

Lancaster County Genealogical Resources: Where to find them and why you sometimes can't!

Lancaster County has several excellent sources of information for individuals tracing their family trees:

- **Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society**, Lancaster Theological Seminary
- **Family History Center**, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
- **Historical Society of Cocalico Valley**
- **Lancaster Public Library**
- **Lancaster County Historical Society**
- **Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society**
- **Lititz Historical Foundation**
- **Manheim Historical Society**
- **Office of Records and Archives**, Lancaster County Courthouse
- **Seibert Library and Resource Center**

Each of these collections has its strengths dependent on the type of information needed.

Family Trees:

Researching a family tree takes time and organization. The local public library is a good place to start by finding one of several excellent guides on how to do genealogical research.

One example is *Unpuzzling Your Past: the Best-Selling Basic Guide to Genealogy* by Emily Anne Croom from which some of the general information in this guide is drawn.

These guides can provide a realistic view of the time and effort as well as the practical aspects of taking notes and filing techniques. Taking the time to maintain the information gathered in an organized manner will make it easier to find and cuts down on frustration and error. These guides also list the types of records available, how and where to get access to them, and explain how to get the most information out of them.

Starting:

The first step to tracing any family tree is to sit down with members of the family and get as much information as possible from them such as names, dates and locations. Family trees are built backward by following the existing individuals to the generation before them. The more information one has at the beginning the better. Talking with older family members provides a list of individual names, how they were related, and when and sometimes where they were born and died. It can also provide snippets of family lore that can be surprising and fun, but not always accurate; remember, you must find supporting documentation. The information may not be perfect, but when one is going through a list of people with the same name such information can help focus the search on the right individual.

Names:

Following a surname back in time is not as easy as it sounds. The people who came to the American Continent and built the country that we live in now brought with them different languages and cultures. The names they came with are not always the names we have now. Spelling variations are common. There was no standardization; clerks spelled the names the way they heard them. Some names were anglicized and others translated. Make a list of as many of the variations as you can and keep it in mind at all times when examining older records.

Given names can be just as difficult. Different cultures have different naming traditions. For example, many of the families that settled in Lancaster originally came from Germany. Germans had a pattern of naming children after grandparents and sometimes used the same first name with a different second name. (Example: Johann Matthias, Johann Peter, etc.) The name would repeat not just once, but several times in a

generation as each son would use the same names for his children. At times like this, it is easy to wander down the wrong path. Always try to confirm the information using another source.

Dates:

Dates should be a simple thing; unfortunately, they are not. Original documents, records created at the time of the event, are always to be hoped for as they will contain the most accurate information. Sadly, the family Bible is not always the best or definitive source. Always check when the bible was published. If events are recorded that occurred before the bible was printed then the information is from memory or copied from another source, and there is always a risk that information might be copied incorrectly.

The researcher may find several different dates recorded for weddings, births, and deaths. Marriage licenses, for instance, sometimes have the date the license was obtained but not the date it actually took place. The date of the wedding may have to be found in church records. Try to get information from as many sources as possible to verify the date's accuracy.

Handwriting:

Early records are hand written and are often hard for us to read today. Penmanship, how letters and numbers were formed, and the abbreviations commonly in use at the time can confuse. In addition, inks often fade or blur through time. This is where a good guide to genealogical research helps. When you are choosing a guide for purchase or loan from a library, check to see if it has a section on handwriting that will help you to decipher the records you will need to examine.

Location:

Location is important in finding birth and death records, wills, tax, and land records which are excellent sources of information. Knowing where the family is or was located helps narrow the search. County boundaries were not always set in stone. For official records be aware of any changes that occurred in the area in which your family resided. The farther back the search goes the less centralized the information is going to be.

Lancaster County was formed in May of 1729 from part of Chester County. Any official county records preceding May 1729, if still in existence, will be found in Chester County.

Birth and Death Records:

Since 1907, birth and death records have been kept at the state level by the Pennsylvania Department of Vital Records. However, before that they were kept by the counties themselves. In Lancaster, the county did not begin to reliably record births until 1881 and deaths until 1894. Birth records from 1881 to 1907 are housed at the Register of Wills. Death records from 1894 to 1907 are housed in the County Archives.

Births before 1881 are recorded primarily in church records such as baptisms. Death records before 1894 are likewise recorded in church records in the form of burials. Knowing the geographic location will allow one to focus on churches most likely to have the information needed. Unfortunately, some of the older church records are no longer available due to fire, damp conditions, mice and insects. There is also sadly the simple fact that some of the churches no longer exist. The congregations moved or died off leaving no one to house or care for the records. To help track down existing records in Lancaster County there is a book entitled *Churches and Cemeteries of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: a Complete Guide* by A. Hunter Rineer, Jr.

