

Overview

Courthouses are places where you can find answers to genealogical problems. They are a rich source of written records created as a result of the laws, the time period, and personal activities of your ancestors. The steps delineated throughout this handout will assist you to be more effective as you visit courthouses in your search for genealogical information. To effectively use courthouse records you should:

1. Set a specific goal.
2. Prepare for the courthouse visit.
3. Find the correct courthouse office to visit
4. Ask the courthouse staff the right questions.
5. Search the indexes.
6. Find the record.
7. Abstract the original record and perhaps make a photocopy.
8. Use the information.

Key Terms

Guidebooks – Guidebooks such as *Redbook* or *The Handy Book for Genealogists* provide the telephone numbers of courthouses and also contain information such as addresses, formation dates of counties, etc.

Land Records – The name of the office where you will do searches for land records will vary. Records may be found in the Recorder of Deeds Office, County Recorder, Register of Conveyances or something similar.

Vital Records – These records include birth, marriage, divorce, and death records.

Probate Records – Wills, settlements, court proceedings, laws, etc., that deal with a person's estate after death. Probate records often include names of relatives

Orphans' Court – These courts involve records about children raised or cared for by someone other than their birth parents. The records usually give the name and age of the child and may include descriptions of the places the child lived. "Orphans and Orphanages" does not include adoption records. Adoption records are assigned to "Guardianship."

Index – An organized summary of a set of records or a book that allows a person to find a specific item within the set or book. Within the legal system, there are several variations of indexes. Some types of indexes include the Cott, Russell, Graves and others. It is a good idea to learn how to use these as it will help you locate the record.

Abstract – An abstract includes all of the important points in the original document: names, dates, residences, signatures, witnesses and other special clauses which may be found within the document.

Transcription – A transcription is a handwritten copy of an original document. Be sure to follow punctuation, spelling and capitalization exactly. If you supply missing letters, guess a word, use square brackets to surround your addition i.e. [born]. Also be sure to add a source citation to the transcription.

Steps for Using Courthouse Records

Step 1: Set a Specific Goal

A first step is to decide what you want to find at the location to be visited and prepare a one-page summary of the information you already know.

- At the top of your summary write your goal for the courthouse search.
- Show a brief summary of what you know about the family that is pertinent to your search.
- Take the summary sheet with you to the courthouse so you don't need to flip through a large file of papers while there.



Step 2: Prepare for the Courthouse Visit

Before leaving home, do some preparatory research:

- Check one of the county guidebooks such as *The Handybook for Genealogists* or *Red Book* to find when the county was formed and what its parent counties were. The reason for this is that the courthouse records may indicate that the family was in the area longer than thought and that, in fact, they may have been in the area before the present county was formed. In that case the search will need to be extended to the parent counties.
- Check online Web sites to gather any information they may offer.
- Is there a Web site of the county's records? (Check www.USGenWeb.org and other sites.)
- Note which libraries are in the county and access their Web sites. Some libraries have been given possession of records from



overflowing courthouses.

Glean information from Web sites such as:

- FamilySearch.org
- Ancestry.com
- Footnote.com

Sites such as these often have information about the county and give you an idea of which records to search. Some sites also have useful tutorials and articles that can be of great help.

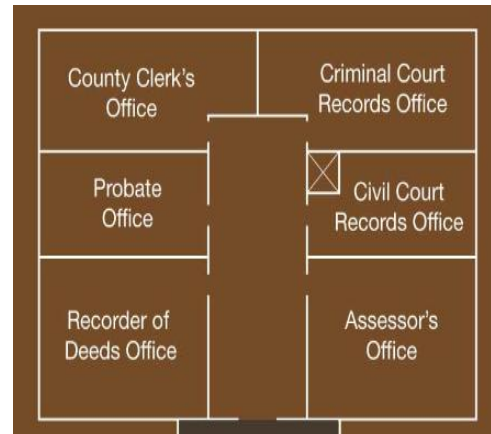
Determine which courthouse departments you will be visiting:

- Register of Deeds.
- Probate Department. In some states this may be called the Surrogate's Office, the Orphan's Court, or the Register of Wills.
- Vital Records. This is where marriage, birth, and death records are located. The records may be housed in the Probate Department or Register of Deeds Office.
- Civil Court Department.

Some of these departments may be combined depending upon the state or county courts.

As with any trip it is a good idea to pack the right things. You might include:

- Information from *The Handybook for Genealogists*.
- Information from *Ancestry's Red Book*.
- USGenWeb.org county printouts.
- Addresses of courthouses and other local repositories or cemeteries you want to visit.
- Summary of family you have prepared.
- Supplies – Lined paper, pens, and pencils
- Magnifying glass
- Change for the photocopy machines and parking
- Camera (optional, but handy if you are not allowed to photocopy documents)
- Flashlight and batteries (lights go out, and



attics are dim)

- Maps: road, topographical USGS, county highway, state outline

Step 3: Find the Correct Courthouse Office to Visit

- When entering the courthouse, go to the posted courthouse directory to find the location of the office you want, such as Register of Deeds. Upon entering the appropriate office, be aware of open doors that may lead to the Record Room. In the Register of Deeds office you can usually walk right into that Record Room from the clerk's office. However, you can wait for the clerk to offer to help you. At that point be prepared to respond that "I would like to see the indexes from ____ to ____."



