

Tips for Finding the Stories of the Women in Your Family Tree

The mothers and other women in our family history research all have stories to tell, but sometimes those stories get overlooked with the men in our family tree taking the center stage in many records. Here are some tips for coaxing the stories of those unsung heroines in our family story from the records.

Get a Woman's Perspective

We tend to look at our family history through the eyes of the men of the family. Make a deliberate effort to look at the records you have through her eyes. For example, we always look to learn more about a man's experiences going off to war, but what did it mean to the wife whose husband went off to fight? Would she have to take over the running of a family business or farm? How old were their children at the time?

Timelines are essential tools in family history and can be very helpful in putting women's lives into perspective. Arrange every event you know of chronologically for the women you are researching. How old was she when she got married? Began having children? Lost her husband? Looking at your timeline through the woman's eyes will give you better insights into her life and will also likely prompt more questions and lead you down an even more revealing research path. For tips on creating a timeline, [download our free guide](#).

Compare and Contrast Censuses

As we gather census records for our ancestors, the stories lie not only in the details recorded on each enumeration but also in the changes that took place between enumerations.

In this 1855 New York State Census, Eliza Doner is living with her husband and five children, ranging in age from 1 through 14.

1855	1000	72	Eliza Doner	35	f	do	1	17	Labourer	1	1
			Eliza Doner	32	f	Wife	do	17			1
			Margaret Doner	14	f	Daughter	do	14			
			Hugh Doner	11	m	do	do	11			
			John Doner	8	m	do	do	8			
			James Doner	4	m	do	do	4			
			Mary Doner	1	f	Daughter	do	1			
		73	Esther Ferguson	30	f	do	Ireland	1	7	Labourer	1

By the 1860 U.S. Federal Census, her husband is out of the picture, as is the youngest daughter, Mary, who was 1 in 1855, possibly meaning she lost both a child and a husband in the span of five years.

1860	1063		Edward Dyer	22	m						N. Y.
			Margaret	20	f						" "
			Eliza Doner	40	f	✓	Grocer	1800	500		Ireland
			Hugh	18	m	✓	Black				N. Y.
			John	16	m						" "
			James	9	m						" "
			Patrick P. & Loughlin	25	m	✓	Grocer				Ireland
			Bridget	35	f						" "
			Mary	9	f						N. Y.
			Margaret	7	f						" "

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Fill in the Blanks

A search of the *Brooklyn Eagle* for Eliza Dooner's husband between those years reveals that he was killed in a construction accident on 24 September 1856 and that "He has a wife and five children who are thus rendered destitute." We can learn more about this change in circumstances through [city directories](#). In 1858, Eliza

Dooley William, laborer, h. 81 Water
Doon Patrick, stonecutter, h. Smith n. Huntington
Dooner Eliza wid. candies, 107 Tillary
Dooner John, laborer, h. r. 95 E. Baltic
Doorley James, liquor, 112 Navy

1858 *Lain's Brooklyn City Directory*

was listed in the Brooklyn City Directory as a widow who is in the candy business. And we know that in the 1860 census record above, her occupation is listed as "grocer" with real estate valued at \$1,800 and a personal estate valued at \$500. Eliza stayed on Tillary Street almost until her death, supporting herself and her family, never remarrying.

Study the Lives of Contemporaries

Even if you don't have your great-grandmother's diary, it can help to learn from the experiences of her contemporaries. Genealogical and historical societies, libraries (public, private, and university), archives, and other institutions often house the personal papers and diaries of residents and travelers. They give us a window into the times and places where our ancestors lived and the things they experienced.

More and more, these contemporary accounts of life in the times and places of our ancestors are becoming available online. Among the diaries on Ancestry is [that of Mrs. Cornelia Peake MacDonald](#), who describes life in Winchester, Virginia, an area in Northern Virginia that changed hands numerous times during the Civil War. Her diary gives readers a first-hand account of what many women endured during the Civil War and as a refugee following the war.

