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Beyond The Placename

by [Jan McClintock](#)



"Every individual is part and parcel of a great picture of the society in which he lives and acts, and his life cannot be painted without reproducing the picture of the world he lived in."

~Harriet Beecher Stowe

In order to find your ancestors, and to understand their lives, you must know something about the places where they lived and worked:

Geographically, because natural features of the land often suggested the location of settlement, the division of property, and the occupation of its owners;

Spiritually, because people feel most comfortable among those who worship as they do; families and groups might have moved to avoid religious persecution;

Economically, because many place divisions were based on wealth, i.e. uptown vs. the wrong side of the tracks - Madison Avenue vs. the South Side.

But remember, people of your great-grandfather's generation had different ideas about places, of course. When a family went "west," it may have meant Illinois, not Oregon. Try not to make assumptions based on your own, modern knowledge or relative concepts of geography.

CLUSTER GENEALOGY

Do you know who your neighbors are? Are they friends, relatives, or strangers? Your ancestor's neighbors probably had a big affect on their lives, and can be clues to their identity. By using what is commonly called "cluster" genealogy, you find more about the place and time in which your family lived. This process includes researching neighbors, relatives, and other people in your ancestor's lives that could help you identify more family, as well as the kind of life they led.

Here are three reasons to use this process from "The Genealogist's Companion and Sourcebook" by Emily Croom (Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 1994):

- By tracking brothers, sisters, and other relatives of an ancestor, you

often find more information on that ancestor and the parents than by tracing only your direct line.

- To confirm the accuracy of the information you find in any one document. Sometimes a given fact does not appear in more than one place, but a preponderance of evidence may appear from gathering whatever you can find.
- To gather family medical history.

EXAMPLE: My great-grandmother, Minnie Berry Rosengrant, lived with her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Pallman, during part of 1900. She was 18 years old, and was listed in the U.S. Federal Census Schedule living in their household with her 9-month-old son. I later found that she had charged her 17-year-old husband with desertion, and he was living with the sheriff that summer. Yikes! Happily, they had a long and fruitful marriage after getting off on the wrong foot, but the real question was, why did she live with the Pallmans and not another Rosengrant relative, of which there were plenty nearby?

By researching the Pallman family, I discovered that Mrs. Henry Pallman was Minnie's aunt, the sister of her mother, who was not previously identified. She had gone to live with her aunt during the time of trouble, instead of with her husband's family. Smart girl...

To find neighbors, you can sometimes use the federal census schedule by locating the descriptions of the **enumeration districts** for rural areas or ward maps for cities; the [National Archives and Record Administration](#) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have microfilm copies. In cities or large towns, the street address is listed right on the schedule. Relatives and neighbors might also be witnesses to documents like delayed birth registration and marriage certificates; guardianships and adoptions; and especially probate bondsmen.

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

OK, so where do you start? Well, hopefully you now have a placename and the state, possibly taken from a birth certificate or from a family tradition. The first step is to find the **county** (or **town** in New England) and the county seat. In the U.S., *most* jurisdiction of vital records began with the county. The county courthouse is where you can usually find probate and deed records, court documents, tax lists, maps, and some vital records, like birth and death registration and marriage license applications. Some **states** have jurisdiction over these records and will keep them at the state library or state archives; still available, but perhaps not as convenient.

FIND THE COUNTY

The most obvious way to find the present county is to look on a state map

with the county boundaries intact. Your local library will have a U.S. atlas, and each map has an index of locations like towns, cities, parks, rivers, streams and lakes, and mountains. Some general atlases even include populations and zip codes of counties and towns.

A faster (and more fun) way to find the county is to use the U.S. Geological Survey's [Geographic Names Information System](#) web site. This is the definitive U.S. placename finder: you plug in what data you have, and it does the rest.

