

Finding Maiden Names: Let Me Count the Ways

The Women in the Family Do Have Names and Histories

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Lucretia Coffin Mott 1793-1880

She is a person. She has a name. She lived her own life. She rejoiced, suffered, shared, helped, saddened, and much more. She is not just Mrs. John L. Anderson, or Mama Anderson, or Auntie Anderson. Before you say you can't determine her maiden name or the family that she came from, stop and honestly question yourself. Have you looked at every possible record? Everything. Everywhere. For everyone in the family and beyond. This session during Women's History Month and especially on International Women's Day will cover many of the usual plus some unique sources that may help you learn more about the females in your family.

Published family histories

Browse through some older family histories in a library or online. One thing that will stand out is a lack of addressing the history of the females. It's generally the husband's line that is traced. If a female was single, she is only listed by name and often without many details; the married woman is listed, perhaps with a marriage date. Look at the histories of collateral families as they may contain clues to your own female. In "modern" family histories, everyone becomes important because they ARE important.

Think about what they experienced

Arranged marriages, childbirth and child rearing issues, early widowhood, social mores, lack of conveniences in the home, pregnancy viewed as something to be hidden, braving treks across the country, familial obligations, losing multiple children, not owning their own home or land, limited paying jobs, limited wages, not being able to vote, losing citizenship status, sexual intimidation, limited education, lack of medical attention, forced into an institution, poverty, and second class status.

Have you really . . .

Checked for all the records of possible siblings, all her children, all her nieces and nephews? Which will, obituary, death certificate, christening record, deed, local news columns in newspapers, or another item is the one that gives the maiden name or a clue to it?

Think about these angles

This is not a comprehensive list, but these should help you zero in on possible records and make you think about other sources for maiden names and family connections. The session will delve into some of these in greater detail. Use these as a checklist to help guide you.

- A divorce case file may give the name before marriage or being restored to maiden name. At the very least it should give the date and place of marriage and that record will have the maiden name. These are generally county level court records except that some early state or territorial ones may have been granted by the legislature. Did one of the married parties go to a divorce mecca for the divorce? How about a Gretna Green for the marriage?
- Witnesses to births, baptisms, and marriages might be the woman's family.
- In some Catholic families, all the female children had the first name of Mary but generally were known by their middle name.
- Check wedding albums, baby books, funeral guest books, and similar books for more names.
- Learn the laws of the place and time she lived as this affected inheritances and ownership of land.
- The land might be in the husband's name, but could it have been an inheritance from the wife's family? Thoroughly search deed records and deeds of gift. Do not stop at the index!
- Same maiden and married name? Think about where they lived and whether it was common to marry cousins.
- Check all records of known or suspected siblings. Probate, land, obituaries, and more.
- Check for christening records for all her sisters. What other records exist for her sisters? The one you skip might have the maiden name of the mother, name her brothers, or give a clue to a family relationship or name.
- Some women kept diaries and journals that had family details. Manuscript finding aids will help locate those in repositories. Don't forget to look for those kept by the neighbors, fellow church members, or business associates. These may mention your own families.
- Many women joined clubs and organizations of all types. Membership records might contain a maiden name.
- Did the husband belong to clubs or organizations that required membership applications? Especially in the case of hereditary societies, old settlers' clubs, insurance or others, the maiden name of the wife may be listed.
- How did she meet her husband? Maybe he was a schoolmate or fellow soldier or sailor of that brother or his neighbor?
- Was her husband a blacksmith, logger, butcher? Maybe the males in her birth family had the same occupation. Did all the sisters marry blacksmiths? Great clue!
- Don't ignore nicknames or common alternate names. Was your Patsy really a Martha? Maybe your Molly really was a Mary?
- We may not like it, but social class did play a part as they married someone of a similar social status, club member, or government official. Check those friends and associates.
- Read scholarly genealogy journals (*The Record*, *The Register*, *NGSQ*, etc.). The articles on how someone else determined a maiden name may give you clues to methodologies and records for your own search. Other articles may provide a short family history with names.
- Pay attention to the cultural differences in women of different ethnic origins and countries.
- Those biographies in county histories often provide a clue. A biography of her sister's brother-in-law may give some family name clues.
- Local news columns in newspapers may say that Mrs. John Q. Anderson recently returned from visiting her brother Andrew Griffin in Athens, Georgia.