Marriage Records:

Early marriage records can be found in churches, city archives, and county courthouses. Where you find them is dependent on how settled the area was where your ancestors lived in at the time of their marriage. Cities and towns during colonial times were more apt to have a clerk and laws dictating marriage. In rural

areas marriages were more likely to be recorded in churches. Lancaster County, for example, has only maintained an official record of marriages since 1885; before that year church records and family papers are the best sources. Do not be alarmed if the only record is the family papers. Early settlement placed people outside the reach of county offices and clergy. In these situations it was not usual for a couple to live together and have children until a traveling clergyman could marry them often leaving no official record.

The Lancaster Public Library and the Lancaster County Historical Society both have volumes that selectively index early church records of births, baptisms, marriages, and burials. The indexes vary in their approach and do not include every extant church in the county. Also, if one of the individuals getting married was from another county, the marriage may have taken place in that county. Two other excellent sources of church records is the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society and the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society; however, both focus on member churches and individuals.

Deeds and Property Tax Records:

Deeds are records involving the transfer of property from one individual to another. Property can refer to items such as land, livestock, and unfortunately slaves. Deeds list such useful information as the seller and the buyer, other family members, their relationships, employment, and where the individuals lived. Such information can clarify relationships and help differentiate between individuals with the same name.

Deeds and property tax records can place a person or family in a certain area at a certain time. These records can also provide information on the family's economic standing and how it changed over the years.

If your ancestors were the first to settle in an area, finding the original land grant or deed will depend on whether the land they settled was part of the original colonies (either one of the colonies or land that was territory of one of the colonies), a nation prior to becoming part of the United States, or a territory claimed by the United States.

For Example:

- Pennsylvania began as a land grant to the Penn family. The Penn family then deeded parts of this grant to others for settlement. These original records would exist in the Pennsylvania State Archives.
- Texas also would maintain original land grants in state records because it was the Republic of Texas before joining the United States, as was Hawaii before its annexation.
- The state of Wyoming's original grants would be recorded in federal records as the land was United States property prior to the grant.

After the initial grant all subsequent deeds and property tax records are maintained at the county level. In Lancaster County, the records after 1729 are kept at the county courthouse. Any records before 1729 will be found in Chester County. Indexes to a portion of the records exist at the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Lancaster Public Library.

Wills and Probate Records:

Wills and probate records can give the researcher a glimpse into the lives of their ancestors. Wills are personal documents that provide a sense of who and what was important in a person's life. The researcher can find the names of spouses, children, and other family members, as well as property both land and goods. Probate records include estate inventories, guardianship decisions regarding minor children, appointment of executors and individuals to manage properties for minors, expenses, and disputes.

In Lancaster County, wills and probate records have been kept since 1730 at the Lancaster County Courthouse and are currently housed in the Office of Records and Archives Services. The Lancaster County Historical Society has an index of wills covering the 1729 to 1947 period as well as microfilm copies of wills from 1729 to 1908. Prior to May 1729 any wills or probate records for the area would be found in Chester County.

Military Records:

The two types of military records of interest to genealogist are service and pension records. Military records for the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War are housed at the National Archives in Washington, DC and often microfilm copies are available in State Archives. Records from later conflicts such as War World I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War are maintained at the National Personnel Records Center and available only to the service personnel themselves (if alive) or their immediate relatives (if dead).

Information on an individual's military service many exist in other sources, such as the DAR Patriot Index, local histories and compilations, and unit histories.

For information on Lancaster County individuals who served in earlier wars:

- *DAR Patriot Index*
- *History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* by Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans
- *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5* by Samuel Bates

These sources and others are available at the Lancaster Public Library and the Lancaster County Historical Society.

Court and Courthouse Records:

County courthouses maintain records of civil and criminal cases, naturalizations, licenses, county business, etc. All of these records can be used to clarify a family's location, relationships, and standing in a community. These records, unfortunately, are not always easy to find or access as they are not always indexed. It is generally better to focus on the more readily available information at least initially.

Passenger Lists and Immigration Records:

The goal for many researchers is to find the ancestor who first arrived in North America and where they came from. Prior to 1820 there was no official record kept of passengers, some ship captains recorded names some did not. After 1820, ships captains were to keep a record of passengers and the port where they got on the ship and the port where they got off and give it to the customs office at the ships first port of entry, but whether the passenger was an immigrant or returning citizen is not recorded. In 1891, the United States government created the Immigration Service, which took over the enforcement of US immigration policy. The next year the Federal Immigration Center opened on Ellis Island. All subsequent passenger lists and immigrations records can be found on microfilm in the National Archives and can be accessed through the Family History Center.

Over the years some effort has been made to collect, transcribe, and index existing passenger lists. Printed compilations vary greatly in their scope and accuracy. One of the best indexes of these materials is *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index: A Guide to Published Arrival Records of About 500,000 Passengers Who Came to the United State and Canada in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries* by P. William Filby. It has been continually updated and contains over two million names. The Lancaster County Historical Society maintains a copy of this work in their collection along with other indexes and compilations.

