



## Finding the Women in your Family Tree

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Do you have a pedigree that names your female ancestors as Mary, Rachel or Phebe...no last names or even worse...UNKNOWN?

Prior to the 20th century, many women didn't have an identity of their own. They were tangled with their father or husband and in some places, were not allowed to own real estate in their own name or to sign legal documents. When they married their name changed, sometimes multiple times, which makes them harder to find and so they get listed in genealogies by their given name and an approximate date of birth and death. But it was the women who bore the children, ran the households and possibly even the farms as their husbands went off to war, and it was the women who carried on the family traditions. If you're looking for a family bible it was likely passed down to a daughter. Women have been referred to as our "invisible ancestors." To find them you need to put them in context with the roles they played during their lives; daughter, wife, mother, widow, friend, neighbor. We also need to research their friends, associates and neighbors, their FAN club.

Since our research methodology is to begin with ourselves and work back, you usually find these individuals first as a wife, widow or mother when they've already assumed their husband's name. Survey the existing literature, family histories published both online and off for hints. If the time frame is 1850 or after, you may find this woman in the census where you get a given name and an approximate date of birth, so it's logical to begin looking for a marriage record. If you've worked back and found her in each census in which she was living, you can probably determine an approximate date of marriage from the birth dates of the children. Find the oldest child and begin searching for the marriage back from that point.

Before you start looking for a civil marriage, make sure the record exists. Identify where the couple was living about the time of their marriage and check [\*The Red Book\*](#) or other resource to determine what type of records were kept for the time and place where your ancestor lived and where the records currently reside.

If civil marriage records are not extant for that time and place you need to look for alternatives. Church records, marriage bonds or newspapers may provide information about the marriage and the maiden name. Look at all the records created by her husband. Is her name given on his death certificate, in his will or administration, in guardianship papers for her children, or on a tombstone? Did he fight in a war and was there a pension record? Have you checked for deeds where your female ancestor gave up her dower rights? On any of the documents requiring a witness make sure you check the identity of the witnesses as one could have been her father or brother.

In your ancestor's role as a mother, obtain the birth records of all of her children, both civil and religious. Depending on the time and place, her maiden name may appear on one of these records. Check the names of sponsors on baptismal records for the children as they might have been a brother or sister. Follow the children through their marriage as the parents' names may appear on their marriage license. Also check the death of every child. By the late 19th century parents' names were frequently recorded, although the accuracy will depend on the knowledge of the informant.

Your female ancestor was also a daughter and granddaughter, possibly a sister or niece. Look for males in the neighborhood who could have been a father, grandfather or uncle, then research them. Look particularly at probate and land records to see if your ancestor was named.

Women created sources such as letters, diaries and journals that are underutilized in research because they are difficult to find. If those records have not been passed down in your branch of the family, extend your research to find cousins. Check the historical societies where your ancestor lived to see if any records were deposited there. Other sources for these records are PERSI (Periodical Source Index maintained by the Allen County Public Library and online at [FindMyPast](#)) and [NUCMC](#) (the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections). References to both of these sources can be found in the Bibliography.

Even if you don't have the details for your female ancestor, write about her life. Read and use social histories to incorporate information on what her life typically would have been like. This is not writing fiction, but if you find a journal or diary of another woman living in the same time and place and of the same social class, you can assume that the activities of your ancestor were similar.

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