January 10, 1863.—Hard at work all day mending clothes for the children. Had an invitation in the morning to spend the day at Mrs. Conrad's, Mary and the girls to be there. Had a bad headache, and in the afternoon was lying on the lounge before the fire, feeling very comfortable in contrast with the storm of rain and sleet on the ice, when a knock at the door of the room, and a vulgar looking man presented himself, and informed me that he had orders to take my house for a hospital, or at least a part of it. I felt almost too helpless and wretched to resist, but as nothing was left to do but resist, as we had only the roof over our heads left us, I resolved to defend it, as I could not consent to share it with sick men, and the alternative was to leave it. I went to get my bonnet and wrapping to go to headquarters and found as I looked out that there was already a wagon full of sick men drawn up before the front door, and a large cooking stove unloading to be put up in the dining room under the fine black marble mantelpiece.¹¹⁷

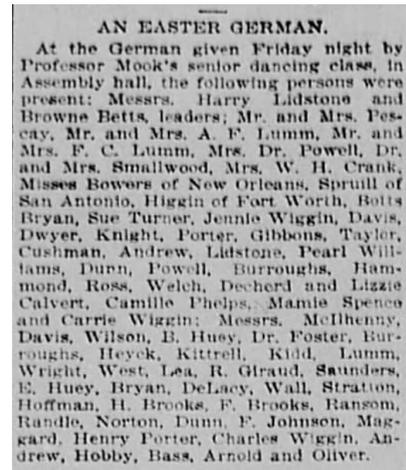
There are many other published diaries online, and a simple search can often unearth diaries with first-hand accounts of historic events that may have impacted your ancestors. Beyond diaries and manuscripts about other women, look at manuscript collections related to men in and around their lives, which can include correspondence to and from women and references to the lives of women.

Check library catalogs and look for finding aids like this [Guide to Women's History Materials and Visual Collections at the Indiana Historical Society](#). The [National Union Manuscript Catalog \(NUCMC\)](#) and [WorldCat](#) search collections in many libraries and are another great way to locate diaries and manuscripts.

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Learn about Her Community

Community played an important role in the lives of our ancestors, and learning about your female ancestor's community can give you unique insights into what her life may have been like. Local histories provide color, and newspapers like those on Newspapers.com are the diaries of your ancestor's community. They document the comings and goings of people in the community, as well as providing a glimpse into the social events of the time. This clipping from *The Houston Post* (Houston, Texas), 12 April 1896, lists attendees at a "German." (A German or German cotillion was a dance led by a conductor and incorporated party games and favors.)



Newspapers can also give you insights into political movements, social reforms, or aid societies in which the women in your family may have been an advocate. [This clipping](#) from *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, Pennsylvania), 3 September 1909, describes the activities of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Washington County, Pennsylvania, and names a number of its members.

Look for the Details

Census records are rich with details that we at times may overlook. Go beyond the names, ages, birthplaces, and occupations and look at the answers to every question. Depending on the census year you can gain insights like the total number of children born and number of those living, literacy, education levels, whether she could speak English, year of immigration for immigrant women (and by extrapolation with her age in the census, how old she was at the time), value of personal and real estate, unemployment during the census year, whether sick or disabled on the day of the census, infirmities, and whether they owned their homes, among other things.

From newspapers and other records we know that Anastacia Saenz was widowed in 1895 when her husband was killed by bandits while working as a mail carrier. Anastacia was left to care for four children, the youngest of whom was only 30 days old when her husband was killed. In the 1900 U.S. census, she was living with her parents and

working on a local farm. In the 1920 census, she was still working as a farm laborer, but by now she owned her own home. Here again, comparing and contrasting the details on two censuses gives us insights into her story.

1920 United States Federal Census for Anastacia Saenz

Household	Name	Relationship	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Birthplace	Other
207 210	Mala Dase	Head	F	W	30	M	
	Merced	Wife	F	W	25	M	
208 211	Saenz, Anastacia	Head	F	W	45	M	Home owned: Own
	Jesse	Son	M	25	S		
219 212	Marino, Juan	Head	M	28	M		
	Beatriz	Wife	F	W	20	M	

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Women and the Law

Women's rights in Colonial and early U.S. history were very limited, and in much of the country, the laws that determined those rights were based on English common law. Laws varied somewhat from state to state though, and evolved over time, particularly in the mid-19th century. These laws were determining factors in what the women in your family were entitled to inherit, own, or contract. Laws also determined the legal age for betrothals and marriage and what rights women had over control of their children. Knowing the laws of the states in which your researching and dates of important changes in those laws can add another layer to the stories of your female ancestors.

A good source of information on laws as they related to women in the U.S., dating back to Colonial times, is *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy*, by Christina Kassabian Schaeffer (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999.)

Tips for Finding Maiden Names

One of the challenges of researching women is that too often they are cloaked with their husband's names, like Mrs. John Williams or Mrs. A. Smith. Even after the husband dies, you may see her listed as Widow Williams. Here are some sources that could reveal that elusive maiden name.

