Too many of our female ancestors suffer from historical obscurity, especially those who lived prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

For much of a woman’s life, she was identified only as “daughter” or “wife.” Often, a woman went directly from her father’s household to her husband’s, becoming even more anonymous with marriage. Many types of early records offer little, if any, information on women. Research, then, requires a deliberate approach.

The first step to finding a female ancestor is to collect all you know, and then identify and research her immediate family members. Ironically, you typically need to follow the men in her life. Fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons usually generated more records and left a more substantial historical imprint. Men owned land, wrote wills, and held local government positions, which means their names are found in deeds, tax lists, and probate and town records—and numerous other sources. Connecting your female ancestor to a male narrative helps establish and document her story.

This article presents familiar genealogical sources, viewed through a different lens. Approach the sources described below with your female ancestors in mind, and you may be rewarded with sought-after information, such as an elusive maiden name or glimpses of a long-ago personality.

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Miniature portrait of Caroline Jackson Thaxter (1800-1846), Thaxter Parks Spencer collection, Mss 1126.
Vital records

Vital records can be an excellent source of information—depending on when registration began, what questions were asked, and how well the forms were completed.

Marriage records are the one source that should include the woman’s maiden surname or, at the very least, her previous married surname. But marriage records may also include ages, birthplaces, residences at time of marriage, as well as parents’ names and their birthplaces, residences of the bride and groom, and the number of marriages for each. (In colonial era marriage records, some women are listed as “Mrs.”—then an abbreviation for “Mistress.” This title does not necessarily imply widowhood.)

Prior to 1700 (a.k.a. Torrey)—a massive manuscript compilation by Clarence Almon Torrey available in print and at AmericanAncestors.org—and its supplements are essential resources for this region and era, since each listed marriage cites the underlying sources. (Note that Torrey itself should not be cited; its references lead to the evidence.)

Besides listing a child’s name, birthdate, birthplace, and parents’ names (and sometimes a maiden name), birth records can also include parents’ birthplaces, ages, and occupations. Usually, illegitimate children took the unmarried mother’s surname. If you are unsure of your ancestor’s maiden name, examine the birth records of all her children to see if the information is provided for at least one birth.

Most death records contain considerable genealogical information; however, the informant did not always provide accurate facts. A death record can potentially provide birthdate and place, length of residency, parents and birthplaces, and burial information. Even the identity of the informant can be useful, as this person might be a previously unknown relation. Death records can assist in locating obituaries and gravestones. Since some death records list a mother’s maiden name, searching for the death records of a woman’s children can also be worthwhile.

Church records

Church records—baptisms, marriages, burials, and membership lists—can be a major resource, especially when vital records are not available. Baptismal records can include the mother’s maiden name, and witnesses were often family members. Be aware that not all baptisms occurred close to the date of birth; often all children in a family were baptized together on the...
same day and sometimes people were baptized as adults. Although church membership lists do not usually offer vital record information, they can pinpoint an ancestor’s location at a particular time, and may also list a spouse. These lists can also record when someone left the church—signaling a potential migration.

Census records

Census records help you identify the members of your ancestor’s family and track their movements. Look for your ancestor in the earliest possible census and follow her in each census until her death. With each subsequent federal census, new questions were added and old questions were expanded or removed, so examine each census record closely. Although pre-1850 census records list only the name of the head of household, your female ancestor can still be traced if you have an approximate idea of her birthplace and/or birth date, and know her father’s or husband’s name. If she was widowed or a single adult, she could be listed as a head of household herself. After the 1790 census, in which all free white females were grouped into one category, the next five censuses show free white females listed according to various age groups. In the same time period, slaves and colored free people were listed only by age, not gender.

Beginning with the 1850 census, everyone was named, except people in the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules. In those schedules, the name of the slave owner was given, along with the number of slaves held. The slaves were identified only by gender, age, and race. Beginning with the 1870 census, all individuals were enumerated by name. Later federal censuses included questions about years of marriage, number of children born and living, immigration and naturalization years, naturalization status, and home ownership. Many states had their own censuses taken in non-decennial years, but not all of them survived. These state records help fill in gaps between the federal census years, and often asked different questions. To determine what censuses are available for states and territories, visit census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html.

In-laws may be enumerated in the same household as a female ancestor, thus revealing a maiden name. For example, in the 1855 New York state census for Moravia, Cayuga County, the household of Leandre Arnold included his wife Jane Ann, son William H., adopted daughter Edith A. Robinson, and sister-in-law, Julia Ann Stanton, who was single. Thus, we can tentatively conclude that Jane Ann Arnold’s maiden surname was Stanton.
Gravestones and cemetery records

Always search for your female ancestor’s grave. The gravestone could list her maiden name, but even if it does not, cemetery research can be valuable in constructing relationships. Women were often buried with a husband and/or children. Extended family members may be buried nearby, and might offer more clues. Cemetery records may include information about everyone buried in a plot, along with death and/or burial dates, and the name of the person who purchased the site.

