Using Church Records for Historical and Genealogical Research

Christopher H. Owen

Thanks for inviting me here and I hope the talk with be useful for you

 --As a historian (now employed at NSU for over twenty years), I have been using church

 records in my research for quite a while

 --yet I am pretty new to the discipline of genealogy

 --we are trying out a genealogy initiative on our campus; we are excited about this development but it's pretty new

 --Nancy, Jere and some of the rest of you here most likely have a greater facility and understanding of various advanced genealogical resources and techniques than I do

 --entering genealogy from the historical profession, however, has some real advantages

 --historians often have a pretty good grasp of the big picture of political, social,

 and religious settings in which our ancestors lived

 --historians are used to using documents in their research, including primary

 documents from various sources, but also scholarly secondary research to

 put such documents into proper context

 --historians are used to gathering information from these sources for analysis, that is, not just what do the sources record, but what do they mean

In discussing the use of church records, I thought it would be good to start to provide some historical background because although such records can provide fabulous genealogical source material, they call also be fairly complex to understand

 --I am going to focus on using various historical records of Christian churches because

 until quite recently, especially in this part of the world, there have been relatively

 few organized religious bodies which were not Christian

 --for example, my colleague Dr. Adam Langsam, a sociologist at NSU, informed that the

 2d district of Oklahoma has the fewest Jewish residents of any Congressional

 district in the United States, that he and another professor down the hall ***ARE*** the

 Jewish vote in our district, actually ca. 30 Jews in the 2d District of 700,000

But it's a complicated story even limiting the discussion to Christian groups & their records

 --freedom of religion, i.e. the 1st Amendment, has helped Christian thrive in the USA but

 also complicated its story

 --anyone unhappy with their particular church situation is perfectly free to start a new

 church, or even a new denomination

 --among the more famous, really new groups, along these lines which were born in the USA are the LDS (Mormons), Seventh Day Adventists, & Jehovah's Witnesses

 --I grew up on the Church of Christ which was also founded with its own particular theology in the 19th century United States

 --sometimes this has fabulous results for genealogists

 --Mormon teaching that one might pray one's deceased ancestors into heaven has led that denomination into its leading role in preserving and disseminating

 genealogical records for this theological end

--on the other hand, this diversity also complicates the job of historians and genealogists

 --there is no one central depository containing most relevant records

 --people often change churches and denominations so it's hard to track them

 --one of my students last semester, for example, comes from a long line of devout Catholics and so he was surprised to find that one of his ancestors from the Revolutionary War era as a pillar and founder of a Congregationalist

 Church in Vermont; still baffled when the family changed faiths

 --church bodies are born, then often disappear or merge with another groups, and their records are misplaced or destroyed

 --still, even as an historian, if I have to choose between religious freedom and good record keeping, I will take religious freedom

The amendment was an experiment, as European nations all still had established churches

 --Christian belief was seen as necessary not only for eternal salvation but also for social

 harmony and stability

 --tax dollars went to maintain & build churches, pay the salaries for ministers & so forth

 --having one faith not many was also seen as necessary for national unity, one who questioned a bishop might also question the king

 --in France this principle, amid a religious Civil war, was expressed as "un roi, une loi, une foi"

Actually the regular keeping of ordinary church records, as used by most historians and genealogists, began about the time of the Protestant Reformation

 --this was part of the modernization process and the rise of the bureaucratic nation state

 --in 1497, for example, after Columbus but before Luther, Cardinal Ximenes Cisneros in Spain, required all churches to record baptisms, as he wanted to kick Muslims out

 --in 1538 Henry VIII, newly broken away from the Catholic Church, pushed through a law which required the keeping of Parish Registers in every English Church to record marriages, baptisms, and burials

 --the Council of Trent, which concluded in 1563, declared that all Catholic churches everywhere must keep records of marriages and baptisms

 --in all these cases actual compliance was spotty so the specific church records may or may not exist but records are more complete than previously

 --in a sense this marks the transition from the medieval period to the modern, but churches often became the main record keepers as what we would recognize as

 government vital records (birth certificates, death certificates, etc.) did not exist

 --however this is partly an anachronism on our part because when church and state were

 not separate, church vital records were in a sense government records

 --each Anglican church was in a sense a government office, its building owned by the nation, its minister appointed indirectly by the king as head of the church

 --disloyalty to the national church, throughout Europe, was equated with disloyalty to the

 national government, i.e. "no bishop, no king," dissenters sometimes reversed this equation

The linkage of church and state did cause dissent, especially in Protestant countries

 --in most areas church membership and citizenship were equated

 --everyone was required to attend church, that country's established church, to avoid fines

 or corporal punishment

 --besides annoying everyone who wanted to sleep in, this requirement irked devout believers who had to attend services with the town's drunks, pickpockets, prostitutes, and atheists

 --some of these folks wanted a more pure church, and began to call themselves Puritans and meet separately

