

Finding the Feminine: In Search of Our Female Ancestors

Lisa Van Gemert, M.Ed.
email: lisa@vangemerts.com

Why is it difficult?

Coverture (the inclusion of a woman in the legal person of her husband upon marriage)

Four-Step Process:

1. Begin with what you know
 - a. all of her names/nicknames
 - b. timeline of her life
 - c. journals/recipes/stories/Bible
 - d. general knowledge of family and area
2. Use this information to create a life sketch
3. Make a list of possible records that may exist (use Source Checklist)
4. Begin your research, tracking against your list and taking notes. Add any findings to the life sketch. Add each piece into FamilySearch under "Other Information." Use "Custom Event" if the information you are adding doesn't fit a typical category.

Pure Gold: Marriage Records

- Carefully consider the location and the implications of where she may have married.
 - Wikipedia for quick look at locality
 - David Rumsey Map Collection <https://www.davidrumsey.com/>
 - Randy Majors Maps <https://www.randymajors.org/>
- When they married is as important as where
 - Before Mid-1800s
 - intentions (civil)
 - banns (church)
 - bonds (Southern/Mid-Atlantic states, typically)
 - Usually the people are the groom and bride's father
 - consent papers for underage
 - clerk's cards in Vermont (love!)
 - After Mid-1800s: License!!!
 - If you find a license, mine it for all it's worth (please consider transcription)
 - Ask lots of questions of the document and the record source
 - Be sure to check to see if all information from the record is on the index
- Family Bibles
 - look for things stuck inside
 - use handwriting to give a clue to the time period
- Don't let a little French scare you off. Learn some words

Research Silver: Census Records

- Important Dates:
 - 1850 - members of household listed
 - 1870 - African-Americans enumerated by name
 - 1880 - relationships to head of household listed
- English census records from 1841 - 1911 have relationships
- If using pre-1850 US records, follow the tick marks over time
- Look for parents on later census records living with your person or their siblings
- Look at census records for neighbors (takes forever...)
- Don't disregard other relationships like cousins

Other Records

- Newspapers
 - social events/marriages
 - crime
 - obituaries (look for names of surviving brothers!)
 - published family histories
- If the family was from New England prior to 1700, you need *New England Marriages Prior to 1700* by Clarence Almon Torrey (American Ancestors has it. It's a source list, not a source itself.)
- Land records (hard to search, but can be amazing)
- Pension records:
 - All wars through Spanish-American [for Civil War, Union only]
 - Held by National Archives
 - Access Revolutionary War and 1812 at Fold3 (free access at FHC)
- Things related to death
 - headstones (inscriptions and location - proximity tells a story)
 - cemetery/funeral home records
 - emblems or symbols on headstone
 - probate records
 - not just parents (so lucky if you find this)
 - sometimes a woman's will has a brother
 - neighbor's wills (they could be her parents)
 - not all records are digitized! Contact local historical and genealogical societies.
- Social Security Applications ask for the mother's maiden name.
- Random, yet possible
 - Did she belong to any organizations or societies?
 - Genealogical society newsletters can be magical.
 - Doctor or midwife records?
 - Immigration records (who traveled with her?)
 - Look at what she left behind (common words or phrases, family lore)

Go in Different Directions

- Go through the husband (He could have worked with or lived near her family)
- Go sideways. Siblings often have very different experiences and records.
- Go down. Look at the birth, marriage, and death records for the children.

Other Ideas:

- local histories
- mug books (stop throwing shade)
- area settlement patterns (hat tip to Ann Lathers)
- look for births of people with same first name and use process of elimination(hat tip to Ann Lathers)
- Use PERSI (Periodical Source Index - available at Find My Past [Family History Center])
- DNA

If you cannot find her name, find her life.