

## Grandma, Who Are You?: Finding the Maiden Names in Your Family Tree

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*You say you've checked all the available sources for your ancestor's maiden name, but have you really? If you haven't checked for every possible record and looked at every possible clue, you aren't yet through. What you are looking for will depend on the time and place. In some cases it might be a hopeless endeavor, but then again you might be pleasantly surprised with an answer that will take you back more than one generation.*

**Home Sources:** As with every search for family history, start at home—but not just your own home, as you probably would have found the answer if it were there. Have every known relative look in their homes. Ask them to look for actual records, of course, but also suggest that they look for:

- **Funeral cards:** Check out every one found, as they might be relatives.
- **Photos:** Look for writing on the back. Even if there are no names, is there a photographer that could help pinpoint a place? Even if there are only given names, they can help you decide if you are looking at the right family.
- **Scrapbooks:** Cull them for clues to family.
- **Book nameplates:** Often books are passed down through families. If an unrecognized surname is in the collection, investigate it.
- **Bible records:** Look especially for marriages, but also references to congregations, ministers, and sponsors. If you are really lucky, spouses' maiden names and birthdays were added.
- **Letters:** Check for postmarks and for references to family names and locations.
- **Address books:** Look especially for unrecognized surnames and investigate them.
- **Diaries:** Look for family names and events that might pinpoint a place. Don't forget to have relatives check their bookshelves for collected books about the family. You'll find a list of possible published resources below.
- **Oral tradition:** Check out those family stories. They might be correct, and even if not might give clues to your ancestor's origin.

**Vital Records** (town, city, county, state, country): Most levels of government in the U.S. generally did not keep vital records before the 19th century, although some New England town records date to well before 1800. Look for burial records as well.

**Birth and Christening of Children** (look at names of sponsors)

- **Indices:** In the U.S. look for statewide, county, city, and town indices; in other countries look for countrywide indices for civil records.

**Marriage** (civil, church, court, newspapers; look at witnesses' names)

- License (civil, religious)
- Certificates (civil, religious)
- Registers (civil, religious)
- Affidavits (civil)
- Banns (church)
- Announcements (religious, newspapers)
- Marriage Bonds: an obligation to pay the sum of the bond if an impediment to the marriage is found to exist. Amounts vary by time and place. The bond is filed in the bride's county of residence. Bondsman might be a family member. (court, newspapers)

**Death and Estate Records** (vital registrations, mortuaries/funeral homes, cemeteries, obituaries, probate, guardianships)

- Death Records (don't forget to look at informants/witnesses)
  - Woman
  - Her children
  - Husband's death certificate might give wife's maiden name
  - Known sisters (if you know brothers you probably don't need to look)
- Mortuary: who paid for funeral, pallbearers, etc.
- Cemetery
  - Maiden name on stone
  - Who else is in the same plot
  - Who is in nearby plots; ask in office who is buried, as not everyone has a stone
  - Name of person who erected stone, paid for burial, owned plot
- Obituary (See "Newspapers")
- Probate and Guardianships (self, spouse, spouse's parents, all possible parents, sisters, and all their relatives)
  - Probate indices might list married names of daughters
  - Might name in-laws
  - If no every-name index look for land transfers to family
  - Check newspapers
  - Probates of all likely parents
  - Relinquishment of widow's portion
  - In-laws' probates might give maiden names of son's wives
  - Relative posting bond when husband dies
  - Guardianships for minor children

### **Social Security Card Application**

- Not only should this have the woman's maiden name, it should have her parents' full names (including her mother's maiden name).

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**Religious Records:** Be creative. Look at sponsors as they might be family members. Maiden names for women are often given. (See "Vital Records")

- Membership lists: If only the woman is a member other members might be family.
- Bulletins: The bulletin for the husband's congregation might give information on a marriage that took place in the bride's hometown. Also look for banns and announcements.
- Minutes: Minutes can give information on births, marriages, and deaths. They might also give information about new members.
- Transfers: A newly married woman might have a transfer from her previous congregation. Her maiden name might be noted.
- School records: Records for children might give more information on their mother.

