

THE ELUSIVE LADIES

By Carolyn H. Brown

The ladies seemed to have been ignored in many early American records, because the land and other possessions of the family were recorded in the man's name only. Therefore, it takes much more in-depth research to locate the women in your ancestry. Following are some helpful ideas to get you over the brick walls built around women.

WHY YOU CAN'T FIND THEM?

Women **were not** on most early records unless they were single or widowed. In America, women changed their surname when they married. She may not show up until her husband or parents died. Women used more nicknames—some may seem strange to you, and you can't connect them to a person you have found by another more common name. In this case, try variations of the spelling you have to try to locate multiple records for her. You need to think like a detective.

Before you start you need to determine what you want to find. Pick the individual to work on and stay with the search, working from death to marriage then to birth.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

The best place to look for information on the ladies is right at home. Use your extended family as a resource for information. They often have documents and photographs passed down on their side of the family, which your parents may not have mentioned or have in their possession.

Try to locate any family Bibles. These often have information about the birth, marriage, and death of family members. Look for old letters, postcards, diaries and other documents kept in the family. Check online databases and family websites to try to locate your extended family. Family Bibles were usually passed to the eldest daughter.

Old letters and diaries may contain information not available anywhere else. Take special note of the address and date on all letters for clues of where to look for more information.

USING GOVERNMENT GENERATED RECORDS

Many vital records were not kept until 1912. This will vary by state, so know the laws of the state where she lived at any point in time.

If she was born, married or died after 1900, start with vital records. If she died before 1900, start with the federal census records.

As in all genealogical research start with the most recent event in her life.

DEATH RECORDS

Locate any death records she may have generated. Unfortunately, government required death records didn't start for most of the country until about 1907, and were not required by the Federal Government until 1912.

Types of death records to look for are: death register and certificate; obituary and news articles; funeral home records; cemetery records; and a family members diary.

Locate the cemetery where she was buried and access their records. Look for the person currently owning the family plot where she is buried. You may be able to contact them for more information. Some cemeteries kept the *obituary* of everyone buried there.

MARRIAGE RECORDS

Marriage records were generally the earliest vital records held by the government. Although not required by all states, the first of these records was the marriage bond paid by the man to insure he would follow through with the planned marriage. This was also a form of consent for the woman to marry. If the woman was under the legal marriage age set by the state at the time, she had to have consent from her parent(s) or guardian to marry.

Many churches required that marriage banns be posted for three weeks within the church before the

couple could be married. This gave anyone who had a reason why the couple should not be married a chance to voice their complaint. At the time of the marriage the minister issued a marriage certificate.

Marriage registers were kept by most states before 1900, and by that time most states issued marriage licenses.

Check the marriage records for more than one marriage. Each marriage document may contain different and often conflicting information. Locate the original records rather than transcripts or copies. I have one instance where I have the original marriage certificate from family records where the woman literally changed the date of the marriage. When I obtained the information from the county where the marriage took place the marriage date was several months later. Obviously she was pregnant at the time!

BIRTH RECORDS

Birth records are the hardest vital records to find before 1912 when they were required by law for the whole country. Some states did require them in the 1800s, and in some cases births may have been recorded in the county court records. Also, look for adoptions and guardianship records, they may contain birth information.

CENSUSES

Sometimes the only information about your female ancestor is located in census records. Finding the woman in the census may indicate where she was living at the time of her birth, marriage and death. Check all federal population schedules during her lifetime, as well as all state and local censuses. She may also appear in the federal agricultural census, if her husband was dead.

COURT RECORDS

Look for the women in wills and probate records of her husband, father, mother, siblings, children and extended family. She may be found in land deeds. She may also be found in the records of her extended family. She may have been part of a civil action, and will appear in the court orders under civil cases. If her parents—especially her father—died when she was young, she may appear in guardianship records.

CHURCH OR PARISH RECORDS

Churches created records for every event which occurred in the church. This information may be found within the church, if it is still in operation. If the church has closed, then the head office of the denomination may have those records. Some may even be found in libraries and museums.

Look in the church for baptism or christening records, marriage banns and/or a record of the marriage, if it was performed by the minister. Her funeral may have taken place in the church, even if the service was held someplace else, the minister would have been paid for services rendered. If the woman transferred in to or out of the church, there may be records of the event. If she remarried, there will probably be information about her name change. Class rolls, church newsletter, and Sunday bulletins may also contain information about her.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers are an excellent source of information on the women in your family. There were many reasons why a woman's name would appear in the newspaper. However, lack of indexes for old newspapers makes it harder to find them.

Items to look for in newspapers are: birth, marriage, divorce and death announcement; obituaries; civil court cases; police records; accidents and catastrophic events; and social, political and sports events. Don't limit your search to just her name, but also search for her listed as Mrs. John Smith as well.

MILITARY RECORDS

America has been at war with someone—somewhere—for much of its history. Therefore, there are volumes of war records to search through. The man may have applied for a pension and included information about his wife in those records. A widow could have applied for a pension based on her

deceased husband's service. These records can be a genealogy gold mine when found. Information concerning who was living in forts or on military bases is also available. Information included in the man's military duty records may provide clues for further research.

IMMIGRATION RECORDS

Ship passenger lists were created at the port of departure, and might be found at every port where the ship docked in route to America. Passenger lists may have supplemental information on the individual available at the port of entry. If she was sick when she arrived, she may be found in the port infirmary records. Names were **not** changed at the port of entry, except in very unique circumstances. Any name change took place after settlement in America. Many times a name change took place where the family first settled. Especially, if their first home was in an area with people of a different culture.

Naturalization Records

Naturalization records were usually initiated by the immigrant in or after the fifth year the person immigrated, depending on the laws at the time. Until 1906 married women and children were naturalized with their husbands or father. If she was married and her husband became naturalized before 1906, she would not have naturalization records, in which case the woman lost her citizenship when her husband left the United States.

OTHER RECORDS & DOCUMENTS

Women created many records over their lifetime, included in this list are: Social Security records; city directories; business and school records. County, city, and town histories are another great place to look for the women. She may appear with her husband, brothers, sons, and/or male cousins. These articles were usually submitted by local families, in one case I found a family of interest and the article carried my research back three generations.

WOMEN'S NAMES

Some women used their maiden name after marriage, especially if they were from a foreign country. Middle names and initials were often used in records. Sometimes they named a child using her mother's or grandmother's maiden name.

WORK COLLATERAL LINES

If you can't find the information following your direct line, follow the siblings, aunts and uncles of the earliest generation in the line you are researching. You may need to work the spouses of the siblings, aunts and uncles as well.

DON'T MISS THE CLUES

Almost every document leaves clues to further your research. Re-read the documents you haven't read in a while, and follow the clues to where ever they lead you.

USE YOUR ANCESTOR'S FAN CLUB

Elizabeth Shown Mills has coined the phrase "FAN Club", and it really applies to the elusive women in our ancestry. You may need to follow her **F**riends, **A**ssociates, and **N**eighbors to climb the brick wall created around women in the past.

As always, cite your sources correctly.

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