
- Neighbors
- Church members
- Grandchildren
- Husbands
- Brothers, Sisters, Cousins

Miscellaneous Records: Don't limit yourself – branch out!

- Immigration and Naturalization.
- Lineage Societies
- Business Records
- Criminal Courts and Judgments
- Guardianship Court Records
- Asylums and Poorhouses
- Photographs

Recommended Reading or Websites:

- *Reassembling Female Lives, A Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 3, Sept. 2000. Available online through www.ngs.org.
- Dollarhide, William. "Dowery vs. Dower Rights." *Everton's Genealogical Helper*, Jan/Feb 2007, p. 48 – 50.
- Schaefer, Christine. *The Hidden Half of the Family*, on sale through Amazon.com, \$35.95.
- Precha, Donna. "Finding Female Ancestors" online article through Genealogy.com at www.genealogy.com/genealogy/50_donna_print.html.

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