

Are You My Mother? – Finding Maiden Names

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It can often be difficult to discover the maiden name of your female ancestors. However, such a find can create a whole new branch of your family tree - opening up connections to more and more families. Here are a few of the resources/records where you might look for more information regarding the “mothers” in your line.

Naming Patterns

Sometimes looking at the names of the children within a family can give you ideas regarding maiden names of either the mother herself or a grandmother of the family. Watch for unusual middle names in both the girls and the boys. Pay special attention to the eldest daughters and sons whose names might reflect a connection to a maternal grandmother.

Census Records

Look at every census year you can find for your female ancestor done during her lifetime. You will often find her as a newlywed living with her husband at her parent’s residence. Sometimes her siblings or other relatives may be found living with her family or an elderly or widowed parent may be living in the household. Also be sure and take note of other families that live nearby.

Family Bibles

Is there a family bible available in your ancestral family? If so, these were often passed from mother to daughter and may provide clues through the events listed inside. They often include additional notes or memorabilia like funeral cards and newspaper clippings that may provide some ideas for surnames to investigate.

Marriage Records

Sometimes a marriage date and place is already known, but make sure and look for the paperwork involved. Licenses, certificates, banns or bonds can be invaluable when looking for maiden names. Witnesses listed are often relatives of both the groom, as well as the bride.

Birth Indexes

Be sure and look in the birth indexes for the children from the family even though you may already have their information. Some indexes list the information on the mother, including a maiden name.

Social Security Applications

If possible, use the information that you know about the children of a mother and order a copy of their Social Security Application which along with other information (including their own maiden name, if they applied after being married) will give you their “Mother's full name, including maiden name, ‘regardless of whether living or dead’.”

Land Records

Land was a very valuable and important part of life and was treated as such. It often was passed down from father to daughter. Look at the deeds from your family lines. Watch for names of females or siblings and children or Latin phrases “et ux” (and wife) and “et al” (and others). As you are reviewing deeds, you may notice someone selling land to your ancestors for a very small amount like one dollar. Those selling this land are very likely related to your female ancestor in some way.

Church Records

Churches are a great source for important records regarding activities like christenings that often show the name of parents including the maiden name of the mother. Those records for marriages - found via the groom and the other family member names involved - usually include the brides maiden name. Membership records also may include more ties to family and possibly maiden names of those members.

Military Records

Pension records for your ancestor’s spouse or children who served in the military are a great source of biographical information. You may also find family members involved as witnesses signing affidavits regarding those people applying for the pension.

Newspaper Records

Look in newspapers from the areas where your ancestors lived for birth, marriage or death announcements. Births may list the maiden names of the mother. Marriage notices include that of the bride and sometimes her mother. If you find an obituary for an ancestor in question, they will sometimes provide a maiden name along with the married name. Also pay special attention to the surviving family that may be included. Also, looking for notices of siblings or other family members may be beneficial.

Death Records

If death certificates were filed during the time of your female ancestor’s death, you may find her maiden name there. Keep in mind that the information is only as good as the informant. You will want to take into account the relationship of the informant to the deceased to get a feel for how accurate the information might be. Also, see if you can locate records from the funeral home. These often include information on who is involved in the funeral planning/program, who is paying for what, etc.

Cemetery Records

Sometimes these records might be the only place you will ever find that your ancestor existed. If possible, check the sexton records for information that might not be found anywhere else. Tombstones may also provide maiden names or even initials that will give you clues as to what to consider. Look at who is buried close by, especially if it is a family plot.

Probate Records & Wills

In order to prove a relationship for a potential parent of your female ancestor, look for their probate records or wills which often list names of the living children and their spouses. This may allow you to tie in your ancestor and their siblings to this family. If land is involved in the probate process, deeds may provide additional clues when investigating this relationship.