



## HOMESPUN & CALICO Researching Our Foremothers

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***“Well-behaved women seldom make history”...Laurel Thatcher Ulrich***

There are two basic categories of sources you will seek in the course of researching female ancestors:

***those created by a woman herself***  
***those created about her***

Sources created ***by*** women include:

### **Letters**

- usually contained news items about births, marriages and deaths in family

### **Diaries and Journals**

- diaries tend to record people's feelings
- journals are more likely to enumerate activities and events
- diaries are autobiographies of ordinary women
  - may be the only existing records of their lives
- read carefully the notations on the diarist's birthday and at the beginning of a new year

### **Relatives' and Friends' Letters and Diaries**

- women usually spent more time with other women than they did with their husbands
  - female relatives and friends attended births, marriages and deaths

How do you find these items?

- contact **all** living relatives
- place a query in one of the local genealogy society quarterlies
- write or visit state historical society libraries or archives, university and public libraries that may have local history or special collections.
  - ask if they have any “papers” for your ancestor or her relatives or neighbors
  - women's “papers” could end up anywhere. How do you find them?
    - start with **National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections** (NUCMC)

### **Family Bibles**

- women most likely recorded family vital records in a Bible
  - men and women who applied for military pensions had to prove births of their children and/or their own marriage. They may have torn out pertinent pages from the family Bible since there was no way to make a copy.

### **Family Artifacts and Heirlooms**

- sewing was part of women's daily work and pastime. Check for samplers
- antique jewelry – check all jewelry for any inscriptions. Locketts may contain photographs or a lock of hair. Mourning jewelry was often created from the deceased's hair and made into rings, broaches and bracelets, or even wreaths.

Sources created **about** women include:

**Daughter:** check for records of her parents – wills.

**Wife or widow:** check for records where her husband names her – pensions

**Widow:** her legal and social status changed, so she may create records under her own name

**Mother:** look for documents on her children, such as death certificates

**Grandmother:** she may be living with one of her grandchildren and can be found on the census

**Sister:** you may find mention of her in a sibling's diary

**Niece:** she may be an heir to an unmarried uncle

**Granddaughter:** she may inherit something from a grandparent

**Friend:** she may be discussed in a letter

**Neighbor:** she may own the adjoining property and be named in a land deed

### **Published Family Histories**

- check to see if someone has already published a family history.
  - Many old New England families have printed genealogies

### **Cemetery Records and Tombstone Inscriptions**

- cemeteries may sometimes be the only place where you will find proof that a female existed – especially if she died young
  - sometimes young wives who died within the first few years of marriage were buried with their own families instead of their husband's
  - if a mother and baby died during childbirth, they were usually buried together

### **Church Records**

- check if local churches kept baptismal records
  - These can predate state birth certificates.
  - Quaker women were very active in their religion.
  - Look for religious holidays and observances your family has celebrated. Do they stem from a certain religion?

### **Census Records**

- between 1790 and 1840, censuses listed only heads of household. Sometimes this was a woman.
- for later entries, look carefully for all censuses your ancestor would have appeared on.
  - was her husband listed as disabled, perhaps from a farming accident or military service?
  - were any children recorded as deaf, blind, idiotic or insane, or having another physical or mental handicap?
  - were there aged parents or other dependent relatives living in her home?
  - was there a servant living in the household?
  - how many children did she have? How closely spaced are their births?
  - if she was an immigrant, did she speak English? What was her native language?
  - did her husband have slaves? Were there mulatto slaves mentioned?
  - who were the women living in the household listed before and after your ancestor? Could they have been friends or relatives?

### **Passenger Arrival Lists**

- many women came to the colonies as ex-convicts, petty thieves, prostitutes, vagrants and indentured servants.
  - indentured servants worked off the indenture over a period of seven years, unless she became pregnant. Usually one more year was added.
- many Catholic Italians and French used maiden names in all legal documents. When traveling, children were listed by their father's surname, but mother was listed by maiden name.
  - if maiden name is unknown, look at indexes for children under father's surname. You'll find her listed with them.

### **City and Rural Directories**

- most city directories were first published during late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
  - generally list names of adults, including adult children living with parents.

### **Voter Lists and Registrations**

- women were granted right to vote in 1920, later in some southern states.

### **Military Records and Pensions**

- women have served in the military throughout history – nurses, spies, disguised as men, etc.
- many women continued to pursue pensions and/or bounty lands long after their husband's death.

### **Orphan's and Guardianship Records**

- when a woman was left a widow with minor children, the children were considered orphans and in need of a legal guardian.
  - guardian was almost always a male relative who would ensure child's welfare until reaching majority.
  - even fathers of motherless children sought guardianship, usually because his children were entitled to an inheritance (mother's child).
- if both parents were living, guardian may have been appointed to protect an inheritance from another relative.
  - many are recorded in probate court.

