

Using Voting and Election Records to Find Your Ancestor

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Genealogists are always looking for more records to add to their ancestors' life story. Many genealogists never think about voting and election records and the part their ancestors played in the national or local political system. This presentation will show the genealogist what kinds of voting and records could be available to add to their ancestor's timeline.

Why Use Voting Records?

Some reasons why genealogists should be accessing voting records:

- Learn when your ancestor lived in a particular area.
- A great record to fill in the gaps between census records.
- Tell more of your ancestor's life story.

I'm Not Interested in Politics

You might be thinking to yourself "But I'm not interested in politics" and that is perfectly fine. But don't discount your ancestor's interest in politics or voting in the local election. Voting for their favorite candidate or voting on an issue that meant something to them was also part of their life story. In many cases, your ancestor could have been making history with their vote:

- Voting for the President of the United States
- Voting for a State Governor
- Voting as a Woman for the first time
- Voting as an African American for the first time
- Voting for local resolutions and laws to better their community

The Poll Tax

In the United States, payment of a poll tax was a requirement to be able to vote in the upcoming elections. The tax came into play for most states in the late 19th century as part of the Jim Crow Laws. After the right to vote was extended to all

racess, several states enacted a poll tax as a way to restrict voting rights for African Americans, American Indians and poor whites. Eligible voters would pay between \$1.50 and \$1.75. Voters were required to bring their receipt from paying the Poll Tax with them when they voted. The Poll Tax was essentially done away with by a Supreme Court decision in 1964.

Today, genealogists can use these records to document their ancestors, especially during those undocumented years between the census records.

Where to find poll tax records:

- Records vary by state and county, check with local property tax offices, archives and other records repositories to see what is available.
- Poll tax records are usually found in the local property tax records. They are usually part of the total taxes that each person paid each year.
- Even if your ancestor didn't own property, they could still have paid a poll tax.

Voter Registration Records:

Voter Registration Records were used to register voters at each election. If your ancestor voted, they could very well be listed by name in these registers. Information that could be included in these registers:

- Name
- Date of Birth
- Place of Residence
- Naturalization Information
- Actual Signature
- Occupation
- Marital Status
- Information on if they owned land
- What district or area do they live in the county

These are a must to put on your genealogy research "To-Do List".

The Election Worker

Many of our ancestors may have done more than vote in the elections, they may have worked for the polling stations and helped others to cast their vote. Some of our ancestors got more involved and worked the elections. Whether they were a poll worker, election judge, served on the local election board or some other job that helped to make the elections possible, there could be records for their service or job:

- Payroll Records
- Local Election Board Records and Meeting Minutes
- Signed election returns and reports

The Candidate

Maybe your ancestor was an actual candidate during an election. It would be very easy to determine if they were a candidate for President of the United States or for Congress but what about those local and community elections.

- Did they run for Road Commissioner?
- Did they run for School Board Member?
- Did they run for City Alderman or County Commissioner?

Don't think your ancestor didn't run for office, check the records and make sure. You might be surprised!

Women and Suffrage

Women did not receive the right to vote until 1920. Genealogists that have a hard time finding records for their female ancestors might have success researching in voting and election records.

Many women were very vocal with their support of women's suffrage and may have even been part of a local group that was advocating for the right for women to gain the right to vote.

Where Do I Find Voting and Election Records?

- Newspapers
- Manuscript Collections
- Vertical Files
- Local county archives, historical societies, genealogical societies
- State archives, historical societies, genealogical societies
- University and college libraries and archives
- Museums

Some Online Databases to Search for Voting and Election Records

- Internet Archive

<https://archive.org/>

- ArchivGrid

<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>

- Google Books

<https://books.google.com/>

- National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

<http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>

- Chronicling America

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

- Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/>

- U.S. National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/>

- Family Search

<https://www.familysearch.org/>

- MyHeritage

<https://www.myheritage.com/>