

Southern Research Using Alternative Record Sources

Alternative records are defined as documents or records that provide the same or similar types of information that would normally be contained in the more common primary genealogical records. Some professionals refer to these alternative record types as “corroborating testimony”. Alternative records may not always be as detailed and reliable as primary sources, but they can serve as guides to other localities and record types which might have been overlooked or ignored or were destroyed by fires or natural disasters.

Locating genealogical information in southern records can be a challenge even under the best of circumstances. Consistent civil record keeping practices varied widely throughout the various regions. This problem persisted until the early 1900s in many areas and even later in some.

Another issue was the Civil War. Many records were destroyed as conditions deteriorated towards the end of the war when the outcome became obvious. Sherman’s March to the Sea has been hailed by many as the primary reason, but there were plenty of other situations that were just as devastating to the lack of survival for many record types. Researchers must think outside the box so to speak and look for other sources.

Under most circumstances, once a researcher verifies that a specific ancestor or family of interest lived in a particular county at a given time period, they would visit the website for the county courthouse to see what information is available prior to a visit or contacting them by mail. For post 1920 records, that would be considered the correct strategy most people would follow. For records generated prior to 1920, researchers should be aware that a growing number of southern county courthouses have transferred many of their “historical holdings to a variety of offsite locations, mostly libraries that have Manuscript or Special Collections, or State and Local History Collections that would include:

- 1. Public Libraries**
- 2. State Libraries and Archives**
- 3. College and University Academic Libraries**
- 4. Large Historical and Genealogical Societies that have repositories in local large Public Libraries**

This same issue also applies to many churches. Many of the small to medium historical churches of multiple denominations have either merged with others or have closed permanently. In most but not all cases, many of these “historical” records have been transferred to Religious Theological Libraries or Seminaries of the same denomination. Where none of these exist, they may have been transferred to one of the nearest College or University Academic Libraries.

Researchers preparing to access any type records in local courthouses are well advised to contact and/or join the local historical or genealogical society in the area of research prior to beginning the research process. For a donation or joining the society, many will have a

member accompany you to the courthouse to assist with research which offers the following major advantages

- a. They know the layout.**
- b. They know what records are available.**
- c. They know the best courthouse staff to work with and in some cases, who NOT to approach.**
- d. May sound funny but it may be the difference between a successful research and a wasted effort that may cost you time and money with no results.**

When using courthouse sources or standard genealogical sources such as the federal or state censuses, birth certificates, marriage records, census returns, and death certificates, etc. fail to achieve success, researchers must think outside the box so to speak and look for other sources. Because of the lax record keeping practices throughout the South prior to the 1900s coupled with the destruction caused by the Civil War, researchers must look for alternative record sources.

Many of these alternative record types such as personal manuscripts and oral histories have ended up in published or unpublished manuscripts and housed in Manuscript and Special Collections held within a variety of libraries and archives. The terms Manuscripts and Special Collections can be inter-changeable depending on the institution. Facilities housing these types of collections would include the following throughout every state not only in the South but nationwide as well:

- 1. Academic**
- 2. Public**
- 3. Private**
- 4. State Libraries**
- 5. State Archives**
- 6. Religious Theological Libraries/Seminaries**
- 7. Personal and Estate Collections (Belonging to Private Individuals)**

These materials often contain significant amounts of genealogical and historical information. Indexing is spotty which requires time and patience to utilize. Most archives and libraries (public, private, and academic) now offer finding aids in print or online to facilitate usage. Published or non-published manuscripts are original records and serve as primary first-hand documentation and evidence of events that shape the development of a society, community, and/or family. They may have been created or compiled by:

- a. Individuals**
- b. Organizations**
- c. Institutions**

The main purpose of these materials are to document important events that occurred within a community, individual, entities, or family for any given time or reason. Many of these materials may be the only surviving types of records or what would pass for official

records within some communities for various time periods. Published or non-published manuscripts can be in multiple print or online formats and handwritten or typed.

Some examples of “alternative record sources” that have proven to be effective for southern researchers include the following:

Autobiographies	Memoirs
Bibles (Family)	Military Records
Biographies	Mining Records
Business Reports	Oral Histories
Church Records	Newspaper Clippings
College and University History	Photographs
Court Records	Political Papers
Contracts	Railroad Records
Diaries, Correspondence, Personal Notes	School Records
Family Histories (Published or Individual Files)	Scrapbooks
Family Papers	Slave Records Narratives, Interviews
Funeral Home Records	Social Service Organizations
Genealogists Papers	Store or Business Ledgers
Graduation Program Books	State and Local Histories
Journals	Vital Records
Letters	Voice Recordings
Maps	Year Books

For a more detailed discussion of alternative records, please consult our companion handout *Alternative Records and Genealogical Research*. Copies may be obtained by contacting Bryan L. Mulcahy at bmulcahy@leegov.com.

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NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers Regional Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.

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