- Did your ancestor teach school? Teachers are often named in newspapers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps your Andrew Griffin married Susan who had been a schoolteacher. Her maiden name might be found in the newspaper when she arrived to teach.
- Boarders in the home? Might that boarder, farmhand, or other person be a family member?
- Who owned the surrounding farms? Check those names in records to see if some connection can be found. Maybe your female married a neighboring farmer.
- Was this woman enslaved? You need expertise in researching slave families. Some did take a name from the slave owner, but many did not.
- Was your female widowed and still had minor children? Know the law and check for guardianship records to see who was appointed as guardian to the children? Her brother?
- Military pension records, especially a widow's pension application, are goldmines. Someone related to the woman may have provided an affidavit about the marriage. The spouse's pension may mention the wife's maiden name.
- Do you know the middle names of all her children or those of her siblings? Might one of them have a family surname from their mother as the middle name?
- Did the woman apply for a pension based on service of a deceased son? Again, a source of maiden name, marriage, and other details. Affidavits from relatives were often given to establish the mother-son relationship.
- Social Security applications may provide a maiden name or at least the names of the parents.
- Does anyone in the family have jewelry passed down through the generations. Initials on it may give a clue to at least the first letter of a maiden name.
- Who owns the plot(s) where family is buried? Could it be her father?
- Was this woman active in her church? Might a newspaper for that denomination have mention of her at some point? An obituary might be more complete than in the secular newspaper. The same holds true for ethnic newspapers.
- Might her aged parents be living nearby with a married sister or brother and be on a census?
- Don't forget that many women were artists, poets, or did attend college. Look for directories, yearbooks, or other publications.
- Some women suffered from post-partum depression and were institutionalized. The court commitment and institution's records may provide a maiden name clue.
- Even if your ancestor didn't have a biographical entry in a town or county history, perhaps a relative did and mentioned your female. Don't overlook the in-laws either.
- Search digitized newspapers by married names for articles listing the names of other relatives.
- Follow her in a city directory after her husband's death. Did she disappear because she moved back home to *her* family? The city directory may say "remove to . . ."
- Are you able to account for every year of her life? Prepare a detailed chronology of her life and some clues might jump out at you or at least you see where the gaps exist.
- Search online catalogs, digitized records, and digitized books for all surnames associated with the woman and her family. It's like looking at a cross-index.
- Have you checked to see what funeral home records may exist?
- You will wish for Iowa connections in 1925 if you have seen the 1925 Iowa state census.
- It's 2021. Have you and other family members done DNA testing? Lots of cousin clues are popping up and that 3c1R (3rd cousin, once removed), that appears may have a family bible or old family letters that can help in the search for that maiden name.

Selected reading

These books and websites are suggested for broadening your knowledge of the historical status, records, and lives of the females in our family history. They may not mention the women in your

family but will help in the understanding of what they went through, how they lived, and how they survived. Many college and university libraries have extensive women's history collections in their libraries and online bibliographies. The Daughters of the American Revolution Library in Washington, DC, has an extensive American Women's History Collection. Check Internet Archive, Google Books, and Hathi Trust for many books such as #11 on Google Books.

1. Backhouse, Frances. *Women of the Klondike*. Rev. Ed. North Vancouver, British Columbia: Whitecap Books, 2000.
2. Basch, Norma. *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
3. Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
4. Cyndi's List categories under your state, county, province, and city for links to records and indexes and then check Female Ancestors www.cyndislist.com/female/general/
5. Discovering American Women's History Online. Provides access to digital collections of photos, letters, diaries, and artifacts that document the history of women in the United States. Find online by searching for this collection's title.
6. Emert, Phyllis Raybin. *Women in the Civil War: Warriors, Patriots, Nurses, and Spies*. 2d ed. Boston: History Compass, 2007.
7. Episcopal Women's History Project. <http://www.ewhp.org>
8. <https://www.familysearch.org> – of course for digitized and microfilmed records and books for our ancestral localities and families plus the FamilySearch Research Wiki .
9. "Female Ancestors: Finding Women in Local History and Genealogy." Library of Congress Research Guide. <https://guides.loc.gov/female-ancestor>.
10. Foote, Cheryl J. *Women of the New Mexico Frontier, 1846-1912*. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1990.
11. Hinding, Andrea H. *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States*. 2 vols. New York: Bowker, 1979.
12. Knox, Reuben. *The Law of Married Women in New Jersey*. Plainfield, NJ: New Jersey Law Journal Publishing Co., 1912.
13. Lindgren, H. Elaine. *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
14. National Women's History Alliance is varied and includes "Writing Women Back Into History." <http://www.nwhp.org>

15. Peavy, Linda and Ursula Smith. *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.
16. Petersen, Penny A. *Minneapolis Madams: The Lost History of Prostitution on the Riverfront*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, Press, 2013. [Poverty was often the reason women turned to this occupation.]
17. Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.
18. Schaefer, Christina Kassabian. *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy*. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1999.
19. Schlissel, Lillian. *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.
20. Schultz, Rima Lunin, and Adele Hast. *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Biographical Dictionary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
21. Smith, Marian L. "Any woman who is now or may hereafter be married . . ." Women and Naturalization, ca. 1802-1940." *Prologue*. Summer 1998. Online at Archives.gov.
22. Stowell, Daniel W., ed. *In Tender Consideration: Women, Families, and the Law in Abraham Lincoln's Illinois*. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
23. Thatcher, Linda, comp., *Guide to Women's History Holdings at the Utah State Historical Society Library*. Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society Library, 1995.
24. Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.
25. White, Deborah Gray. "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 237-42 [on JSTOR]
26. Women's History Research in Archives: long list of such archives
<https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=177948&p=1168872>.

Mrs. Ann B. Holbrook, whose death is recorded in another column, was sister of Mr. George C. Davis, who died suddenly at Northboro on the 26th of April. Mrs. Hoolbrook attended her brother's funeral and was sick but a week.

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