

What Your Ancestor's Neighbors Can Tell You

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Our ancestors did not live in isolation, although we sometimes research them as if they did. They were part a community of friends, neighbors, classmates, co-workers and complete strangers. Whether they lived in big cities, small towns or rural farming communities, our ancestor's neighbors could help us with our research. Using records in archives could be the key to finding information about our ancestors, through their neighbors.

Genealogists use archives every day to locate records about their ancestors. Are there records that you are not accessing because you don't know they exist? Not all records are online, indexed or microfilmed. Digging deeper in the local and state archives to find those records that your ancestor's neighbors produced just might be the next step in your genealogy research.

What is an Archive?

An archive is defined by the Society of American Archivists as: *An organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or other organizations* (<http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms>).

There could be one or more of these types of archives in any area where your ancestors were from:

- County or local archives collects and preserves local government records and historical records
- State archives collects and preserves government records and historical records from across the state
- An historical society that collects and preserves local records is also considered an archive.
- A genealogical society that accepts donations of family records is an archive.
- A museum that has exhibits and displays may also have records collections and would be considered an archive. Don't forget the museums!
- Local public libraries that have genealogy rooms with records in them are archives.
- Universities & Colleges with on campus libraries and archives is a great records resource.
- Religious denomination archives collects and preserves church records of all kinds within their specific denomination.

The term “archive” is not solely used to represent a county or state archive; any organization that accepts, collects and preserves government, historical and genealogical documents, records, memorabilia and artifacts is considered an archive, even if they don’t have the word “archive” in their title.

Where Do I Start?

Finding your ancestor in the records generated by their neighbors can be very rewarding although a bit challenging. It may take all your genealogical research skills to locate these records but don’t let that deter you.

Knowing where to find the records and how to find the records is the first step. It’s always best to start local:

- Try to narrow down the area where your ancestors lived to the specific county (parish) and the specific city within that county (parish)
- Find out what archives are in that specific area, where is the facility and obtain contact information.
- Talk to the archivists, librarians, clerks, county historians and educate yourself about what records are available and where the records are physically located
- Locate and bookmark the websites of each and every local archive.

Going to the Next Level

If the records you are looking for are not at the local level, they may be at the state level. All of our 50 states in the United States have a state archive and all of them have an online presence and brick and mortar buildings.

- Go to the website and dig, click on everything. Records that are available are not always in plain sight.
- Some state archives have county pages listing records they have by each county in the state.
- State archives might be able to help you locate local archives.

Researching in the Records of the Neighbors

Accessing records that are not online or on microfilm means that we are going to have to dig deeper and research in specific records that our ancestor’s neighbors produced and that survive. These are usually unique records that have been donated to an archive. Here are some of those unique records to put on your to-do list:

- **Manuscript Collections**: A manuscript collection could be as small as one box and as large as 200 boxes or even larger. The majority of manuscript collections are materials donated by individuals or organizations. A collection of various documents, photographs and artifacts related to one person, family or

organization arranged in a box-by-box, folder-by-folder method with a Finding Aid.

- **Vertical Files**: Sometimes called Subject Files, are a collection of miscellaneous documents and ephemera that are put in file folders which are then stored in filing cabinets and catalogued by surname or by subject name. These files are a hodge-podge of records and could contain just about anything that can fit into a file folder.
- **Diaries and Journals**: A fantastic source to locate genealogical information and local history that was actually experienced. It might be surprising to find that many of the locals in the community kept diaries and journals about their lives, their work and the happenings in the community.
- **Correspondence**: Old letters and post cards that have been written by your ancestor's neighbors could be found in archives. This type of correspondence is usually found in Manuscript Collections and could mention your ancestor or events that happened in the local community.
- **Loose Records**: Considered the "working papers" or "accompanying paper work" to the records recorded in bound volumes. Loose records, many times, can hold additional information and fantastic discoveries for the genealogists that are not found in the typical bound volume records.
- **Scrapbooks**: A type of "time capsule," each scrapbook is unique and one-of-a-kind. Compiled by individuals and many times contain one-of-a-kind records that are not found in traditional genealogy records collections.
- **School Records**: The records of local public schools, universities and school boards have gradually developed into a valuable resource for genealogical information. School records provide a more personal glimpse into our ancestor's lives. They include everything from elementary education through college, professional school, military academies and special education training.
- **Voting or Election Records**: Whether your ancestors were considered "political" or not, they most likely will show up in local voting or election records. Poll taxes, voter registrations, poll workers and even candidate records are just some of the genealogical information that could be found
- **Photographs**: Many archives have photograph collections. The photographs are of people, buildings, schools, churches and events of the community. There are also a collection of unidentified photographs that could contain images of your ancestors.
- **Unprocessed Records**: These records collections are sitting on shelves in archives waiting to be processed (cleaned, unfolded and catalogued). Sometimes archivist will allow researchers to view these records. It's always a good idea to ask about them.

Behind Closed Doors, Asking the Archivist

Many of the unique records I just described cannot be seen in the research area of the archives. Normally these types of records, along with almost all original records, are stored behind closed doors. This is why it is very important to talk to the archivist and get to know the facility and what they hold. Why are these records behind closed doors?

- These records are original and unique and cannot be replaced if they are damaged or stolen.
- The back rooms or offsite storage areas are large and have thousands of boxes of records stored on shelves in what are called “stacks”.
- The preservation of these records is sometimes a continuing process.
- All of the “back room” records could not fit in the research area, which is why genealogists need to dig deeper!

Archives Online

Many of our archives have an online presence. More and more these archives are scanning and digitizing their records and making them available to researchers online. Spending time at their websites is essential.

- Get Click Happy! Many archive websites don't make it easy to find the records, catalogues, finding aids and other indexes on their website. Don't be afraid to click on every link to find what you are looking for. Spend time getting to know the website. Visit the site often as the archives will add data as it is processed and becomes available.
- Utilize the website search feature. It may not be full proof but it might help you navigate the website more successfully.
- Use the “Ask the Archivist” feature, if there is one. Many archive websites have this feature or an “Ask the Librarian” button that researchers can contact an archivist or librarian to ask about records on the website or to submit a genealogy request.
- Use websites that archives contribute information. There are several websites that archives contribute digitized records, catalogues, indexes or finding aids of records in their collections. Put these websites in your favorites and visit them often because there is always new information being uploaded by archives.
- If you are finding yourself at a stopping point with your genealogy research, dig deeper into the archives. If you find yourself facing a genealogy brick wall, dig deeper into the archives.
- Statistics say that there is only about 5% of all the world's genealogy records online or microfilmed, the remaining 95% is just waiting for you to find on the archives shelves!

Useful Links

Family Search

<https://www.familysearch.org/>

Internet Archive

<https://archive.org/>

Accessible Archive

<http://www.accessible-archives.com/>

Haiti Trust

<https://www.hathitrust.org/>

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

<https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>

Archive Grid

<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>

North Carolina's Digital Heritage (DigitalNC)

<https://www.digitalnc.org/>

Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/>

U.S. National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/>

Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, North Carolina

<http://www.cherokeemuseum.org/archives>

National Museum of African American History & Culture

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/>

Historical Foundation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church

<http://www.cumberland.org/hfcpc/>

Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives

<http://www.sbhla.org/>

East Tennessee State University

<https://www.etsu.edu/ehome/>

