

Step: 15 Unusual Record Sources
— Terry and Jim Willard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the fifteenth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." Watch for the final three articles in this series to be posted in coming weeks.
<http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

In this series, we have focused on the most obvious family history clues to follow, which require the use of vital records. But we have also covered other clues that should be pursued in the quest for information, such as census, military, immigration, naturalization, and probate records.

Now, we are focusing on less obvious sources of information. Our point in utilizing these sources is to fully examine the ancestral paper trail, which will assist the researcher in tracking down information that could solve a dead end. Examining the paper trail closely will also assist in building a thorough life history of one or several ancestors.

As you delve deeper into the lives of your ancestors, it is important to focus on one individual at a time. We refer to this person as the key individual. We recommend that you write his or her name in bold letters at the top of a blank sheet of paper. Then list the vital information you already know about that individual. This, of course, represents your research into birth, marriage, and death records. Next, list in chronological order any of the additional information you may have uncovered through other records research, including census data, military service, land ownership, ship's passenger lists, etc. Finally, turn to the other, less obvious sources of information. Check Laura Pfeiffer's *Hidden Sources* (Ancestry, 2000) for information on many unusual record sources. Then ask the following questions about your key person to narrow your search:

1. Where did he or she attend school?
2. Where did this person live? What were his or her addresses?
3. Where did this person worship? What religious affiliation did he or she belong to?
4. Where did he or she work? What was his or her profession or trade? Did this person belong to any work-related organizations?
5. Where did this person socialize? Did he or she belong to any civic or fraternal organizations?

Answers to these questions will enhance the information you gather about your key individual. Once you're ready to gather the answers to these questions, you will truly be involved in a family history project, since this information goes well beyond average genealogy.

Educational Records

While it may seem insignificant, learning the educational background of an individual will lend depth to your research. As a general rule, the higher the level of education, the greater the likelihood you will locate relevant records. Among Jim's prized genealogical possessions are transcripts of his parents' high school course work. Jim also has a transcript of the two years his paternal grandfather spent in high school at the turn of the last century. These transcripts, in fact, led to the solution of a small genealogical mystery.

Jim's grandfather was not listed with his family in the 1900 census when he would have been seventeen years old. When we requested Jim's father's school transcript, we also chanced upon his grandfather's location. We sent a letter to the school, asking if we could get a list of students

with the last name Willard, along with their dates of attendance at the school. The school complied, and on the resulting list we found a James Blaine Willard who had attended the school in 1900 and 1901. A further check of the 1900 census showed this James Blaine, Jim's grandfather, living as a boarder some twenty miles from his parents' home, paying tuition and attending the same school Jim's father attended thirty-five years later. Only the school records gave us evidence about where this grandfather was located. The transcripts also revealed the actual street addresses of Jim's parents and grandfather when they were students at the school—information we had not yet gathered.

All schools and colleges have procedures to follow for gathering this type of information. To learn these procedures, or to request a copy of a transcript, write to the school you believe your ancestor or relative attended. Be sure to include a letter that explains your relationship to the individual(s). If that person is still living, you will need to get his or her written permission before contacting the school. Also, there is usually a fee associated with this type of request, so you may want to contact the school for more information. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope to expedite the process. Addresses for most schools and colleges can be located on the Internet.

Places of Residence

While school records are one source of an ancestor's address, telephone books and city directories also provide this data. In most telephone books, the listing gives the street address as well as the phone number. It seems that the smaller the community, the greater the chance of finding old phone books. Check local libraries for old telephone books.

Similarly, many communities published directories that list the family name, street address, and even the occupation of the head of household. In our research, we've found city directories that date back to the nineteenth century, and we've discovered interesting details on several ancestors and relatives through them. And once you know your ancestors' place of residence, you may want to take a picture of the property or home, if it is still standing.

Town Reports and Tax Lists

Other helpful tools in gathering family history data are town reports and tax lists. In New England, these reports were often published annually. An alphabetical listing of property owners, their addresses, the values of their property (and other valuables), and the taxes they owed or paid are often included in town reports. In other communities, annual tax lists were published.

When we were on the trail of Jim's great-great-great-grandfather Josiah, we lost track of him somewhere between Keene, New Hampshire, where he was born, and Skowhegan, Maine, where he died. Our census research placed him in Keene until 1840 and in Skowhegan after 1850, but we had no idea where he was during the decade in between. Using tax lists from towns surrounding Skowhegan, we found Josiah in Farmington and later in Wilton, Maine during the 1840s. We learned he was a cooper and half-owner of a barrel shop during this time. Unfortunately, we still don't know why he left Keene.

Places of Worship

While it may seem like a long shot, it is possible to learn details about an ancestor if you know the religious denomination or the specific church where he or she worshiped. In our research, we found many eighteenth-century Protestant marriage records that had been recorded by a minister

and preserved by the church. (This was unusual because ministers usually took their record books with them when they moved to another church). It was a lucky find. Some of these marriages had not been recorded with the local authority because the town had not yet been incorporated.

With several of our Catholic ancestors, we were able to examine the parish registers where births, marriages, and deaths were recorded. While these registers paralleled civil records in most cases, the church records proved beneficial in two situations. In one case, fire or flood had destroyed the civil records, and the church records served as a backup. In another case, the priest made a notation in the margin of the parish record book that provided information not found elsewhere. We learned about a particular child born out of wedlock—quite a plus for any diligent researcher.

Some church members have also published histories of their churches, which often provide lists of members throughout the history of the church, detailed information on the early founders of the church, and services and gifts provided to the church by grateful members. This information is likely to add depth to what you already know about your ancestor(s).

Places of Employment

Employment records are among the most difficult to research. In many cases, the company is no longer in business, and the records have long been destroyed. In other cases, the records are confidential and difficult to access, or there are no records at all. However, there are instances when a company will confirm whether an individual was employed and if so, the dates of employment. This information will place your ancestor in a specific place and time and can lead you to other discoveries. It is possible, for example, that union membership was part of your ancestor's employment, which will produce more records.

In any event, learning about an ancestor and discovering his or her trade or skill is a key piece of data. Even today, a person's job has a major impact on his or her life.

Social Organizations

For many immigrant ancestors, membership in a social organization or club was an important aspect of life. Virtually every American community with an ethnic or immigrant population had organizations of this type. Many such organizations were instrumental in getting foreign-language newspapers published in the communities—a boon to research, if you can read the language. Also, these organizations provided services for their members; they often acted as banks and insurance companies.

In some cases, these societies still exist. In other cases, the records of earlier groups have been cataloged by a local historical or cultural organization. If your ancestry is of a particular ethnic type, investigate the community where your immigrant ancestor settled to see if an existing organization can offer additional information. If nothing more, you will learn a great deal about the social conditions of that community.

Genealogical research can be extremely rewarding for several reasons, but for us the best part is that it puts us in touch with our past. Genealogical research helps us understand who we are and where we came from. And delving into areas of everyday life, using the records we have discussed, can help researchers see their ancestors' daily existence. But doing so requires detective work. You must examine every clue carefully and always be on the lookout for leads that can further your search.

Terry and Jim Willard hosted the ten-part PBS series "Ancestors." They have researched their genealogy fifteen generations back on both sides.