



When the Records are Not Online

Tim Bingaman, AG[®], Research Specialist
bingamantd@FamilySearch.org

Today more and more records for family history research can be located online. However, there are still many documents that cannot be found online and can only be viewed at the repository where the record is housed.

Whenever possible a researcher needs to examine the original record. For this handout an original record is a document created at or near the time of the event. Using an abstract or an extract may not yield all the information from the original record. But where are these original records kept? In those cases, on-site research may be necessary to track down original documents. Let's examine some high-profile records and try to determine where the originals may reside.

VITAL RECORDS

Birth, Marriage, Death and Divorce

The keeping of vital records varies from one location to another. New England record keeping practices are much different from the Mid-Atlantic region. It is important a researcher learns the record keeping practices of the region where their relative lived.

Records created at the county level will usually be housed at the county courthouse. Be aware that some counties have a county archives and older county records may be stored at that facility. Also, check county websites for the availability of records and how to obtain them.

Vital records created by the state may be stored in the state department of vital records or the state archives. The FamilySearch Research Wiki is a good source to discover when vital records began in various states and where those records are housed.

CHURCH RECORDS

When vital records are not available church records can be used as a substitute. However, church records are difficult to find and depending on the denomination the record you seek may not exist. It is a good idea to read county histories and discover what religious denominations were in the locality where your relative lived.

Contact the Church itself to determine what records are available and will the Church allow you to look at the records. There are denominational repositories throughout the United States. Check the FamilySearch Wiki by denomination for a listing and addresses for each repository. Also, search historical and genealogical societies for possible published church records. It could save you time and money. Below are some suggestions when visiting a church:

- Time of Worship Service
- Visit on Sunday
- Wait for the Minister or Priest
- Schedule a time
- Ask to take pictures
- Abide by the rules
- Give a donation

LAND and PROBATE

Land records can help locate where an individual or family lived in a county or state. They can usually be found in county courthouses or state archives. Before contacting those institutions search the following:

- FamilySearch Library Catalog
- County and State level
- County websites
- State Archives websites
- Local Societies

Below are some suggestions when visiting a courthouse:

- Call ahead to determine where the records are located
- The staff is not interested in your family history. They are there to do the work of the county
- Parking
- Bills and Coins
- You will go through a Security check point
- Research Room or not
- Takes time to get off-site material on-site
- Patience
- Copies

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers are becoming more popular. However, many are not online so not easily accessible. Local libraries, societies and universities may have copies of newspapers on microfilm. Check their websites to see if their catalog is online for newspaper availability. In many cases the researcher will have to visit the repository.

- Local libraries
- College, University libraries
- Historical and Genealogical Societies

NATURALIZATION

Depending on when an individual became a citizen of the United States, his or record could be found at the County, State or Federal Level. All three levels need to be searched. The Declaration of Intent and the Petition for Naturalization can usually be obtained by the researcher. The actual certificate of Naturalization was usually presented to the naturalized citizen. If a record cannot be found on Ancestry, FamilySearch or Fold3, you may have to contact the local courthouse where your ancestor lived. Also, for naturalizations 1906 and later contact the USCIS through their website to obtain naturalizations not online.

- <https://www.uscis.gov/>
- Local branches of the National Archives

MILITARY RECORDS

There are a plethora of military records and many of them are not online. A good place to start is Fold3. However, for records not online use the National Archives site (NARA)

www.archives.gov

- Click on VETERAN'S SERVICE RECORDS
- Some records are stored in St. Louis, Missouri