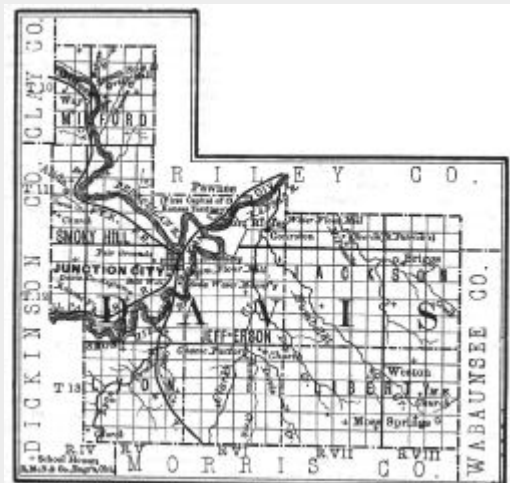
EXAMPLE: I recently found a photo postcard of my great-grandmother's brother, with the name and place of the photograph studio printed across the bottom. The town was given as Red Jacket, Michigan. Searching a U.S. atlas didn't help, as that town wasn't in the index or on the map. By using the above web site, I found out that Red Jacket is not the name of a town, but that of a *mine*, in Houghton County on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan; copper mining country.

ADDING DETAILS

By then looking in a Michigan placenames book at the library, I found out that Red Jacket *was* a town between 1875 and 1892, when it was incorporated by Calumet. The town had been named after the copper mine shaft that was sunk there in 1857, which had been named after the Seneca Chief Red Jacket. Well, that suggests that the photo was taken during the between 1875 and 1892, when the town was still called Red Jacket, thereby narrowing down my target years in which to search for this family.

OLD MAPS

Since I was doing other research in Michigan, I already had a reproduction map of Michigan. It shows the county boundaries and placenames of 1873/74, and the railroad lines and water features. I bought my map from Jonathan Sheppard Books, P.O. Box 2020, Empire State Plaza Station, Albany, NY 12220, and there are plenty of other retail and government sources for old maps. (The county map of Kansas shown here was downloaded from the Kansas Heritage Graphics web page.)



Historical societies will always have old maps of the county or city they represent. For detailed urban research, try a [fire insurance map](#). The Library of Congress (LOC) offers a booklet called "Fire Insurance Maps in the Library Of Congress." Reproductions of historical maps are also available from the National Archives' cartographic department and from the LOC's Geography and Map Division.

More reasons to use old maps for genealogical research: [Maps Can Help You Trace Your Family Tree](#), by the U.S. Geological Survey.

BOUNDARY CHANGES

We all know by now that most county boundaries changed over the years, so a good knowledge of the original and successive county (or state) dominion of your placename is essential. The years of transition may determine where original records can be found.

EXAMPLE: My hometown in northeastern Pennsylvania is in an area originally claimed by Connecticut. It was purchased from the Indians in 1768, then can be traced from Bucks to Northampton (1752) to Northumberland (1772) to Luzerne (1786) and finally into its present county of Wyoming in 1842. Whew! Now I know to search Luzerne County records for a property deed of 1837.

For county boundary changes for the entire U.S., look in [The Handy Book for Genealogists](#), 8th Edition by George Everton (Logan, UT: [Everton Publishers](#); 1991), or in Ancestry's Red Book edited by Alice Eichholz (Salt Lake City: [Ancestry Publishing Co.](#), 1992).

COUNTY HISTORIES

Locally published county (or town) histories are perhaps the most valuable sources for the purpose of researching a place. These labors of love are usually written and researched by a local historian. They might include lists of newspapers, schools, churches and clergymen, fraternal and other local organizations, local businesses, and photographs and maps.

EXAMPLE: From the book celebrating the sesquicentennial (150 years) anniversary of the birth of my home county in Pennsylvania: "Tunnel Hill [school was] built before 1869 and closed in 1946. In 1954 the property was deeded to the Lackawanna Trail School District and the present high school was constructed on that property."

My great-grandfather and his brothers attending this school in the 1890's. I know how far they had to walk to go to school - just like the old "when I was your age..." story!

