



How To Find An Ancestor's Marriage Records

Lisa Lisson from Are You My Cousin?

As new genealogy researchers or genealogy researchers starting on a new family line, we are told to find the birth, marriage and death records and dates for our ancestors. After all, these records often hold lots of genealogical pertinent information including names of parents and other family members.

But, let's face it. Finding that marriage record for an ancestor can be quite a challenge.

Understanding Your Ancestor's World

To be successful in a search for an ancestor's marriage record, researchers must understand the world and the culture of the couple.

Consider what was happening in the world, and also what was happening in your ancestor's community and family. What circumstances impacted their lives?

- What did he/she see when they looked out the window?
- What type of transportation did he/she have available to them?
- How far from the courthouse did they live?
- Was there a church close by? Did it have a regular clergy?
- Would there be a significant impact on the bride or groom's family when the couple married?

Always Remember:

If something was important to your ancestor, it is important to you as a researcher. This includes faith, occupations, the weather and even political views.

Determining Where a Couple Married

Typically, a couple married in the county where one or both lived. If members of a church, the couple would likely marry in the church. Start the search for an ancestor's marriage record in the usual places:

- The Family Bible
- The County Courthouse
- The State Vital Records Office

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- The State Archives
 - Church Records

Sometimes circumstances required the couple to marry elsewhere. Your ancestors were in LOVE, but their families may not have been happy about it.

The couple felt their only option was to elope and get married in a destination where no one knew them. [Yep, my great grandfather broke his original engagement and headed across the state line to marry my great grandmother! I really wish I knew the rest of that story!]

Or maybe the requirements to get married were cumbersome in the couple's home state. Age requirements, medical tests, and parental consent were just some of the impediments over the years to a couple getting married.

What the couple needed and wanted was a quick and easy way to get married. The "industry" of marriage mills was born.

Marriage mills are those places where couples can go for a quick and easy marriage. You may hear these areas referred to as "Gretna Greens". Gretna Green, Scotland (just across the English border) became a popular destination in the 1750's for English couples to marry, and it became one of the first marriage mills.

Examples of Marriage Mills in the U.S.:

- Las Vegas, NV
- Elkton, MD
- Niagara Falls, NY
- Dillon, SC
- Lee County, Iowa

Find a much longer list of marriage mills at *FamilySearch* in their article [Gretna Greens in the United States](#).

Intent to Marry Records

Intent to Marry records indicate a bride and groom's intention to get married. This type of record's purpose was to ensure there was no legal or religious reason the couple could not marry.

Impediments to the marriage could include: one of the couple was already married or the couple was related too closely.



Marriage Banns

Marriage Banns (Bans) were a part of the Christian parish church and were typically associated with the Anglican and Catholic churches. The banns were read for three Sundays in a row, and if no objection was made to the marriage, the couple was free to marry. These will be found in church records.

Marriage Bonds

The marriage bond was a legal bond for the groom and co-signed by a bondsman indicating there was no legal reason the intended marriage could not take place. Technically, a marriage bond only indicates the intent of a marriage and is not proof that the marriage took place. Note the bondsman (or bondsmen) named on a marriage bond. These individuals were frequently family members or close associates.

Civil Records of Marriage

Civil records of marriage could be kept at the town, county, and state levels of government depending on the time period. Typically, a civil record of marriage will be at the county courthouse.

Marriage License

A marriage license was (and still is) obtained from county offices and presented to the officiant to prove the couple can legally marry in that county and state. Once the marriage has been performed, the officiant returns the signed license to be registered with the clerk of court.

Ministers & Justices of the Peace Returns

As the officiant of a wedding, the minister or justice of the peace was required to file a couple's marriage with the county court. Known as Ministers' returns or Justices of the Peace returns, the lists were to be submitted to the county clerk within a specified time frame.

Did they always turn in their returns in a timely manner or at all? No, not necessarily. Check for idiosyncrasies within a given county if you are not seeing an expected marriage.

Church Marriage Records

As you research the church a couple married in, remember churches went through their own changes over the years. Congregations evolved and churches split to form their own organizational structures. It is important to understand the history of the individual church and the church's governing structure if one existed.



Why? You want to make sure you are not searching for a record that no longer exists or never existed. You want to make sure you understand how that particular church or faith recorded marriages.

Finding Church Marriage Records

You may know which church your ancestors married in, but are unsure how to find the church's marriage records. Try these steps for accessing those records:

- Contact the church itself if it still exists.
- Contact church archives. (Ex. Catholic Archives of Philadelphia)
- Contact Regional church/denominational offices
- Genealogy Databases such as [Ancestry.com](#), [FindMyPast](#), [MyHeritage](#) and [FamilySearch](#)

Many faiths and denominations have their own archives and/or historical societies. Below are examples of the more commonly searched archives.

