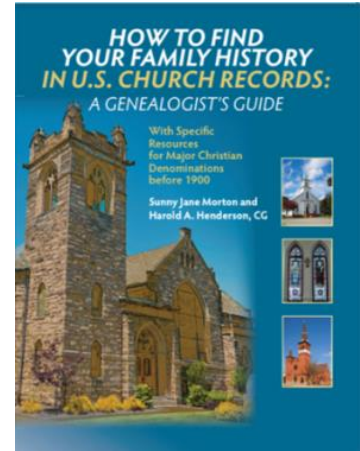


Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records

Sunny Morton is a leading expert on using U.S. church records in family history research. She is co-author of the NGS award-winning book, [How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records](#) (with Harold Henderson, CG), and Coordinator of the [Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh](#) 2024 course on using U.S. Church Records. She is Content Director at Your DNA Guide and a Contributing Editor at Family Tree Magazine, past Editor of Ohio Genealogy News and author of *Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy*. She runs the Book Club at the Virtual Genealogical Association. Find her at www.sunnymorton.com.



Get a copy of *How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records* at <https://genealogical.com/store/how-to-find-your-family-history-in-u-s-church-records>; use promocode **church24** for 20% off your purchase.



U.S. church records often mention:

- Names (birth/maiden and married) and family relationships
- Dates and places of birth, marriage, death
- Overseas hometown of immigrants and other migration info
- Acts of conversion, devotion, disaffiliation, disputes and drama
- Information about women, minorities and others underrepresented in many U.S. records.

U.S. church records fill record gaps

- Often kept long before government vital records
- Often survived disasters that destroyed local government records
- May confirm relationships for *entire family groups*
- Vital events often recorded at or near the date of the event
- One of best places to identify that elusive overseas hometown
- Unique source for migration hints, juicy stories, church participation and more

How to identify your ancestor's denomination and congregation

Clues from various genealogical sources, local history and maps:

- Memories that the family attended a particular church or that a relative was a preacher
- Names of pastors/ministers/church on marriage certificates, funeral programs/mass cards, obituaries, or memorabilia related to church participation
- Local histories and city directories may name churches near your ancestor. You may find the ethnic/language group served by the church, names of clergy and prominent members.
- Neighborhood-level maps often identify churches. Consult resources such as plat maps, atlases and Sanborn fire insurance maps.
- Consider the odds, geographically or ethnically. Local options may have been limited. Families that originally settled each region often attended the same church.

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- Use denominational timelines/family trees to trace a denomination forward in time
<https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/history/family-trees>
- Watch for closed/merged churches or union churches

Consider the odds: Ethnicity (see chart and map in the church records book)

How to locate existing records

1. Do a Google search:
 - Name of congregation (if known), denomination, town, county, state. As needed, add terms like baptisms, marriages, deaths, records, registers, etc.
 - What to watch for in search results: Online church record collections (indexes, images), manuscript finding aids, library catalog or publication descriptions.
2. Church offices, church archives and other archives:
 - Contact current local congregations
 - Look for regional (diocesan/conference) and/or national church archives
 - Search at local, regional and state archives
 - See the church records book for repositories specific to 12 major denominations
3. Search websites for online collections, including:
 - AmericanAncestors.org (Browse databases): Congregational, New England
 - Ancestry.com (Search> Card catalog, by place or “church”): Evangelical Lutheran, Quaker, Dutch Reformed/Christian Reformed, United Methodist, French Catholic, LDS, Swedish American
 - CongregationalLibrary.org: Congregational
 - Findmypast.com: Catholic Heritage Archive, www.findmypast.com/catholicrecords
 - FamilySearch
 - Search > Catalog, by place, then select Church Records category)
 - [Church record collections for several U.S. states](#)
4. Online archival catalogs (for original records):
 - ArchiveGrid (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid>) is a multi-library database of over three million archival materials held at thousands of libraries, museums, societies and archives
5. Published/microfilmed records and record inventories:
 - WorldCat (<http://www.worldcat.org>): Look for printed inventories like *Directory of American Maryland Church Records* by Edna A Kanely; *A Guide to Episcopal Church Records in Virginia* by Edith F Axelson; *Inventory of the Church Archives of Georgia* (Baptist); *Searching for American Church Records* by Fran Carter-Walker; *Survey of American Church Records* by E Kay Kirkham
 - PERSI (<https://www.genealogycenter.info/persi/>): Look for articles in periodicals
 - Church records book: See list of WPA directories of churches and church record inventories (not published or available for every state, county or denomination)

What other kinds of church records may exist?

- Church minutes and correspondence, including letters of transfer
- Attendance, donation and subscription lists
- Creeds, by-laws or rules of conduct
- Pew rentals, directories, congregational histories
- Ministerial records and (separate) records of orders/auxiliaries
- Denominational/regional newspapers (*Advocate* for Methodists, diocesan papers for Catholics)

Tips for requesting copies of records.

- Call ahead and/or check the website. Is this the right church? Any ordering instructions?
- Make your request respectful, patient, brief and specific. Send payment with your order.
- Request copies of originals. If that's not possible, ask them to include every piece of information about that person, not just what there's room for on the certificate/abstract form.
- Include your email address and thank them in advance for their response.

Learn more:

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- More church records presentations by Sunny Morton: "Where Did Your U.S. Ancestors Go to Church? 5 Ways to Find Out" and "Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians—Oh My!" at Legacy Tree Webinars (<https://familytreewebinars.com/speaker/sunny-morton/>)
- "Using U.S. Church Records for Family History," week-long workshop with Sunny Morton at Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh, July 14 (<https://grip.ngsgenealogy.org/>)