Newspapers

Newspapers contain much more than marriage announcements and obituaries. You can also find notices of probate court dates and land sales. The community news and gossip columns may identify friends, neighbors, or visiting relatives, and supply social and historical context.

A local news item from the July 8, 1938, Hammond [Ind.] Times allows us to determine the maiden name of Mrs. William Barrett. The notice reports, “Mrs. William Barrett of Cambridge, Mass., has been in town visiting her mother on Bauer street, having come back with her sisters, Mrs. Anne Hoffman and Miss Gene Carroll who

Who was Elizabeth Smith?

Consider this case. You know the name of your ancestor Elizabeth Smith but you do not know the first name of her late husband or the names of her parents. You have found a probate record that includes her last will and testament. The document, dated April 12, 1814, shows that Elizabeth Smith of Worcester, Massachusetts, widow, bequeathed her estate to the following persons:

- Abigail Rice (wife of Benjamin Rice), Lydia Ball (wife of Daniel Ball), Sarah (Sally) Bixbe (wife of Samuel Bixbe), daughters of her late husband
- David Smith and Amos Smith, sons of her late husband
- Jonathan Flagg, Joel Flagg, Hodefer Ward, Betty Ward, and Robert Bixbe, grandchildren of her late husband
- Ruth Parker (widow of Aaron Parker) and Esther Gleason (wife of Jonathan Gleason Jr.), daughters
- Robert Smith Gleason, Elizabeth Goodale Gleason, Jonathan Gleason, Philander Gleason, Maryanne Fiske Gleason, Henry Gleason, and Charles Gleason, grandchildren of Elizabeth Smith

What can we learn from this record?

Elizabeth was not the first wife of her late husband, as she differentiated between her husband’s children and hers. She appears to have two daughters of her own, Ruth and Esther, most likely with the late Mr. Smith, since she did not identify the daughters as children of a former or deceased spouse.

Because a codicil to her will was dated February 24, 1836, and the inventory of her estate was appraised March 30, 1838, we have an approximate time frame for her death date. A death record was found for an Elizabeth Smith, age 96, widow of Robert Smith, who died in Worcester, on October 6, 1837.

We can pursue several different strategies for finding Elizabeth’s maiden name. We can look for a marriage record for a Robert Smith who marries an Elizabeth in Worcester County. We can corroborate this marriage by locating Robert Smith’s probate record to see if he left a will, and named heirs. We can also speculate what her name could be by observing the naming pattern for Elizabeth’s grandchildren, Robert Smith Gleason and Elizabeth Goodale Gleason. And we can search for birth, marriage, and death records of daughters Ruth and Esther to see if Elizabeth’s maiden name was included.
motored east and spent several weeks in New York City and Cambridge, returning by way of Canada. Since a sister, Miss Gene Carroll, was unmarried, the family surname for “Mrs. William Barrett” is likely to be Carroll. A Margaret E. Carroll married William J. Barrett in Lake County, Indiana, on October 19, 1928.

Wills and probate records

Ideally, when your ancestors left wills, they named spouses and children—including the full names of married daughters! Wills are a key resource for identifying adult daughters before vital and post-1840 census records. Wills can provide proof of parenthood and marriage as well as residency; conversely, if a spouse or child is not mentioned, you should consider whether that spouse or child may have died. If a parent died intestate—without a will—you still may be able to extract information about family members, as a relative was often appointed as administrator by the court. The resulting record could contain a distribution of property to heirs. Prior to 1800, few women made wills. You may find them for widowed or wealthy single women, but it was not until “the mid-nineteenth century, [that] most states passed legislation giving married women rather than their husbands the ownership and control over all personal and real property they had inherited or been given.”

If parents did not leave a will, search for grandparents’ probate records, as they may have named grandchildren. In addition, the wills of unmarried aunts and uncles often named nieces (sometimes with a married surname) or nephews.

Naturalization records

Before 1922, a woman became an American citizen as part of her husband’s or father’s naturalization process. Naturalization records for male relatives can include relevant information on female family members. The Expatriation Act of 1907 required a U.S.-born woman who married a foreigner to assume the nationality of her husband, therefore losing her own American citizenship. Between 1907 and 1922, an American-born woman who married an alien eligible for citizenship could regain her own American citizenship, but only by going through the entire naturalization process as if she were a newly arrived immigrant. The steps included providing character witnesses and taking the Oath of Allegiance. The Cable Act, passed September 22, 1922, repealed the 1907 law, but women who had married aliens and lost citizenship during the Expatriation Act still had to submit to the full naturalization process.

In 1936, a new act allowed a woman who had lost her citizenship through marriage, a “marital expatriate,” to apply for repatriation, provided she was no longer married to her alien spouse—whether through death or divorce—by submitting her U.S. birth, marriage, and divorce records (or her husband’s death certificate), then taking the Oath of Allegiance. On July 2, 1940, a new act allowed all women who lost their citizenship by marriage to repatriate—regardless of marital status. But they still had to take an Oath of Allegiance and swear that they had continually lived in the United States since their marriage. Women could repatriate at any District Court, and these repatriation applications are part of Record Group 21 at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) branch holding records for that District Court.

