

Where Do I Start? Where Do I Go From Here?

Where you start or where you go from here depends on what you want to know. Do you just want to know about a certain person or everything about your ancestors like I do. As you go back doing genealogical research from generation to generation, the records you use will vary. At first, it is not too difficult in most cases finding the information you need from relatives and vital records. As you go back further in time the records that you use will change. From vital records, you may go to church records, immigration records, and land records for more information. States vary in when they required registration of births, deaths, and marriages. The most common early documents are marriage records or marriage bonds and returns. Not all ministers, priests, or Justices of the Peace registered the marriages, so there are not always returns. But you know the marriage took place by using other records. The date of the bond is not the marriage date, but close. I will not go into other information, such as family history, which can be added to give more interest, but make note of anything you might find.

This article will give you a general idea of where to get the information you are looking for, that concerns your ancestors. Records you use will depend on the information you are looking for. For instance a friend wanted to find out in which county in Ireland her Great grandfather, Patrick Cavanaugh, was born. He was probably famine Irish and worked for the railroad so he moved often. It took a while to find out where he died and was buried. A search of census records for all of his children was done to find him living with a daughter and her husband in Toledo, Ohio. Another daughter was living with them and the husband worked for the railroad, which helped to establish that I had the right person. I had mistakenly thought I had found him in Indiana, but that Patrick Cavanaugh was a farmer and did not have a son with the ladies grandfather's name. I was able to find the Calvary Cemetery records digitized on Familysearch.org and found the grave location at Calvary Cemetery and requested a picture from a person willing to do that through Random Act of Genealogical Kindness (raogk.com). The Irish like to put the place of birth on their tombstones, but I didn't know if he had a tombstone and if that was done. All the records I had checked only said Ireland although one said the Republic of Ireland I suppose to distinguish it from Northern Ireland.

The record information varies with the state and date of the records. Early records may list only the most basic information, such as the names of the bride and groom, place and date, the person performing the ceremony, and witnesses.

In the beginning

This would be records for most people living in the 20th Century:

1. Birth Record if person was born in the 1900s.
2. Marriage Record
3. Death Record
4. Obituary
5. Probate Record

All but the obituary can probably be found at the courthouse, in the county where the event took place. For obituaries, contact the nearest public library to the event location, to find the most likely newspaper in which the obituary or death notice might have appeared.

1. The birth record may contain all or some of the following information: the child's name, birth date and place, race; parent's names, ages, occupations, residence, places of birth; or other information about the child, such as a multiple birth, full term, legitimacy, number of children in the family, and even the child's footprint. Sometime the names of siblings are also recorded. There can be errors on the records: my father did not have a middle name just an initial, but always thought his middle name was Henry and that was found on some records. Often, there are errors in the number of children in the family, i.e., whether it included the newborn or not.
2. The marriage record may include the names of the bride and groom, the dates of birth or age and birth places, race, their residence, occupations, parent's names and places of birth, person presiding over the ceremony, place where it took place, and names of witnesses.
3. The death record may include name, sex, birth date and place, race, date and place of death, spouse, residence, citizenship, social security number, occupation, length of residence, former residence, parent's names, burial place and funeral home, doctor and cause of death. Each state has its own form containing the information it has deemed important.
4. An obituary contains whatever information a family wishes. Some contain the life story of the person, others very little. You may find names of children, siblings and their spouses and residences, the date and place of death, date and place of funeral, and place of burial. Obits can be very useful in locating people. Used with the death certificate and probate a lot of information can be woven together.
5. A probate record's purpose is to find heirs and disperse the deceased's property in accordance with his will. Hopefully the person made a will, but if they didn't and they have property and heirs there will probably be a probate record. Here you can find the names of heirs and their addresses, as well as the property to be disbursed and its value.

19th Century Research

Except for a few exceptions vital records will not be the main source of information. For information on the types of resources found in a particular state check the Red Book, which is in many libraries and is now available on Ancestry.com.

In the late 1800s you could possibly find birth, death, or marriage records. Those records are more likely found in church records, obituaries, cemetery records, and probate records. There are many online sources for cemetery records such as internment.com, findagrave.com, the USgenweb.org tombstone project.

If you have done your census records you should have some idea of when and where the person died. County histories are very useful. The information is not always correct, but like the internet resources it should be checked and will yield clues. I proved a person for the The Mayflower Society using a county history with other records.

19th Century Records

1. US and State Census Records
2. Birth, Death, Marriage Records, and Church records
3. Probate and other Court Records
4. Land Records
5. County Histories, Obituaries, and Newspaper Articles

1. US and State Censuses-track those people. Is there more than one family with the same name? Are they related? Do you have the right family? If they are related research all the related families. The other families may have better records such as mentioning a slave's name or land and saying they received the slave or land from their father or uncle or grandmother, etc.
2. The early civil vital records-do not contain as much information as later records. Some church records give maiden names and places of birth. Maiden names also often appear on tombstones.
3. Probate records-if available usually mention all the heirs. Guardianship records name minor children and if the records are extant the children will be mentioned each year until they reach majority or marry. If the person is very poor it is unlikely that they will have a probate, but the family might receive aid from the county and would be mentioned in the courts poor records.
4. Land records-when a person dies his property is divided amongst the heirs and they will be named in the land records. This sometimes happens many years after the death. I have used land records to prove descent for heritage societies. They are more difficult because they can be hard to read and sometimes you have to use the property description for proof, but the reward is worth the trouble. The record you want to look for the most in the index is one that names at least one member of the family and has "et al" after the name.
5. County histories, obituaries, and other newspaper articles-these sources can give you biographical information and family members. The histories usually mention the names of the person's parents and where they came from, their children and spouses and where they live.

17th and 18th Century research

Now we are getting into the area where land and court records are the most useful especially probate records. Church records are sometimes available, but harder to find unless they were from an established church. Fortunately many of my father's ancestors were Quakers, who kept very good records. If you are lucky your ancestors spent a lot of time in Massachusetts, whose vital records are also very good.

17th and 18th Century research

1. Probate Records
2. Land Records
3. Court Minutes
4. Church Records

Conclusion

Many records have been transcribed, extracted, indexed and published. The Family History Library in Salt Lake City has many of these books. They have also microfilmed many records

mentioned. Remember they are not all on microfilm, published, or on the internet. You still need to contact people in the county in which you are doing research through the courthouse, genealogical and historical societies, and libraries. I learn what's available from the input of these contacts. Not all of it is correct, however. Now that the Family History Library has extracted information and digitized various records and put them on their website, Familysearch.org I'm finding many items to help me in my research. Other websites such as Footnote.com, Ancestry.com and others also have digitized records. Hunt around, I sometimes find the records I need digitized on the internet after I have ordered them from a depository.