Step 4: Ask the Courthouse Staff the Right Questions

- If you wait for the clerk to ask if he or she may help you, be prepared to respond, "I would like to see the indexes from ____ to ____." Hopefully you have done some planning and know the dates for your proposed search. The clerk will likely either wave you toward the Record Room or will take you to the room and point out where the indexes are located. This may be a good time to ask the clerk if photocopying is allowed. Is it self-service? What is the cost per copy?
- Resist the impulse to ask the clerk for additional help. Take time to survey the room, do some exploring, and see if you can find what you need.
- If you can't find the needed indexes, ask the clerk where they are located. They may be in an attic, basement, or another room or building.
- If the clerk says, "Our courthouse burned in 1840," do not be discouraged. Ask what records survived. You may find that although



the courthouse burned, many of the records were saved and are still available.

Step 5: Search the Indexes

- Find the shelves with the indexes. Search the indexes first. The indexes should all be in the same location.
- Become familiar with various indexes before making your trip. Spend a few minutes figuring out how to use the indexes in this courthouse. At the front of an index is usually a diagram and explanation of how to use it. This is an important step because it is easy to overlook important documents otherwise.
- After finding the surname being researched, write down the information on all those with that surname who lived in the pertinent time period. If the list is extensive, see if it is permissible to photocopy or photograph the index entries. Many times it is permissible to photocopy the index pages, but sometimes it is not allowed because the indexes are so heavily used.
- Copy all the pertinent entries even if there is not enough time to look at them all while at the courthouse. Then after arriving back home, it will usually be possible to order microfilm from the Family History Library to examine the other entries for useful information.
- Go through the list; pick the most likely entries to examine first. Note the record book and page numbers, and then look around the Record Room to see if you can find that record book. If after looking you still can't find it, ask the clerk. It may be in an attic, basement, or other location.



Book "D" from AD 1853 to 1861

<i>Johnson Charles B</i>	<i>Ferguson Harriet</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Jackson Benjamin</i>	<i>Tutton Lydia Ann</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>James Henry C</i>	<i>Rhodes Ellen Louisa</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Jones Emanuel</i>	<i>Tutton Ellen</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>Jordan John</i>	<i>Kimball Adeline</i>	<i>212</i>
<i>Johnson David W</i>	<i>Pearson Rebecca</i>	<i>217</i>

Step 6: Find the Record

Find the document in the record book. Make sure you look at all the pages relating to that document. Also look at the documents before and after the item you are examining. Sometimes they too are pertinent to your search.

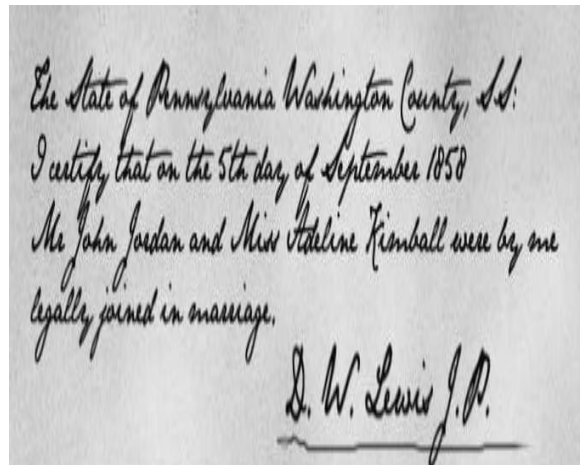
Step 7: Abstract the Original Record and Perhaps Make a Photocopy

Do not try to photocopy everything found. Time will pass quickly and the opportunity to absorb the information in each document will be lost. If permissible, you may be allowed to use a digital camera for copies. It is, however, a good idea to abstract all items examined.

Learn how to read old handwriting and the technique for abstracting documents before going to the courthouse. Then it will be possible to quickly abstract or transcribe the documents. There are some Web sites that can help you with this (see Additional Resources). Even if a document does not seem pertinent to your search, always note the book and page that you examined and abstract the record. You can't be sure at this point in your search if it is pertinent. Even if it is clearly not related to your search, quickly note the book and page number so you won't wonder later if you looked at it. One of the biggest errors researchers make is to hastily decide what is pertinent to their search. It is usually only after some study that this can be properly assessed.

Step 8: Use the Information

Once you have found the information you were looking for, it may provide you with several clues to other documents you will find useful.



Additional Resources

The Board for Certification of Genealogists provides annotated examples of online transcribing and abstracting.

<http://www.bcgcertification.org/tests/index.html>

Eichholz, Alice ed. *Redbook*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry Inc., 1992. This guide includes courthouse addresses, formation dates of counties, etc. Each state also has a summary written by an expert on that state's records and their organization.

The USGenWeb Project is a website that provides you with links to all the state genealogy websites which, in turn, provide gateways to the counties. www.USGenWeb.org essential information for the courthouse researcher; addresses, formation date of county, parent county, records available, maps, and other pertinent information.

Rose, Christine. *Courthouse Research for Family Historians*. San Jose Calif: CR Publications, 2004.

Rose, Christine. *Courthouse Indexes Illustrated*. San Jose Calif: CR Publications, 2006.