 --the most radical of these became the Pilgrims, were hounded out of the country, and in

 1620 sent to Plymouth in modern Massachusetts to worship as they desired

To make a very long story shorter, a good deal of splintering occurred among Protestant groups

 --this mean many different ways to organize churches & denominations and many

 different ways and places to create and store records

 --Lutheran records might be in German or Norwegian, Catholic records in Latin

 --some churches, including most among the Puritans, were congregational, as also were many Baptist ones

 --some of these gathered in university or denominational archives, some not

 --Presbyterians with a similar theology had different organization with groups of ministers organizing the church

 --Anglicans/Episcopalians, then Methodists, retained bishops and central church machinery

 --Va Episcopalians kept parish registers on the English model until 1786 when that function taken over by the state

 --these differences can matter when locating church records, which tend to be located more in centralized depositories among the more centralized denominations

 --in Catholic dioceses or Methodist Conferences, for example

 --some theological differences matter to even as regards church records

 --Baptists by definition believe in adult or believer's baptism, most but not all other Christian groups practice infant Baptism

 --this means baptismal records are more or less useful for birthdates for many groups but not for Baptists

 --Catholic records often reflect their belief in several sacraments

 --records for baptism, confirmation, marriage, and last rites are often preserved and served as rough markers for key life passages

 --many churches preserved such records but not all in the same way

 --various churches, including Catholics and Protestants, also preserve ordination records for clergy more regularly and more completely than for ordinary believers; such

 records also often go back further in historical time

If you are doing genealogy in most southern states, you will find most believers were

 Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, or perhaps Episcopalians or Campbellites --Presbyterians and Episcopalians tended to be a bit more prosperous and more educated, especially at the start of the 19th century, less so later

Most of my work has been in Methodist Church records and even in this one segment of many American faith traditions, the diversity is amazing & sometimes confusing

 --among separate denominations were the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Protestant Church, the Congregational Methodist Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the United Brethren, Republican Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion, the

 Colored (later Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist

 Church & there are still others

 --Most Holiness and Pentecostal churches also derive from this religious teachings and some of the teachings of its founder John Wesley

 --there have also been numerous different sorts of Baptists with differences on theology, attitudes towards missions and so forth

 --so if you find an ancestor who is a Primitive Baptist that will mean something quite different from an ancestor who is a Missionary Baptist or a Free Will Baptist

There are a few other things to keep in mind in research church records

 --belonging to a church before the Civil War in particular was quite a commitment to a difficult way of life

 --one was required to follow a very strict behavioral code, and could be expelled for

 drinking, fighting, reading a novel, attending the circus, the theatre, or the opera,

 wearing jewelry, dancing, and a variety of other offenses

 --many churches have records of disciplinary hearings which give you a feel about their code and their expectations of members

 --I found one such hearing in Georgia where a minister was accused of rape by one church members and was expelled after a church trial

 --in virtually every denomination women composed a majority of members

As for specific records I found quite useful, church newspapers

 --I used several, most especially the *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*, (which was founded in 1837) if you were research Oklahoma Baptists, or an ancestor who was one, you'd see the *Baptist Messenger*, now over 100 years old

 ---for black history the AME *Christian Recorder* would be quite valuable, although published in Philadelphia it had lots of information from its churches down south

 and elsewhere

 --church newspapers and especially obituaries provided some key insights for my work

 --they are often detailed and discuss family members, place of birth and death, marriage, kids, and so forth

 --deceased slave-owners for example were often described as kind parents and also as "indulgent masters" or mistresses, showing an ideal, and perhaps providing insight into the character of one's ancestor if doing genealogy

 --the papers also provide details of various revivals with useful genealogical information, I would highly recommend looking at them when you know what denomination your ancestor belonged to

Collected church histories, many unpublished, were also quite helpful to me

 --I was looking in working at the Pitts Theology Library at Emory University in Atlanta which had systematically collected such histories

 --The state archives, also preserved many such histories, and other church records which were quite useful

 --these histories are focused on local events, but give details prominent church members,

 founders and afterward and significant community developments, and can tell you

 a lot about what it was like to belong to this organization if your ancestor did

Sometimes visiting the actual church can prove interesting

 --obviously many have cemeteries nearby which even if your ancestor is not buried there may have clues to his or her family or acquaintances

 --you might get a feel for what church for your ancestor was like as with the churches shown in Green County and Hancock County Georgia

 --what do two doors and a rail mean, evolution toward prosperity, etc.

Some states also have family bible collections

 --I've not used these but the can be valuable genealogical tools

 --one such Bible used to demonstrate that Chester A. Arthur was native born in the USA

From 1850 to 1946 the U.S. Census also collected information on churches in the USA

 --you can use these records to locate what churches existed when, how large, and how

 wealthy they were when your ancestor may have lived there

Now we have come to rely on the state for quite a lot of this information

 --but as the state definition for such things as marriage changes, it may be that records of such events will again differ for church and state