Court records

Court records can be extremely valuable for female ancestors, especially for establishing their whereabouts at a particular time, identifying a maiden name, and determining family relationships. Below are some examples of information revealed in colonial New England court minutes:

"Administration granted to Elizabeth Gowen alias Smyth of the Estate of her husband William Gowen alias Smyth, deceased, with whom Capt. Frost, her brother, and Nicholas frost stand bound in an obligation of five hundred pounds that sd Elizabeth Frost shall bring a true Inventory of her husbands Estate aforesd, & Administer according to law."
“Mary Breedene bonds being
Continued to this Court for being
with Child with a bastard Child, She
Appearing & own’d the fact & Said that
James Oliver who She is now Married
to is the father of the Sd Child & he
also appearing & own’d the fact…”

“Twenty first Day of November
1763…To the Constables of…
Raynham…Whereas John Ingley of
Taunton with his Wife Mehitable &
four Children Namely William, Mary,
Fileeny & Deborah have Intruded…by
Coming to Live…on the fifth Day of
July AD 1763 at a house of Mr. Amos
Halls in said Raynham…Warn…
Depart…even to Taunton…first Day
of March…1764.”

Court records encompass a variety
of documents useful to genealogists
seeking female ancestors: warnings
out, divorces, adoptions, fornication
and bastardy cases, and more. Court
records include minutes that report on
what occurred during a court session;
dockets that summarize official court
case proceedings and contain case files
numbers for criminal and civil cases;
and court orders. Court records can be
found at local, county, state, and fed-
eral levels. State libraries and archives,
in addition to court jurisdictions, may
hold these records.7
The Family History Library has
microfilm copies of many court
records, and with digitizing under-
way, many are now available to search
online. Many early court records have
also been transcribed, published, and
sometimes digitized. The NEHGS
library holds a sizable collection of
these published court record tran-
scriptions, and AmericanAncestors.
or offers an extensive collection of
searchable Massachusetts county court
records. If you have questions about
access, contact the county court clerk.

Widow’s pension and
federal land records
After the Revolutionary War, the
government provided various pensions
for veterans, widows,
or their children—
depending on the
date and circum-
cstances. Pension
applications include
service details, death
date of veteran,
proof of marriage,
residency, and more.
Fellow veterans, fam-
ily members, friends,
and neighbors could
be deposed or submit
affidavits with perti-
nent information. If
your female ancestor
filed an application,
look under her hus-
band’s name and the
state where he served;
her name will also be
listed with a “W” and
a file number. If she
remarried, her new
surname and her sta-
tus as a former widow
will be noted on the
record.
Women could
also apply for federal
land, but “very few
lands that were sold through pri-
ivate land companies and public land
offices were purchased by widows and
female heads of families between 1811
and 1830. . . . Under the land act of
1841, widows could apply for federal
land, but a married woman could not
apply for land in her own name.”8
Subsequent land acts modified the
requirements for widows and single
women. For more information, see the
Bureau of Land Management/General
Land Office (glerecords.blm.gov)
and the National Archives Records
Administration (archives.gov/).

DNA testing
Although DNA testing cannot replace
genealogical research, your test results
 can be matched with relatives, allowing
you to identify possible relations-
ships. Mitochondrial DNA (MtDNA)
is passed from mother to child, and
testing can be used to trace matrilineal
ancestry and find shared matrilineal
forebears. (Note that a male relative
must be tested for a woman to discover
her patrilineal line.9)

Additional sources
• Published genealogies and local his-
tories for towns, counties, and states.
• Town records, which include tax
rolls, land grants, constable records,
and sometimes court record
abstracts.
• Deeds and dower releases. (A dower
release indicated a wife’s consent to a
land transfer or sale by her husband.
This practice occurred before the
mid-nineteenth century.)
• Affidavits in legal documents.
• City directories, which usually list adult males, single women, and widows.
• Archives and manuscript collections for diaries and journals.
• Historical societies and local history collections at libraries have material not (yet) online, including family histories, diaries, scrapbooks, local business records, and photographs.
• Compiled genealogies in journals like the New England Historical and Genealogical Register.
• Christina Kassabian Schaeffer’s book, *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women’s Genealogy*, is a useful resource, especially for various government record groups and state-specific laws regarding marriage and divorce, property and inheritance, and citizenship.
• Living descendants of relatives often have letters or remember the stories told by older family members.

Although tracing female ancestors can be a challenge, discovering new information about the women in your family is an attainable goal. The records and sources discussed in this article provide the necessary elements for extensive research. But researching female ancestors also requires a shift in mindset, creativity, and “thinking outside the box,” especially to uncover the personal details that make each life unique.

NOTES

2 For a list of the questions asked for each census, see census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/index_of_questions/ and Ann S. Lainhart, *State Census Records* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1992.)
3 *Indiana Marriages, 1811–2007* (From original records held by the Indiana Commission on Public Records, Indianapolis).
9 “United States Court Records,” in FamilySearch Wiki, *at FamilySearch.org*.