United States Census:

The Constitution of the United States of America stipulates that there is to be a census of the population taken every ten years. The first United States Census was taken in the year 1790. It lists the head of household by name and provides a simple head count of males, females and slaves. Over the years the U.S. Census has changed to better reflect the make up of the United States population. The censuses from 1800 to 1840 continued to list only the name of the head of house, but began to introduce additional age categories. It is not until 1850 that each individual in a household is named, as well as, other information such as their occupation, age, and place of birth.

The U.S. Census can provide the family researcher with a wonderful amount of information. It can also be frustrating. The census can provide a family's location in terms of state, county, and township and, in later years can also provide street and house numbers. Unfortunately, because of its focus on the "head of household" until 1850, it is difficult to research female members of a family and children prior to 1850, and close to impossible to trace African American families or individuals held in slavery. Unless the female was listed as head of household or the African American was a freedman with their own household they will not be listed by name. The 1850 and 1860 census did include lists of individuals held in slavery.

Sadly, sections of the U.S. Census have suffered the same fate as other paper documents. Approximately one third of the 1790 census was lost to fire during the War of 1812 which also claimed parts of the 1800 and 1810 censuses. A fire in 1921 destroyed almost all of the census records for 1890. Smaller sections have been lost from 1820 to 1870.

The methods used to take the census are not perfect. Early on, large areas of land were covered by a single individual in one day. Entire homesteads were easily missed. Weather sometimes made it impossible to travel. Pages were lost or damaged. Some people were away from home or would not answer the door. Sometimes the census takers did not speak the language and communication was impossible. Some people just will not be found.

Census records for Lancaster County are available at the Lancaster Public Library and the Lancaster County Historical Society on microfilm. To access the census for the rest of Pennsylvania and the other 49 states individuals with valid Lancaster County Library System library cards can visit either the Lancaster Public Library's website (www.lancaster.lib.pa.us) or that of the Library System of Lancaster County (www.lancasterlibraries.org) to use *Heritage Quest*. *Heritage Quest* is also available at the Lancaster County Historical Society. The census records currently available for researchers are all existing records up until 1930. All information after 1930 is sealed for 72 years for privacy reasons.

Heritage Quest can also provide the user with local histories from across the United States and access (for a fee) to articles from genealogical magazines.

Newspapers:

Current newspapers contain notices of births, marriages, and deaths. However, earlier newspapers are not as informative. Due to the high infant mortality rate until around the mid-1900s, birth announcements are relatively rare. Before the late 1800s death notices only included the name and date of death. At that time, the obituary as it is today began to appear. Obituaries often list the names of parents, spouse, and children and often include whether they are still alive at that time and where they live. The difficulty with newspapers is that they can only print the information they are given, thus, accuracy can be a problem. Also they do go out of business and it can be difficult to track down copies both paper and microfilm.

Lancaster Public Library and the Lancaster County Historical Society both maintain a collection of the Lancaster Intelligencer, the Lancaster New Era, and the Sunday News on microfilm. There are also several city newspapers that are no longer published in the microfilm collections. In addition, the Manheim Heritage Center has a collection of Manheim newspapers. If a newspaper is needed that is not contained in one of these collections, it may be available from the State Library of Pennsylvania through Interlibrary Loan.

Interlibrary Loan:

Some materials, that are not available in the various genealogy collections in Lancaster County, can be requested through Interlibrary Loan. Unfortunately, many of the materials of interest to genealogy research are assigned to local history collections or genealogy collections that other libraries will not loan. The Lancaster Public Library provides Interlibrary Loan services for its patrons. The library makes every effort to obtain requested material without charge; however, in the end this is up to the lending library.

Genealogy and the Internet:

The internet has opened up a whole new world for individuals researching their family trees. Sites vary from fee based databases to personal websites. These sites can provide the researcher with a great deal of information; unfortunately, not all of the information is accurate. When using an internet source it is important to remember that the internet is open for anyone to post their information. The researcher can not know how careful the person was at gathering and evaluating their data. A good source will include a citation that will tell the research where the information came from thus allowing the information to be checked. There is also the problem of transcribing errors. Whenever information is copied from its original source there is a possibility that text and dates could be changed. As with any other source, one should always try to verify the information using another source.

Some Internet Sites:

- Genealogy.com – offers a collection of different databases available separately, fee based monthly or yearly.
- Ancestry.com – offers a collection of different databases, fee based monthly or yearly.
- RootsWeb.com – associated with Ancestry.com, some free material.
- OliveTreeGenealogy.com – houses a collection of free passenger lists, provides links to fee based databases.
- Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet – offers various topics from how to start your research to doing research and finding resources in other countries.
- www.ellislandrecords.org – provides access to immigration records.

The Lancaster Public Library provides its patrons with internet access.

Are we there yet?

This is just a brief sample of the material available and a very short explanation on how and where to find the information you need; many more sources of records exist from the federal, state and local level both public and private. Do not let yourself be frightened off. It can be fun to find out where and who you came from. Every family is unique with its own set of heroes and scoundrels.

Compiled by:
E. Margaret Coldren
Lancaster Public Library
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