

Collateral Ancestors: Researching siblings, in-laws, and other family members

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Many researchers dedicate their time to tracking only direct-line ancestors. In doing so, they may miss valuable bits of information and some interesting stories!

If you can't find Grandpa or Grandma anywhere in the records, try searching for the aunts and uncles. Birthdates, marriages, occupations, and places of residence could turn up among the records of your collateral ancestors.

You will want to focus on the standard record groups and sources:

1. Census records (especially 1850-1930)
2. Deeds and other land records <
3. Probate records (wills and estates)
4. Military pensions and service records
5. Newspaper obituaries
6. Birth and baptismal records
7. Death records
8. Bible records
9. County and local histories and biographies
10. City directories
11. Court Records.

1. Census Records: Check all years, but 1850 – 1930 will provide more information. Check the census for his brothers and married sisters (if you know their husbands' surnames). Check every spelling variation you can think of for first AND last names. Don't ignore the possibility that initials may have been used. Pay attention to any variations that are close. Handwriting could make an "I" look like a "J."

If you think you have found the parents of your ancestor but you cannot confirm them because your ancestor died before county death records were recorded, and you cannot find the family group in the 1850 census, check the "possible siblings" in the census records. You may find an elderly parent, niece, or nephew (your guy's or gal's kids), or his widow living in the household.

2. Deeds (Land records): Check the grantor and grantee indexes for every spelling variation you can think of for the surname. Do not ignore dates 10 – 30 years beyond your period of focus. Some of those land deals may not have been recorded right away. Check in-laws, neighbors, etc. – Great-grandma's sister's husband's farm may have bordered your family's farm. Dower right deeds may give you a clue to Grandma's maiden name. (*dower* is the wife's portion of property). You may find clues to the wife's maiden name, siblings, missing/unknown children, and proof of parent – child

relationship.

3. Wills and Probate Records: Check those spelling variations in the probate indexes! You may be looking for Henry Breedlove, but check out Solomon Breedlove's will; he might have mentioned Henry and how they were related.

Check out related families' estates; Grandma might have been an heir! Check out 2nd and 3rd spouses in the files. Children from the widow's previous marriage might be named. Do not bypass "miscellaneous files." They might contain unrecorded wills that will identify family members and lead to seemingly unrelated probate files.

If you can't find anything on your 4th great-grandmother, and her brother died testate, check for the inventory of his estate! You never know!

4. Military Records: A soldier's pension file may contain family information, places of residence, fellow soldiers or commanding officers who testified to military service (and may have been a neighbor or relative in peace time), when he arrived in the area, and a description of the military service. A widow's pension file should contain much of the same information as the soldier's pension file, in addition to death record of soldier. A soldier's service record: should contain much of the information listed above, possibly including a physical description of the soldier.

Applications to a State Soldiers' Home may include family members, military service, places of residence, biographical information ([profession, family's arrival in area, birth date and place, etc.).

Bounty Land Warrants (Land given to veterans in lieu of pay for military service) may contain family information and the transfer of the land within the family.

5. Newspaper obituaries: Newspaper obituaries can be a gold mine of data. Names of parents and possibly the maiden name of the deceased's mother may be given. You could find the names of siblings, including married names of sisters. Birth date, birth place, and date of death are likely to be included. You might find out where the deceased's parents came from.

6. Birth and Baptismal/Christening Records: Grandma Hattie may just have her baptism recorded in the church records, but Uncle Earl has his parents listed!! Look for ancestor names as a witness in baptism records. The witnesses were often family members. Parents names, including mother's maiden name, place of birth may be found on birth certificate or registration.

PROBLEM!!! WPA indexes may only list "male" or "female" for child, so double check the birth dates you

have for the aunts and uncles! AND . . . watch for spelling variations and typos!!! (Albert Smyther might be your great-uncle Albert Smythen.)

7. Death Records: These documents may contain the following information: date and place (if known) of birth; name of father and mother (with maiden name); name of spouse (often wife's maiden name); cause of death; witness (generally child or sibling of deceased); and residence at time of death. Be aware of the fact that the informant (person providing "factual" data) may be incorrect in providing some of the dates and places.

8. Bible Records: Even though the Family Bible may have belonged to a great-aunt, you may get some valuable dates and relationships from the entries. You could find the following: parents and children named with date of birth and/or baptism; death dates recorded for those dying before person recording information; marriage dates and name of spouse are often recorded for parents and, at least, the recorder. (Perhaps all of the kids, if you are lucky.) You may find bits and pieces of family information (year of immigration, country of origin, the occasional pedigree chart, etc.) recorded along the borders of the pages.

Wouldn't it be nice if our ancestors wrote the place of birth on those Bible pages? (Then again, they knew where they were.)

9. County and Local Histories and Biographies: Your ancestor may not have achieved the prominence to have his/her biography printed in the circa 1880 county history, but he/she might be mentioned in the bio of a child, sibling, son-in-law, nephew, neighbor, business partner, town founder, or other person of note.

Check out the history of the time period your ancestor arrived in the county. The name might be listed among early settlers, taxpayers, voters, etc. Once again, check those spelling variations. Jakob Smidt might be your Grandma Greta Schmidt's baby brother Jacob.

Look for relatives and neighbors on militia and regular military service rosters. Someone might have missed Grandpa Zeke while indexing, or recorded him as Zack.

10. City Directories: These wonderful predecessors of the telephone book can provide you with all sorts of terrific clues and data. The first entry for the family will help you determine their approximate arrival in the area. Familial relationships can be established. Chances are the four Joneses residing at 135 N. Main St. are related! You may get an idea as to when a male ancestor died or a marriage connection: "widow of____" is a frequent entry. Occupations or places of business (including advertisements) are included in the entries. The lack of an entry may help determine approximate time of death or departure from city. (Check a few more

directories after the name vanishes – your guy may have been missed in 1910, but turn up again in 1912.) Track movement of family within the city. Directories include city maps. AND . . . don't forget those spelling variations!!!

11. Court Records: Litigation was frequent in the early years of Colonial America and the United States. (Like it's not now!) Family members could turn up as plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, justices, etc. A court case could give relationship between individuals in a case or identify parents.

Orphan's Court records (refers to lower court, not parentless waifs) often contain actions on estate settlements, guardianship, and other actions that could identify relationships between people.

In some locales marriages, deeds, and other events/items not normally associated with courtroom activity may be found in these records. You may not be interested in Great-uncle Max, but his records may contain a reference to a long elusive date or event that you desperately need to complete your family group sheet. Besides, you may find out some really interesting facts about the extended family to share with your relatives. Take the time to research those collateral ancestors!

I am a retired teacher and began researching about 16 years ago. I was curious about the national origin of the Prall surname and no one in the family was able to help. Things quickly got out of hand. I have traveled to ten states to do onsite research and have attended numerous regional and national conferences, including the Stamford Institute of Genealogical and Historical Research. I am also a five year attendee of the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy. In addition, I am putting together a series of presentations of various aspects of research.