### **Court records**

- Contracts (marriage, land, business)
- Adoptions: less likely to be closed before 1930 (and available in some areas after that)
- Divorces (or legal separation) and child support: more common than you think before 1900
- Other civil cases (lawsuits often involve family members)
- Sanitarium and asylum records
- Poor house records
- Criminal and prison records
- Probation and parole reports

**Newspapers:** Look for all known family members. Don't forget to search ethnic, religious, school, and business newspapers as well.

- Birth, marriage, and death announcements
- Obituaries: pay particular attention to those attending from out of town
- Social notes/gossip columns: family visitors
- Anniversaries
- Advertisements/announcements for probates, land, etc.

**Census Records** (include all known family members)

- Family might live with parents
- Elderly parent(s) might live with family
- Other family members might live with family
- Who lives nearby?
  - Families close after marriage
  - Families close before marriage
  - Even before 1850 look for families with daughters the right age

**Land Records**

- Low-cost sales between family members
- Maiden name appearing in deed or contract
- *et ux*: and spouse
- Plat maps/block books to see adjacent families
- Progressions: putting a family plot back together

**Military Records**

- Service records
- Pension papers

**Organizations:** Look at husband's associations as well. Pay attention to sponsors.

- Sororities/fraternities
- Lineage societies
- Heritage societies
- Membership associations

**Published sources:** Look for your direct ancestors and every other known relative.

- Family histories
- County histories: Don't forget to look for any known relatives, including children, husband's parents, known sisters
- Indices
- Diaries and journals of those who knew your ancestor
- High school yearbooks (most helpful with less common given names)
- Oral histories, *e.g.*, Holocaust narratives, <http://goo.gl/9yo9Bt>, <http://goo.gl/FyxYX4>

**Creative online searches:** Name, birthdate, place. Use given names without surnames, use partial names, allow a range for dates and names. Search for known family members, etc.

**LDS Records**

- Family Register: lists names of ancestors for whom people are searching and gives the name and address of the searcher. Similar lists are online.
- International Genealogical Index: The IGI is excellent for finding possibilities (make sure you verify the information!) for lost ladies and other information.

**Genealogical Query Columns** put you in touch with others who may have uncovered maiden names. Thousands of them are searchable online. Town historians and librarians receive genealogical inquiries. In New York State nearly every town has a volunteer town historian. Many of these people keep surname files. Also look at online messages boards, such as on RootsWeb.

## A Few More Ideas

**Same Name:** Don't rule out the obvious. The maiden name might be the same as the married name, *e.g.*, Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak.

**Naming Patterns:** Look for families with the right given names living in the area.

- Middle names: A middle name might be a family surname. This can lead back more than one generation.
- In Jewish research, mother's and father's names given to succeeding generations: usually skip one generation, sometimes two; same name given to multiple cousins in same generation

**Lost Ancestors:** Did your female ancestor or perhaps her sister remarry and you don't know her new name? If she might have collected Social Security, you can search the SSDI using just a given name and a birth date. If the name isn't too common, you might then be able to investigate those deaths to see if one is possibly the right person. A death certificate might give a maiden name. If you can find the marriage record, it might have the maiden name. The Social Security application should list the woman's maiden name and both parents.

**Changed Surname:** Don't get stuck by looking for a surname listed on just one document. Often names have been modified over time. An immigrant who naturalized might have changed his name. Sometimes the husband changed his name to that of his wife, especially if the wife's family had more prestige, such as in rabbinical families. Recent scholarship has indicated that the majority of freed slaves did not take their former owners' names, and that sometimes they changed their surnames several times before deciding on one. Check every possible combination of names using all the clues you have. Don't give up because you were told it was so.

**Did your ancestor keep her maiden name?** This was not common in the United States, but there was a movement to do so starting in the 1850's. If you find your ancestor widowed and her name is different from that of her children, don't automatically assume that she remarried and was widowed again; she might have gone back to her maiden name. Use of maiden names was more common in certain European and Latin American countries, so always investigate further. And it's always possible that a woman was not married and had never changed her name.

**Create a Timeline:** Create a detailed timeline for your ancestor. Indicate any known vital records and all events in the neighborhood that should be searched for further clues. Include information on spouse and children. Enter information for potential parents.

And don't rely on just one record! Different family members may give different answers for a woman's maiden name.