HOMESPUN & CALICO
Researching Our Foremothers

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"Well-behaved women seldom make history"…Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

There are two basic categories of sources you will seek in the course of researching female ancestors:

those created by a woman herself
those created about her

Sources created ***by*** women include:

Letters

- usually contained news items about births, marriages and deaths in family

Diaries and Journals

- diaries tend to record people's feelings
- journals are more likely to enumerate activities and events
- diaries are autobiographies of ordinary women
    - may be the only existing records of their lives
- read carefully the notations on the diarist's birthday and at the beginning of a new year

Relatives' and Friends' Letters and Diaries

- women usually spent more time with other women than they did with their husbands
    - female relatives and friends attended births, marriages and deaths

How do you find these items?

- contact all living relatives
- place a query in one of the local genealogy society quarterlies
- write or visit state historical society libraries or archives, university and public libraries that may have local history or special collections.
    - ask if they have any "papers" for your ancestor or her relatives or neighbors
    - women's "papers" could end up anywhere. How do you find them?
        - start with National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

Family Bibles

- women most likely recorded family vital records in a Bible
    - men and women who applied for military pensions had to prove births of their children and/or their own marriage. They may have torn out pertinent pages from the family Bible since there was no way to make a copy.

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Family Artifacts and Heirlooms

- sewing was part of women's daily work and pastime. Check for samplers
- antique jewelry – check all jewelry for any inscriptions. Lockets may contain photographs or a lock of hair. Mourning jewelry was often created from the deceased's hair and made into rings, broaches and bracelets, or even wreaths.

Sources created ***about*** women include:
Daughter: check for records of her parents – wills.
Wife or widow: check for records where her husband names her – pensions
Widow: her legal and social status changed, so she may create records under her own name
Mother: look for documents on her children, such as death certificates
Grandmother: she may be living with one of her grandchildren and can be found on the census
Sister: you may find mention of her in a sibling's diary
Niece: she may be an heir to an unmarried uncle
Granddaughter: she may inherit something from a grandparent
Friend: she may be discussed in a letter
Neighbor: she may own the adjoining property and be named in a land deed

Published Family Histories

- check to see if someone has already published a family history.
    - Many old New England families have printed genealogies

Cemetery Records and Tombstone Inscriptions

- cemeteries may sometimes be the only place where you will find proof that a female existed – especially if she died young
    - sometimes young wives who died within the first few years of marriage were buried with their own families instead of their husband's
    - if a mother and baby died during childbirth, they were usually buried together

Church Records

- check if local churches kept baptismal records
    - These can predate state birth certificates.
    - Quaker women were very active in their religion.
    - Look for religious holidays and observances your family has celebrated. Do they stem from a certain religion?

Census Records

- between 1790 and 1840, censuses listed only heads of household. Sometimes this was a woman.
- for later entries, look carefully for all censuses your ancestor would have appeared on.
    - was her husband listed as disabled, perhaps from a farming accident or military service?
    - were any children recorded as deaf, blind, idiotic or insane, or having another physical or mental handicap?
    - were there aged parents or other dependent relatives living in her home?
    - was there a servant living in the household?
    - how many children did she have? How closely spaced are their births?
    - if she was an immigrant, did she speak English? What was her native language?
    - did her husband have slaves? Were there mulatto slaves mentioned?
    - who were the women living in the household listed before and after your ancestor? Could they have been friends or relatives?

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Passenger Arrival Lists

- many women came to the colonies as ex-convicts, petty thieves, prostitutes, vagrants and indentured servants.
    - indentured servants worked off the indenture over a period of seven years, unless she became pregnant. Usually one more year was added.
- many Catholic Italians and French used maiden names in all legal documents. When traveling, children were listed by their father's surname, but mother was listed by maiden name.
    - if maiden name is unknown, look at indexes for children under father's surname. You'll find her listed with them.

City and Rural Directories

- most city directories were first published during late 19th and early 20th centuries.
    - generally list names of adults, including adult children living with parents.

Voter Lists and Registrations

- women were granted right to vote in 1920, later in some southern states.

Military Records and Pensions

- women have served in the military throughout history – nurses, spies, disguised as men, etc.
- many women continued to pursue pensions and/or bounty lands long after their husband's death.

