

She Did What? Putting Your Ancestor in Historic Context  
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**Context** helps genealogists answer the questions of *how* our ancestors acted and *why* they acted how they did. History is looking at the big picture. Genealogy is micro-history, looking at individual people during historic events to place them within the larger story. Why do people do the things they do?

Actions and behavior all occur in context:

- |                    |                           |            |             |           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| -Historic          | -Personal and Personality | -Religious | -Social     | -Economic |
| -Legal/Legislative | -Community/Locality       | -Ethnic    | -Occupation |           |

Think about your ancestors' lives from multiple perspectives: social history (daily life), community networks, architectural history, occupational history, and economics. Even if you can't find records that specifically address your ancestor, can you use the records that do exist to make *reasonable* hypotheses about the life of an ancestor?

### How do you start to put your ancestor in historic context?

- Craft a timeline for your ancestor. Plug the records you have into the timeline and make note of the people with whom he or she interacts. *Tip: Try to have information for every year the life of the ancestor you are studying.*
- Put together a web or mind-map of those connections and begin to discover your ancestor's social community.
- Create a map using Google Maps or Google Earth to track the movements of your family or related groups.
- Use the Cluster/FAN Genealogy principle to create a web of people that interact together.
- Utilize a list of interview questions and see if you can fill in the blanks of your ancestor's life via the records you already have. Are you overlooking details in the records because you are looking for the answers to other questions?

When you have done this for commonly utilized "genealogy" records, move on to records that are more commonly used by historians and other researchers.

In order to utilize the historical research you uncover, you have to have documents and data to reinforce the research. You don't want to write the wrong story for your ancestor! The research you uncover has to match your ancestor's story. History is the tapestry on the wall, but if part of that tapestry doesn't match the others, it is a problem for your genealogy. You have to look at every piece of evidence, figure out why it is there, and what it means in the larger picture.

### Underutilized genealogical sources:

- Subject reports by State Historic Preservation Offices and architectural historians, graduate student theses, journal articles—both scholarly and genealogical, blog posts by "amateur" or local historians.
- National Register nominations—look for historic district or individual buildings in the county or city in which your ancestors lived.
- Photographs, aerial photographs, paintings.
- Books—County histories, architectural and clothing pattern books, directories, general history.
- Subject timelines and timelines by year.
- Maps—historical and modern, birds-eye, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps/State Insurance Maps
- Historical artifacts—within the family, in museum collections, for sale on auction sites
  - Antiques Roadshow!
- Historic Markers—both the markers and the research completed to write them.
- Postcards
- Newspapers: look at obituaries, news articles, and advertisements.
- Walking tour brochures for communities

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- Historic home tours
- Letters, Diaries, and Memoirs—within the community and travelers through the community
- Oral histories - of people in the neighborhood, not just your ancestor
- Bibliographies
- Laws
- Documentaries - Ken Burn's *The Civil War* for example, but be aware of biases
- Music and popular culture

Even if you can't find information about your ancestor's specific home, if you can find a history of the town or community *AND* figure out when your ancestor moved to the area, you may be able form a hypothesis about what kind of home he or she lived in. That, in turn, can lead to information about the running of the household. What were their occupations? What were the family's finances like? Did the women dress in new silk and velvet gowns in the latest styles, or did they wear cotton and linen hand-me-downs?

Don't overlook research: Examine blogs and articles in journals for potential research subjects. Check Worldcat and JSTOR. JSTOR offers options to read articles online, download articles, and completely subscribe to the service. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, JSTOR upped the number of articles available to read per month for unaffiliated users to 100, so you will never be without reading material!

For example, if you have Irish roots in New York City prior to the American Revolution, you may be interested in an article titled "Ireland, New York, and the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World" by Thomas M. Truxes in the *American Journal of Irish Studies* from 2011. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41604764>)

If you are doing work on slavery in the American south, you may want to examine the article titled "Taxes and Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South," by George Ruble Woolfolk in *The Journal of Southern History* from 1960 ([www.jstor.org/stable/2955182](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2955182)). While the analysis may not match current standards, it could lead you to more research.

**ALWAYS EXAMINE THE FOOTNOTES FROM THESE ARTICLES! They will lead you to more research.**

Where do you find the research?

- Public Libraries, Academic/University Libraries, and their websites
- City/County/State websites
- State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO)
- State Department of Transportation
- National Park Service website
- Historical Society files, websites, Facebook
- Blogs
- Topical websites

**Pitfalls to Avoid:**

- Make sure the context you research *actually* applies to your family.
  - Just like research for correct lines of family tree.
  - Painful to have to "chop" off a tree limb or a family story.
- Avoid presentism and judgement. Judging our ancestors for their actions based on current mores does no one's history justice.

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