

Breathing New Life into Your Boring Ancestors

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Genealogists who have been doing genealogy research for any length of time will tell you that they hit brick walls, get frustrated by the lack of available records and yes, they even say that their ancestors get “boring”.

Boring ancestors are those in our family lines that we just can’t find much information or they seemed to not have done much during their lives to generate records. We all have them but the best way to deal with these types of ancestors is to think outside of the box and use the tips and tricks in this presentation.

Many times, we have gaps of missing information associated with your ancestors. Using archives and the records they hold can fill in those gaps. Moving beyond the basic census records and vital records to unique records and records that are not online will help you fill in those gaps in your ancestor’s timeline.

Visiting and contacting local and state archives is key in finding records about our ancestors that are not online and that can fill in the gaps in our ancestor’s timeline.

One of the ways to fill in those gaps is to create a timeline.

What is a Timeline?

If you are not constructing a timeline for your ancestor, you are missing a key component of genealogy research. A timeline is easy to build and will help any genealogist see the holes in their research and what records or information that is needed to tell more of your ancestor’s story and bring them back to life.

A timeline is a chronological listing of the events of your ancestor’s life. A timeline usually starts with the birth of the ancestor and ends with the death of that ancestor. The information that goes in-between those events could be anything. Normally, the events listed on a timeline consist of the date of the event, what the event was and any other pertinent information about the event.

Many people choose to include historical events that happened during their ancestor's life such as World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, etc. You could also include local events that might have affected your ancestor. Anything that your ancestor lived through and could have been affected by or the event can put their life into perspective is always good to include in the timeline.

Between the Censuses

Census records are one of the first and basic record groups that genealogists seek out and collect for their ancestor. In the United States, the U.S. Federal Population Census was taken every 10 years starting in 1790.

A lot can happen to an ancestor in those 10 years and there could be records to tell you all about it. What are some of the records that can be in archives to fill in that 10-year gap between the census:

- Tax Records**: A great source of genealogical information and are usually collected each year. Some tax records are online but not all.

- Deed Records**: Deeds could have been generated during this 10-year span when your ancestor was purchasing or selling property. Again, some deed records are online but not all.

- Birth, Marriage, and Death**: A birth, marriage or death could have occurred in-between the census years. Seeking out vital records, probate records and obituaries will help fill in the gaps. Also, don't forget to search for children that were born and died during those 10 years. Many genealogists don't think to look for those children that never show up on a census record but show up in other records that can be found at an archive.

- Court Records**: Any number of court proceedings could have taken place in-between the census years and those records can be found at an archive.

- School Records**: There were records generated year after year by the school system. Children's class attendance, report cards, yearbooks are all great records to locate. If you ancestor didn't attend school, maybe they are mentioned in School Board Minutes as the person who delivered the coal to the schoolhouses, lodged a complaint about how their child was treated at school, served on the school board, etc.

These are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to record sources that can be found that were recorded in-between the census.

Why Look in an Archive?

Archives, libraries, historical societies, genealogical societies, university archives and museums house records that are not online or even on microfilm.

- Archives receive records donations all the time from individuals that have unique records.
- Most archives understand the importance of historical and genealogical records and will maintain a facility that collects, stores, and preserves these types of records.
- To accomplish a “Reasonably Exhaustive Search”, archives must be on the to-do list.

Unique Records in an Archive

Archives have some of the most unique records collections. Many archives are striving to put as much of their records collections online, there are still vast amounts of records that are sitting on shelves for researchers to discover them.

Some of the more unique records that can be found in an archive and should be research by genealogists are:

Vertical Files:

Vertical Files are unique, and many genealogists don't know about them or know to ask about them.

- A hodgepodge of miscellaneous records.
- Arranged in file folders by Surname or Subject name
- Stored in filing cabinets in back rooms. An index should be available.

Manuscript Collections:

A collection of personal papers, family papers, business records, etc.

- A **MUST** for every genealogist to access and do research.

- The most underused records collections in genealogy research.
- This collection of records is very well organized, cataloged and indexed.
- The Finding Aid is the “road map” to the individual collection.
- Manuscript Collections are stored in back rooms or vaults and must be requested. There should be an index available.

Loose Records:

A collection of working papers belonging to a larger collection of bound records.

- Organized and archives separate from the bound records.
- Additional documents and information that go with the information found in bound volumes of records.
- Examples of loose records are “Loose Marriage Records”, “Loose Court Records”, etc.

Scrapbooks:

Personal books filled with various documents, photos and memorabilia about a person’s life, local events, national events, and memories.

- Scrapbooks are usually archived in Manuscript Collections.
- Scrapbooks can have documents that are unique and never seen.
- Some scrapbooks have journaling included that can provide family information.

Old Letters and Diaries

Old letters and diaries can be a wealth of information for the genealogist. These are some of most personal records that our ancestors could have produced.

- Old letters and diaries will usually be found in Manuscript Collections.
- First-hand accounts of family history can be found in old letters and diaries.

-Births, marriages, deaths and other specific ancestor's dates and events can be reported in old letters and diaries.

Filling in Those Gaps

Using the resources available at various archives will help us fill in the gaps of missing information in our ancestor's timeline. Why settle for the basic information? Let's tell our ancestor's whole story. The more information we can locate and document, the more our ancestors will come alive to us and the more we can appreciate their lives and life story and they won't be boring anymore!