- [The Moravian Church Archives](#)
- **Quaker Records:** [The Guilford College Hege Library in Greensboro, North Carolina](#) & [The Swarthmore College Friends Historical Library in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania](#) & [Ancestry.com](#) – Quaker meeting records from 1681-1935 and Hinshaw's Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy can be found on Ancestry.com.
- **The Methodist Church:** [-Resource UMC](#) & [The General Commission Archives](#)
- **Catholic Records**– Catholic heritage collection at [FindMyPast](#)
- [Evangelical Lutheran Archives](#)
- **Jewish Resources:** [JewishGen](#)

Recommended Resource: [How to Find Your Family History in U. S. Church Records](#) by Sunny Morton & Harold Henderson

Religious Periodicals

Do not overlook religious periodicals in your search for your ancestor's marriage. Many faiths have their own newspapers and publications.

[Chronicling America](#) is a free resource search for religious periodicals in addition to the more traditional newspapers.



“Don’t Miss” Research Tools

PERSI - Periodical Source Index

Have you ever wondered what offline records may have been transcribed in various genealogical and history journals? PERSI is your go-to index for searching for helpful journal articles.

PERSI is found on FindMyPast (\$) and now online at the [Allen County Public Library](#). As an ongoing project, PERSI is being added to and digitization of journals is occurring. If you are new to PERSI, I recommend reading this post [“How To Use PERSI To Improve Your Genealogy Research”](#) to get started.

ArchiveGrid

As an online finding aid, [ArchiveGrid](#) accesses over 1000 institutions and 5+million of archival records including personal papers, family records, old documents and original manuscripts. They have listings for special collections across the US and internationally as well.

Now, imagine your ancestors hiding away in a small repository’s records you never even knew existed. Do not miss out on finding important genealogical clues located in areas in small (and large) repositories you never thought to search.

WorldCat

Use [WorldCat](#) to search for the Family Bibles and marriage record abstracts.

If you are new to [WorldCat](#), learn how to perform searches in ["How To Use WorldCat For Your Genealogy Research."](#)

When You Still Can’t Find The Actual Marriage Record

Perhaps you have not been able to find your ancestor’s marriage record in the county or church records. Search into the following to find more clues about your ancestor’s marriage.

The Family Bible

Ok, I know....you are thinking "We don't have a family Bible." I said the same thing when I started, only it wasn't true. I discovered a copy of the family Bible in a distant relative's possession.

If you are still trying to find a family Bible, I recommend checking out: [Can't Find the Family Bible? 10 Places You May Not Have Looked](#) (<https://lialisson.com/find-family-bible-genealogy/>)



Wedding Announcements

A couple's wedding announcement may be written up in the local newspaper. Check society pages for those more lavish weddings. Often in smaller community newspapers, you may find only a line or two mentioning a wedding took place. Large or small, the wedding announcement could be crucial to your research.

The Census Records

Evidence of a marriage and number of years married documented in census records **provides clues** to a couple's marriage. For example, the 1910 census records marital status and number of years married. From that an estimated marriage date can be calculated.

The Birth Certificate for a Child

Include a check of the birth certificate(s) for a couple's child(ren). Some birth records ask for the date and place of marriage.

Pension Applications

Pension records are another place to find your ancestor's marriage date. Obviously a soldier's pension record and/or that of the widow's pension application provides a lot of important genealogical information on your ancestor. For our purposes, we are just focusing on marriage dates.

When a widow applied for her widow's pension, she had to prove she was the deceased soldier's wife. Information on the couple's marriage was included in her application. Pension applications can be quite lengthy. Be sure to read every single page in your search for marriage information.

American Red Cross Nursing Records

[American Red Cross Nursing records](#) found at [Ancestry.com](#) are a unique set of records providing much genealogical information including the marital status. Other pieces of information listed include: a maiden name, the husband's name and permanent address.

The Red Cross files can be lengthy with some being over 100 pages! If your ancestor was a nurse in the American Red Cross, I would encourage you to include these records in your search.

Divorce Records

Sometimes that couple did not live happily ever after and the marriage ended in divorce. If a couple divorced, seek out their divorce records. Their marriage date, place and other details of their marriage can be found.



Divorce records can be found in:

- The County Court
- Legal Notices in the Newspapers
- Early divorces may be at the state level of government

Find Lisa at:

- [Are You My Cousin?](#)
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