### **Land Records**

- some of the earliest records you will find are land records.
  - even when courthouses burned, many deeds were recorded since land ownership was sacred.
- since married women were "covered" by their husbands (femes covert), they could not legally engage in contracts or land transactions without their husband's approval.
  - transacting her own land sales.
- watch if a man, or a husband and wife, sold property to a woman, or a husband and wife for one dollar (or some other small amount). Sellers (grantors) could be woman's parents or other close relatives.

### **Marriage Records**

- in some states, no license was required for marriage.
  - many took out a license or a bond, but never made it to the altar.
  - the groom and either father or brother of bride posted bond.
    - if a woman posted bond, it may be bride's mother (father deceased).
- in colonial marriage records, you may find a man marrying a *Mrs. Mary Smith*.
  - does not necessarily mean she was married previously.

- the term Mrs., which is originally an abbreviation for Mistress, used in both married and unmarried cases. Denotes a social position.

### **Divorce Records**

- in our nation's early history, more men than women filed for divorce.
  - after Revolution, women petitioners outnumbered men.
- Indiana was reputed as a divorce mill – easy divorce laws and short residency.
  - migratory divorce was common. Look for Gretna Greens.

### **Wills and Probate**

- wills of fathers and husbands are important documents.
- always check for probate packet.
  - may contain papers for each step in the probate process: inventory, estate distribution, whereabouts of heirs, etc.

### **Court records**

- why would couples would willingly admit to court they engaged in premarital sex?
  - many New England churches would not baptize a child born less than seven months after marriage unless couple publicly confessed.
- illegitimate children were a financial burden on community, so officials tried to coerce a mother to name the father of her child.
  - check for these records in bastardy court.

### **School Records**

- most girls in rural communities attended one-room schoolhouses at some time in their lives. Education was not always a big priority for girls.
  - middle – upper class girls attended boarding schools.
  - check internet for availability of these records.

### **Bibliography**

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Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher, *Good Wives, Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750*, Vintage Books, New York, 1991.

### **Select Websites:**

Gretna Greens in the United States:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Gretna\\_Greens\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Gretna_Greens_in_the_United_States)

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

An extra bonus from one of my other webinar handouts:

### **Substitutes for Vital Records**

<p><b>The US Federal Census</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Every one your family appeared in.</li><li>• Can lead to other records.</li></ul> <p><b>Mortality Schedules</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The year before 1850-1880 census.</li></ul> <p><b>Local Church or Religious Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Often began before civil registration.</li></ul> <p><b>Christening and Baptismal Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May be the only record of a child's birth.</li><li>• These events may take place through adulthood.</li></ul> <p><b>Cemetery Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Check local funeral homes to find the owners of local cemeteries.</li><li>• Towns, cities, churches, and privately owned.</li></ul> <p><b>Tax Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One of the most underused records.</li><li>• Shows location and financial status.</li><li>• Check every year.</li><li>• May see when they reached taxable age, moved, or died.</li></ul> <p><b>Newspapers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many are online, many more are not.</li><li>• Small-town newspapers are especially "newsy".</li></ul> <p><b>Town Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Common in New England.</li></ul> <p><b>Journals, Letters, and Diaries</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Look for entries near monumental events, i.e. birthdays, New Year's Day, beginning of war.</li><li>• May be housed in manuscript collections or vertical files – Libraries and Archives.</li></ul>	<p><b>Obituaries and Funeral Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dissect every bit of information found.</li><li>• Keep a blank family group record nearby.</li></ul> <p><b>City and Rural Directories</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Look at each one your ancestor may have appeared in.</li><li>• May help to determine death.</li><li>• Earliest date to 1700's – Boston.</li></ul> <p><b>Military Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pension records are rich!</li><li>• Obtain the entire file.</li></ul> <p><b>Draft Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Began during the Civil War.</li></ul> <p><b>Land Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow the money!</li><li>• Look at all neighbors.</li><li>• In conjunction with probate packets, look at estate inventory and sale.</li><li>• May include names of slaves.</li></ul> <p><b>Maps</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Begin a collection of maps for your research areas.</li></ul> <p><b>Naturalization Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Look at 1900-1940 for abbreviations.</li></ul> <p><b>Probate Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not just wills – the whole packet.</li></ul> <p><b>County Histories</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commonly called "Mug Books".</li><li>• Don't rely wholly on the information, but use as a springboard to other records.</li></ul> <p><b>School Records</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many include birth date of students.</li><li>• Most include names of parents.</li></ul>
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