

Court House Research

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County Court Houses contain vital records of genealogical interest including marriage and divorce records, wills, list of voters, property tax list, school tax list, records of administration and distribution of estates, land transactions, service records, deeds, records of orphans' court, guardianship papers, minutes of the court, professional registrations, sheriff sales, brands and cattle markings, civil and criminal court records, legal name changes, lunacy hearings, testimonies, bonds and many other primary records that will be of vital use to you as you research your family history.

The Probate Record Office, which is usually on the main floor near the front with a sign over the top of the door, is the best place to start. On the most part the clerks are very friendly and helpful. When you tell them that you would like to look at their old records they will indicate a room with a huge steel door that looks like a vault. If it is your first time to research in a court house be sure and let them know. The clerks will usually take a few minutes to show you around and explain where the marriage records, wills, deeds etc. are located. On some occasions you may be sent to a basement room filled with old books and ledgers with no one around to show you how to use them. Sometimes they are piled haphazardly on the floor; you just have to use your common sense and start going through the indexes looking for your Surname. You will often find information this way that you didn't know existed. These old records are sometimes housed in a separate building such as the old jail. Either way, the probate office will direct you to them. Once you find them, you are on your own; start with the indexes, list each page where you find your ancestors name, then go to the ledger indicating that particular time period. When you find the information you can either copy it by hand or take it back to the clerk to have a photo copy made. The price will vary from ten cents to two dollars. If you copy the information by hand you may leave out some important fact that you might need later, regardless of what they charge, it is best to have all of the information photo copied. It would be a lot more expensive to have to drive back to the court house for the information later. Wear old clothes because the paper is constantly crumbling and you will be covered with yellow dust when you leave.

How-to books give you several titles for finding these records- Office of the County Clerk, Clerk of the Court, Circuit Court Clerk, etc., if you go to the Probate Records and ask there they can direct you to the correct place for each record.

Have a list of people you are researching, when you arrive. Know the time period your ancestor was in that county, have your Ancestor Chart available so you will know what information you have and what you still need. Remember the clerks cannot and will not do research for you.

Respect the papers found in court houses, some may be 150 -180 years old and are very fragile. Turn the pages carefully and try to leave them in as good a condition as when you arrived.