

# PROBATE RECORDS

## Who? When? Where? What? How?

Some of the most interesting information about an individual and their family can be found by studying Probate records. In them you may find not only names, dates, and relationships, but personalities and feelings, or perhaps treasured possessions to better help you understand the individual or family.

Much of the information you need to locate probate records, you already have in your research. Identify an individual to search by using a full name, birth, marriage, and family information, and date of death. Correct place names for city, town or county where the individual lived at the time of death are very important in finding a will or other probate records.

Though there are exceptions, most probate records are kept at the county level, and will be found in court buildings. Many have been microfilmed and even indexed and digitized and available at Family Search libraries or online at county records sites. A search of court records for that time, may reveal further information. In a probate record search, you may find not only a will, but other documents such as codicils (changes to wills), inventories of possessions, sales of assets, letters of administration to heirs, estate documents, beneficiaries, and other papers concerning minors, wives, or orphans.

When the documents are found, the fun begins as you analyze carefully, and take note of all the information. Read every line to help recognize and identify individuals, even down to the witnesses, which, though not able to inherit from the will, may well be relatives. After a careful review, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I have a complete probate packet here? If not, can I obtain it?
- What can I tell about the family as a unit?
- Do any of the names mentioned sound like family names?
- Does the inventory tell what possessions were left behind? Was there a sale? To whom?
- What can be learned about lifestyle, community life, or finances?
- Where they educated? Did they sign the will or use a “seal”?
- How are the feelings expressed towards other family members?
- Where can I find additional documents?

*“Being of sound mind, I spent every cent I had while I was alive.....therefore, YOU are my memorial! What will you leave?”*

... .... A very short will

# **Last Will and Testament**

**On this 25<sup>th</sup> day of October, eighteen forty-two I, John Martin, of Washington County, State of New York, iron worker, being of sound mind but frail of body, do make this my last will and testament. . . To my beloved wife Mary Martin I give all my personal real estate . . . My wife Mary to bring up my son Henry Martin in the fear of God. . . and to educate him into the ministry as he desires . . . all expenses to be paid from the proceeds of sale of properties as deemed necessary . . . I appoint my wife Mary, my brother Henry Martin, my brother-in-law Henry Wilkes executors.**

**Witnesses: Ellen Wilkes and Peter Jones.**

**Signed John Martin**

**Who?**

**When?**

**Where?**

**What?**

**How?**

**Other Information?**