

# Her Name Was Not Unknown: Researching Your Female Ancestor's Life

Gena Philibert-Ortega, MA<sup>2</sup>

Women are half the population but they seem to be the hardest half to find in a family tree. I don't know about you but I want to scream when I find a female ancestor's gravestone that identifies her as Mrs. John Smith or when her children's birth certificates label her name as "unknown." What can you do to find your female ancestor? Thinking outside the proverbial genealogy box will assist you in finding clues to her life. The following are just some of the techniques you should consider incorporating into your research plan.

## Research Involves Five Aspects of a Woman's Life:

- The woman herself
- The woman's family
- Locality where she lived
- The time period she lived in
- Her neighbors and community

As you research, consider how to search for resources that document these five aspects.

## Make a Timeline

Whenever you start researching an ancestor, it's always a good idea to begin a timeline. The timeline serves as a visual representation of your ancestor's life. This can help you analyze your findings and to see if there are any missing pieces. It also can serve as a research log reminding you what you have already found.

## Check the Usual Sources

As with any research, start with sources you are most comfortable and familiar with. Find your female ancestor in records such as the census which places her in a specific time and location. Look for vital records, if applicable. Check cemetery websites like **FindAGrave** < <http://www.findagrave.com/>> and **Interment.net** < <http://interment.net/>> for her burial place. Conduct searches on genealogy websites such as **Ancestry.com** and **FamilySearch**.

As you search these familiar websites, make sure to keep an Internet research log where you note the date, name variations you searched, and databases. Make sure to use name variations

including initials and creative spellings for your ancestor. A computer search engine will only bring back results based on what you have entered so it's important to conduct multiple searches.

### **Create a List of Keywords**

As you search, remember that your ancestor may have been mentioned in records using numerous name variations. An example:

- Maude Sarah Snider
- M.S. Snider
- Maude S. Snider
- M. Sarah Snider
- Mrs. John Snider
- Mrs. J. A. Snider

Then you have to consider the various creative spellings of her first and last names. Create a list of all these variations. Then create a keyword list to use in archival and library catalogs and search engines. This list should include the place/s your ancestor lived in, their religion, occupation, and groups they belonged to.

### **Utilize Search Engines**

So many resources exist online that it's impossible to know about every resource that can help you. That's where a generalized search on Google can assist you. By using quotes around the ancestor's name, like "Maude S. Snider" you are essentially telling Google to search for that phrase intact. Otherwise a search for Maude S. Snider without the quotes can bring back all kinds of results that contain those words somewhere on the web page but not necessarily together. While using an exact phrase search is a great technique, remember that it won't find variations of your ancestor's name. Use advanced search features to narrow your search even further.

### **Survey the Library**

It's important to survey resources that may help you find additional information. To do this, you will need to look through the catalogs of various libraries. State libraries, academic libraries, private and public libraries all have something to offer genealogists. Start your search with **WorldCat.org**, a card catalog of items from thousands of libraries worldwide. Use keywords such as the name of your ancestor's hometown or county to begin your search. WorldCat searches not just books but also archival and image collections. While not every library is represented in WorldCat, it's a good place to begin your search. Once you have completed that search, move onto other library catalogs. I always search through the catalog of my local library, genealogy libraries, the public and state library where my ancestor lived, and nearby academic libraries.

© 2009-2019 Gena Philibert-Ortega, MA, MAR. (909) 556-9003. [genaortega@gmail.com](mailto:genaortega@gmail.com). Publication, copying, reproduction, or otherwise reuse of this document or any part thereof is not permitted without express written permission from the author.

## **Digitized Books**

After you have looked at what resources can be found at the library, seek out digitized book websites for histories of the place your ancestress was from, as well as genealogically related books like city directories, to find mentions of that ancestor. Digitized book websites include **Google Books** < <http://books.google.com/>> **Internet Archive** < <http://archive.org/index.php>>, **Hathi Trust** < <http://www.hathitrust.org>> and **FamilySearch**.

## **Use Familiar Sources Differently**

How do you use FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>? Each research project should find you searching the **FamilySearch Catalog** for pertinent resources. The Catalog allows you to search by author, title, place, surname and keyword. Start with searching the catalog for resources for the place/s your ancestor resided. Once you have noted all the resources available for the place, conduct a keyword search. A keyword search is similar to how you would search an online search engine like Google. Use a word or short phrase to describe your subject. So for example I may choose the phrases “Colonial women” or “Quaker women” to describe an ancestor. Keywords don’t always find everything you would be interested in so it might be a good idea to come up with several different words or phrases to use in your search. As you consider keywords to use, choose words that describe the church or organization your ancestor belonged to. Don’t use too many words at once, the more words you include the less likely you will find matches.

## **Read the Newspapers**

Ordinary people were mentioned in the newspaper for all kinds of reasons including milestone events like births and anniversaries, community events at churches and schools, even not so pleasant events like arrests, past due taxes and welfare payments. Newspapers can be found online and on microfilm. For digitized newspapers online see **GenealogyBank**, **Ancestry.com**, **Newspapers.com**, **Chronicling America** < <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>> and **Findmypast**.

## **Consider Her Life**

What types of activities could your female ancestor have taken part in? Was she a member of a church? Did she join a women’s club? Was she a member of a fraternal organization? Learning more about the time period and place she lived in can provide important clues to what records documented her life. Groups recorded their activities whether by creating membership lists, histories, meeting notes, or treasurer’s reports.

When researching the organizations she may have belonged to, consider searching **city directories** and **local histories** for the names of membership groups. Organizational records can be archived within the organization itself, if it still exists, or in a manuscript collection housed at a library, archive or museum. Catalogs to search include **ArchiveGrid** <<http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>>.

### **Take a Look at Other Family Members**

When researching a female ancestor it's vital to take a look at the men in her life. As you go further back year wise in your research, spend some time focusing on the family unit instead of solely on an individual. Focusing on a family can provide you with more options and information. Reconstructing that family may also reveal associates who migrated and interacted with the family. It is through these men that you might fill in the details of a woman's life. Mentions in military pensions, a will, or probate records can provide valuable clues. Start with a timeline for her husband's and/or father's life. Then identify documents that they should appear in.

### **Enlist the Help of Others**

Have you tweeted your genealogy? What about posting an ancestral photo on **Facebook**? No? Consider social networking as one way to get the word out about your family history and find potential cousins. Whether you are tweeting a question on **Twitter**, posting photos to be identified on Facebook, or using a genealogy message board to ask questions, social networking can help you reach other researchers working on your mutual ancestors. Check out the **Genealogy on Facebook List** to identify applicable groups <<https://socialmediagenealogy.com/genealogy-on-facebook-list/>>.

### **Bibliography**

Schaefer, Christina K. *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co, 2006.

Gena's Genealogy (Women's History Month): <http://philibertfamily.blogspot.com/>

Tracing Your Female Ancestors (Vol 1 & 2): <https://your-genealogy-history-store-usa.myshopify.com/collections/tracing-your-ancestors-series>