

Researching Ancestors Born Out of Wedlock

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Are You My Cousin?

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Is it possible to determine the parents of an ancestor born out of wedlock?

Yes. And no.

Sometimes you know one parent (typically the mother, but not always).

Sometimes you only find circumstantial evidence pointing to the potential parents. The challenge is finding which records hold the clues you need.

Clues An Ancestor Was Born Out of Wedlock

1. **Oral History** is often your best source for information on potential parents of an illegitimate ancestor. Be sure to reach out to distant relatives for the oral history stories that are in their family. Whole stories and versions of the same stories may be different in their family.
2. The child's surname can provide clues as well. Typically, the child took the mother's surname, however, there were exceptions. If the father openly acknowledged the child and/or provided financial support, the child could have the father's surname.
3. The terminology in the records can indicate the status of the child's birth.

Know The Terminology Used

Understand the terminology in use for the time and location where the child was born.

1. Base Born
2. Misbegotten
3. Bastard
4. Natural
5. Spurious
6. Born out of wedlock
7. Local Slang such as "other side of the woodpile".

Other Terms:

1. **Reputed** - Pertains to the reputation, as in the "reputed son of" John Smith

2. **Imputed** - Attribution on behalf of others, as in the “imputed son of” John Smith indicates the mother was accusing the man [John Smith] of being the father
3. **Ignotus** - Latin term for “unknown” that may be seen in church records
4. **Filius Nullius** - (Legal Term) Literally means “child of no one”
5. **Adulterine Child** - (Legal Term) Child born out of wedlock to a married woman.

Get Into The Records

Vital Records

If you are researching in fairly “modern” times when birth and death certificates were being issued, be sure to check those. Often the father is not listed or listed as “unknown”, but you may get lucky and find the father’s name listed. Even a partial name will provide you with a valuable clue.

Church Records

Evidence of a child born out of wedlock may be found within church records. If you do not know the child’s mother, the church records may help.

A woman who had a child out of wedlock may have been censored or excommunicated from the church. Check what records are available for the location you are researching. Are there any women being disciplined by the church for having an illegitimate child around the time your ancestor was born. Or if you know the mother, do you find her being disciplined? Is there a man being censored about the same time? You can pick up clues to her identity here.

County Court Records

Who went to court? Free white women with a child born out of wedlock that likely would become chargeable to the county most often landed in the court system. The upper class rarely went to court in matters of illegitimacy.

The reason? Money.

The county wanted a father or guardian appointed to take financial responsibility for the child. Otherwise, the child’s care and welfare would fall to the county.

Did all women who bore a child out of wedlock end up in the court system? No. Depending on the circumstances, the mother might be paid off or supported by the purported father in order not to be named in public.

Bastardy & Apprentices Bonds

Bastardy bonds and apprentice bonds (from the colonial era up through 1913 in NC) are useful in determining one or both parents of an illegitimate child. Bastardy bonds are against the mother so you need to know the mother's name. The father is sometimes named in these bonds if the mother was willing to name him.

Other court records of bastardy include:

- Warrant Issued for the Woman
- Questioning of the Mother as to the Father's Identity
- Warrant for the Father
- Questioning of the Potential Father
- Orders of the Court

Apprentice bonds are also helpful. If your ancestor was apprenticed as a child (and this could be done at a very young age) the bond often will list the parent's name. If the child's named parent is the mother only, then the child may have been born out of wedlock. The exception would be if the mother was a widow.]

Remember! An apprentice bond is NOT exclusively for children born out of wedlock. While illegitimate children were frequently apprenticed out, it was not an exclusive process just for these children.

Researching in Special Collections

Do not overlook the resources and information potentially found in special collections. Special collections contain personal papers and letters detailing information on family members and the family business. Details can include the naming of an individual's children including legitimate and illegitimate. In personal papers, documentation for the financial support of a child born out of wedlock can sometimes be found. Since these children would not have been eligible to inherit, a family might make other arrangements as documented in personal papers.

[ArchiveGrid](https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/) [<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>] is an excellent finding aid resource for searching special collections.

DNA Testing

The use of DNA to further genealogical research will certainly help in determining your ancestral line. While DNA is not a paternity test and will not tell you who the father of your ancestor was, DNA can potentially provide you with a surname or line you match.

You will need:

- Good matches with good trees (Sometimes you have to build these out yourself.)
- Good Detective work on your part

- Genealogy records - DNA alone does not replace traditional paper genealogy research

Mary Eberle of DNA Hunters talks about using DNA to find unknown parents in this post: [7 Steps for Using DNA to Find Birth Parents of Adoptees & Others with Unknown Parents](#)

Remember....

Don't get discouraged! Researching ancestors born out of wedlock is not easy or quick. It can be a very sensitive topic within a family. Sometimes the best we can do is build a circumstantial case with the clues we do find.

Then we wait for the next bit of information.....