Orphan's and Guardianship Records

- when a woman was left a widow with minor children, the children were considered orphans and in need of a legal guardian.
    - guardian was almost always a male relative who would ensure child's welfare until reaching majority.
    - even fathers of motherless children sought guardianship, usually because his children were entitled to an inheritance (mother's child).
- if both parents were living, guardian may have been appointed to protect an inheritance from another relative.
    - many are recorded in probate court.

Land Records

- some of the earliest records you will find are land records.
    - even when courthouses burned, many deeds were recorded since land ownership was sacred.
- since married women were "covered" by their husbands (femes covert), they could not legally engage in contracts or land transactions without their husband's approval.
    - transacting her own land sales.
- watch if a man, or a husband and wife, sold property to a woman, or a husband and wife for one dollar (or some other small amount). Sellers (grantors) could be woman's parents or other close relatives.

Marriage Records

- in some states, no license was required for marriage.
    - many took out a license or a bond, but never made it to the altar.
    - the groom and either father or brother of bride posted bond.
        - if a woman posted bond, it may be bride's mother (father deceased).
- in colonial marriage records, you may find a man marrying a *Mrs. Mary Smith*.
    - does not necessarily mean she was married previously.

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- the term *Mrs.*, which is originally an abbreviation for *Mistress*, used in both married and unmarried cases. Denotes a social position.

Divorce Records

- in our nation's early history, more men than women filed for divorce.
  - after Revolution, women petitioners outnumbered men.
- Indiana was reputed as a divorce mill – easy divorce laws and short residency.
  - migratory divorce was common. Look for Gretna Greens.

Wills and Probate

- wills of fathers and husbands are important documents.
- always check for *probate packet*.
  - may contain papers for each step in the probate process: inventory, estate distribution, whereabouts of heirs, etc.

Court records

- why would couples would willingly admit to court they engaged in premarital sex?
  - many New England churches would not baptize a child born less than seven months after marriage unless couple publicly confessed.
- illegitimate children were a financial burden on community, so officials tried to coerce a mother to name the father of her child.
  - check for these records in bastardy court.

School Records

- most girls in rural communities attended one-room schoolhouses at some time in their lives. Education was not always a big priority for girls.
  - middle – upper class girls attended boarding schools.
  - check internet for availability of these records.

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NUCMC: https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/

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An extra bonus from one of my other webinar handouts:

Substitutes for Vital Records

The US Federal Census

- Every one your family appeared in.
- Can lead to other records.

Mortality Schedules

- The year before 1850-1880 census.

Local Church or Religious Records

- Often began before civil registration.

Christening and Baptismal Records

- May be the only record of a child's birth.
- These events may take place through adulthood.

Cemetery Records

- Check local funeral homes to find the owners of local cemeteries.
- Towns, cities, churches, and privately owned.

Tax Records

- One of the most underused records.
- Shows location and financial status.
- Check every year.
- May see when they reached taxable age, moved, or died.

Newspapers

- Many are online, many more are not.
- Small-town newspapers are especially "newsy".

Town Records

- Common in New England.

Journals, Letters, and Diaries

- Look for entries near monumental events, i.e. birthdays, New Year's Day, beginning of war.
- May be housed in manuscript collections or vertical files – Libraries and Archives.

Obituaries and Funeral Records

- Dissect every bit of information found.
- Keep a blank family group record nearby.

City and Rural Directories

- Look at each one your ancestor may have appeared in.
- May help to determine death.
- Earliest date to 1700's – Boston.

Military Records

- Pension records are rich!
- Obtain the entire file.

Draft Records

- Began during the Civil War.

Land Records

- Follow the money!
- Look at all neighbors.
- In conjunction with probate packets, look at estate inventory and sale.
- May include names of slaves.

Maps

- Begin a collection of maps for your research areas.

Naturalization Records

- Look at 1900-1940 for abbreviations.

Probate Records

- Not just wills – the whole packet.

County Histories

- Commonly called "Mug Books".
- Don't rely wholly on the information, but use as a springboard to other records.

School Records

- Many include birth date of students.
- Most include names of parents.

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