For more information:

Filby, P. William, *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1985) [order online from [Amazon Books](#)]

Walch, Timothy, *Our Family, Our Town: Essays on Family and Local History Sources in the National Archives* (Smithsonian Institute Press: 1987) [order online from [Amazon Books](#)]

For lists of local resources, try [Everton's Genealogical Helper](#) magazine's annual directories of genealogical libraries, genealogical societies, and local genealogical publications.

CHURCHES



We all know by now that church records sometimes hold information not found anywhere else, but churches also publish books about their history, including biographies of their members. How do you find out which church your ancestors attended? If you're lucky, the church affiliation will be mentioned in a wedding announcement or invitation, a family bible, an obituary or a funeral notice in a newspaper, or in the funeral home record itself (sometimes the funeral director will be named on the death certificate).

EXAMPLE: From the newspaper obituary of my great-great-grandmother, who died in 1905: "... At the age of eighteen she was baptized and joined the old Baptist church at Factoryville, where she has always been a consistent member, and living her religion in her home and among her friends."

If you have no other source, start with the neighborhood where your ancestors lived. Find the churches nearby using a city directory, an old map, the county history, etc. Immigrants could have attended a church that was further away but that held services in their native language.

Cemetery locations can often be linked to a church. Local historical societies might have a list of cemeteries in the county, and what organizations were responsible for them. If your family was buried in a municipal cemetery, try to find the clergyman who performed the funeral ceremony and look for a link to his church.

EXAMPLES: I know my Pryor family in Wilmington, Delaware were somehow connected to the Catholic Church, since their young son was buried in a Catholic cemetery. Now I have to find the church that they may have attended, and check for baptismal records; I already know the family's street addresses from city directories. I can use the Delaware Historical Society library card files and books about Wilmington history.

NEWSPAPERS

One of the best ways to learn about a place is through its newspapers; reading the same papers that your family members read can give you a great insight into their lives. Of course, newspapers hold lots of genealogical data, like birth announcements, marriage notices, and obituaries, but I'm talking about the *rest* of the paper. The events of the past, as the people of the past saw them.

EXAMPLE: When I found my great-grandmother's obituary in a June 1925 newspaper, I took the time to skim through the rest of the paper, and noted that President Coolidge was in office, Babe Ruth was playing for the Yankees, "Captain Blood" was playing at the movie theaters, and the weather section reported a terrible heat wave that month. The same type of stories were there in black and white as I see in today's papers: famous court battles, scandals in Washington, fashion tips, sports news, etc. The advertisements were fascinating to me - the new kitchen gadgets, the shoe and hat styles, the automobile prices! I'm not sure they were the good old days, but they were interesting.

Many old newspapers have been microfilmed, even in small towns. You may be able to rent them from the LDS Family History Library or from the [American Genealogical Lending Library](#) (AGLL), or borrow them on interlibrary loan from a local or state library. Probably the first place to ask about local newspapers is the nearest public or university library, and next the local historical or genealogical society. Some of the larger city papers have been indexed, making it simpler to find a particular event. However, narrowing down a few months of weekly newspapers in search of a specific article is a time-consuming process; be prepared and bring eye-drops. The reward will be worth the effort.

OTHER SOURCES

This article gives you just a few of the many sources available for local research into a place and the people who lived there. I have benefitted many times from my research of the counties and towns of my family's history, not only by finding more genealogical clues, but by learning more about their lives and times. Much of my initial research was done online, by searching for data on a particular county or town on the web, using gopher to access online library catalogs or to search manuscript repositories, or by queries in a mailing list or newsgroup.

FINDING TIPS

Occupations - to find an occupation, look in census schedules, including manufacturers, agricultural, and industry census schedules; marriage applications; indenture and apprentice records; life insurance records; social security applications; to find out more about a specific occupation, check city, school, and professional directories; trade organization and labor union records.

Physical property and possessions - deeds and land grants describe

the real estate; topographic maps; tax lists; wills and probate inventories;
tax lists; sheriff's sales.

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