- **Vital records.** Birth records are an obvious choice and typically will include the mother's maiden name. Marriage records will typically list the bride's maiden name, and often the names of her parents and sometimes her mother's maiden name. Death records will typically list parents' names as well, often revealing a maiden name.
- **The records of siblings.** Record formats changed over the years, and from place to place, so information not provided on one child's record may appear on another's. If you're not finding a maiden name for the mother of your ancestor on his or her records, try side-stepping to a sibling.
- **Church records.** Baptism records will often include the mother's maiden name and can provide the names of godparents and sponsors who may be relatives on the mother's side of the family.
- **Middle names.** You may see maiden names appearing as the middle name of one of her children. In some cases, some women may have adopted their own maiden name as a middle name after marriage. While this convention is most commonly seen in more recent years, some women did adopt this practice earlier. (Think Elizabeth Cady Stanton.)
- **Probates.** Since probates often spell out the relationships of heirs, these records can sometimes be a good resource for finding maiden names. Look especially for the probates of relatives who died without heirs, as their siblings and the siblings' children would then be next in line for inheritance.
- **Obituaries.** Obituaries can be a great resource for finding maiden names. Even if a woman's maiden name is not explicitly stated, the names of surviving relatives may reveal it.
- **Witnesses and sponsors.** Keep track of the names of sponsors and witnesses you find on legal documents and in church and civil records. If you see a recurring name that you suspect could be your ancestress's maiden name, try searching for her in censuses in which she would have been a child using that surname. Coupled with information you've found in later censuses after she was married, such as birth year and place, and the birth places of parents, you may be able to locate her. Of course, you'll want to find supporting evidence of the relationship, but once you have a name, it is easier to prove or disprove a connection.





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- **Cemeteries.** Another place you may find a woman reunited with her family is in the cemetery. She may be buried in the same plot as her parents or siblings or in a nearby plot. If possible, visit the cemetery in person and make note of the names on surrounding stones. Do any of them match up with the names of sponsors, witnesses, or other associates?
- **Home sources.** Look through memorabilia that has been saved in your family. Note any unfamiliar names and ask other family members if they know anything. You may find a maiden name on the back of a photograph, in a scrapbook, on a funeral memorial card, or in an old address book.
- **Military pensions.** In cases where the widow applied, proof of the marriage would be required, so often maiden names are included in the form of a marriage record that was supplied. Affidavits by the wife's family are also sometimes included.

Tips for Finding Married Names

Discovering the married names of women who suddenly disappear from family records can be as challenging as finding maiden names. As a woman married and moved away from the family, her identity was disguised under husband's surname. If she was married more than once, the puzzle is all the more complicated. That said, there are some surprisingly good ways you can find married names.

- **Home sources.** If you're working with relatively recent generations, ask family members what they know. Pore over old correspondence, photographs, or other memorabilia for clues. Overlooked clues can sometimes jump off the pages of old family address books.
- **Sponsors, witnesses, and family associates.** Just as in the search for maiden names, check out those names that keep popping up in records as witnesses, sponsors, neighbors, and business associates. Ethnic communities were often close-knit groups full of extended family. In some cases you may find multiple siblings marrying into the same family. Also look at the names of informants on the death records of other family members. You may find that the woman you're seeking provided the information for the death record.
- **Court records.** Be sure to seek out probate records on all family members, especially probate records that include the names and relationships of living and dead family members, including married names of female siblings or offspring.
- **Newspapers.** Traditionally, obituaries are the richest source of biographical information in any newspaper. Don't forget to search for all family members. They can be one of the best ways of finding those elusive married names of female relatives. While the obituary section is naturally the first place a family historian searches, other sections of the newspaper – especially old newspapers – can yield some surprising details. Engagements and marriage announcements were important popular features in hometown papers, and you will find them to be great places to find for maiden names and married names. Social pages often recount the comings and goings of visiting family members and are a wonderful source for married names.
- **Search creatively.** These days, we have some powerful tools at our disposal in the form of searchable electronic databases. Try searching using just a given name, and then include information like place of birth and birth date, relationship (wife), race, residence, and any other fields available for that particular database in order to narrow your search to a few candidates. Then do a little digging on those that closely match what you know and see if you can find a connection.
- **Search censuses thoroughly.** Seek the census records for all family members, and don't forget to search forward. Sometimes we find the siblings or parents of our ancestors in census records and continue backward, without remembering to search forward, too. You may find a widowed sister living with a brother or moving back in with parents later in life. Beginning in 1880, U.S. censuses will list the relationship to the head of household and are a huge help in locating women who moved in with family.