



Help!

The Courthouse Burned!

Now I Can't Research My Ancestors

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Courthouse records are the backbone of American genealogical research. The records held in the courthouse document major events in our ancestors' lives and therefore are of prime importance to our research. These records help establish the backbone of our research and offer hints for further discoveries. What happens when there is considerable record loss due to fire, floods, rodents, mold, vandalism, theft, or over-zealous courthouse clerks? Following are strategies to use when our research takes us to a "Burned County"!

Strategies for Researching in a Burned County

Keep a positive attitude. Be persistent. Think creatively. Study and learn.

Background Information

- When did the courthouse burn?
- How much of the courthouse burned - which areas?
- How great was the record loss?
- Were records saved and returned to the courthouse or other repository?
- Were the records re-recorded?
- Was there more than one courthouse or record repository?
- Was a second copy of the records sent to another jurisdiction at the time they were created?
- What are the parent/progeny counties? They may be in different states.
- Who knows the most about the records you want?

Obtain an Inventory of the Courthouse Records

It is important to know the holdings of the courthouse and when the material was there.

- Many courthouses published inventories of their holdings.
- The WPA inventoried many courthouses.
- Individuals, historical societies and genealogical societies have inventoried courthouse holdings.

Develop a Research Plan

- Analyze research already done - make sure you have a copy of the original record (or as close to it as possible).
- Find source citations for any missing citations.
- State research question/challenge in writing.
- List specific resources that should be used and strategies that will be applied.
- Conduct your research and evaluate as you go then re-evaluate.
- **Cite your sources!**
- Draw a conclusion and state your hypothesis.
- You may need to conduct more research to prove or disprove your hypothesis.
- Write a well thought-out formal research report (this may later be disproved).

Research in other Repositories

- County/city archives and historical societies
- State libraries
- State archives and historical societies
- University libraries
- Law libraries
- National Archives
- Library of Congress
- Religious archives
- Regional libraries
- Heritage organizations
- Government Documents Library (usually at a university)
- PRO (Public Records Office)-London
- American Antiquarian Society Library (Worcester, Massachusetts)
- Daughters of the American Revolution Library
- New England Historic Genealogical Society Library
- Ellen Payne Odom Genealogy Library (Moultrie, Georgia – Excellent Scottish references)

Check a Variety of Records, Collections and Finding Aids

- **Tax records – Likely to be recreated – may have been sent to state**
- **Land records – Likely to be recreated - Public Land States, State Land States, American State Papers**
- **Newspapers (especially legal notices, death, marriage, birth, land & tax)**
- Census records (federal, state, county, township, town)
- Church records
- City directories
- Farm directories
- Cemetery, monument company and funeral home records
- Military records
- Bible records
- Grand Army of the Republic
- Correspondence
- Diaries
- School records
- Local histories and biographies
- Commercial Records (store accounts, business records, employment records)
- Territorial Papers
- American State Papers
- Brayton Collection (housed at Santa Cruz Public Library – relates to Virginia families)
- The Durrett Collection (housed at the University of Chicago Library – relates to Kentucky, West Virginia and the Ohio River Valley – comparable to the Draper Collection)
- Draper Manuscripts (original housed at Wisconsin Historical Society Library. Relates to early settlers of Appalachian regions of Western Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. There is no one comprehensive index to the collection. Check Cyndi's List for listing of additional finding aids)
- Passport records
- Passports of Southeastern Pioneers (Passage through Indian or non-U.S. territory east of the Mississippi River between 1770-1823)
- Probate records (check neighboring counties)
- Swem Index (Swem Library, College of William and Mary – early Virginia settlers, Jamestown settlement, Virginia Company and more)
- Confederate Pension Applications (awarded by individual states including Missouri and Oklahoma – usually found at state archives)
- Freedman's Bureau (created in 1865, provided assistance to approximately 4 million former slaves and impoverished whites)
- Plantation records
- National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) - (Catalog of manuscript collections in repositories throughout the country. Program of and accessed through the Library of Congress)

You should gather clues from each document for further research.

Conduct Thorough Collateral Research

- Study the neighbors, associates and relatives as if they were your ancestors
- Remember neighbors may live in a different township, county or state
- Look for commonalities especially in tax and census records
- Look at the census records several pages prior and after your family

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