

ALL THE EASY ANCESTORS ARE TAKEN

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That's how I felt. All the easy ancestors are taken. In my early genealogical experiences I visited the Dallas Public Library, the Family History Library, the New England Historic Genealogical Society, and the DAR Library. They had rows and rows of compiled genealogies—genealogies that did *not* contain my ancestors.

I studied the books. Many were undocumented, but the information seemed to have come from public vital records, from church records, from tombstones, from wills, and from family records—records of vital events.

My ancestors, on the other hand, seemed to have been willfully negligent in reporting vital events to the appropriate officials, belonged to churches that eschewed record keeping, were too poor to have a tombstone, and were too frugal to pay for a will. Their records had not survived their multitudinous moves.

Over the years, however, I have managed to establish lineages for many of these ancestors. How? I found my ancestors when I quit looking for vital records and focused on record groups that might tell me about relationships.

CENSUSES

The decennial censuses are the backbone of genealogical research in the federal period. They weren't readily available to early genealogists, but they are to us. Relationships weren't explicitly stated until the 1880 census, but are generally implied in the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses.

I learned it was important to look at *every* census. The solution to the ancestry of the newlyweds of 1860 might be found in the 1880 or 1900 census when an elderly parent was in the household—and explicitly identified as such.

PROBATE RECORDS

I discovered that there were probate records other than wills. When there was property but no will, an administration should have occurred (although some of my ancestors even wiggled out of this one). Administrations required that the property be distributed according to the law, which meant that the widow and each of the children usually got something; often they were all listed by name.

If there were minor children, a guardian was appointed for the child (as guardian for the property, not the person). Once a child was 14, he or she could choose his or her

own guardian, providing an estimate of the child's birth date.

With this wealth of information resulting from the lack of a will, I sometimes find myself wishing that the ancestor whose will left everything to his unnamed wife and eldest son had died intestate instead.

LAND RECORDS

Land records are easily the most under-utilized source for establishing relationships. Elderly parents sometimes wrote deeds of support, giving land or personal property to a child if that child would care for them in their old age. The arrangement didn't always work, and a second deed several years later might switch the agreement to a different child.

I love finding "et al" in a deed index. It may indicate a quitclaim in which one or more siblings (usually with spouses named) sold their rights in their father's property, often to another sibling. Quitclaims may be years (or even decades) after the father's death. Why? Likely the mother recently died and her dower thirds reverted to the estate, making it easier for the children to divide or sell the land.

TAX RECORDS

One of my favorite sources are tax records because they were created annually. It is so comforting to see William, his 50 acres, and his two cows being assessed year after year, because I'm confident I haven't combined two different men. The new entry for "John of W." tells me of a relationship and that for "William est." tells me of his death. I just wish tax records survived for more states.

COURT RECORDS

Tedious to use because they are usually unpublished and unindexed, court records (especially depositions) can be a gold mine. Deponents were often identified by age, as "Thomas, aged about 45." I have one family who appears only rarely in Massachusetts vital and church records, but whose relationships (amicable and otherwise) are detailed in depositions, most of which fortunately are in print.

CHANGING MIND SET

Once we break ourselves of the thinking "I just need to find a birth record" (or marriage record or tombstone or Bible record or will), we have a much better chance of adding ancestors to our family trees.