
Thomas J. Watson Library

Research Guide

Genealogy Resources

Thomas J. Watson Library

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For current Library hours visit us at metmuseum.org/art/libraries-and-research-centers/thomas-j-watson-library

Where to Start

Vital Records

Vital records are often the first type of records that genealogists consult. They record life events and milestones like births, marriages, and deaths. Note that vital records may be inconsistent due to changes in measurement and recording practices over time.

- **Birth records** will usually include information such as proper name, sex, date, place of birth, and parents' names. Sometimes details like the parents' birth locations and occupations may also appear.
- **Marriage records** will usually show the full names of the bride and groom, date, place, and sometimes the ages and/or religious denominations of the bride and groom.
- **Death records** provide details such as age, marital status, cause of death, date and place of death or burial, and sometimes occupation and names and birthplaces of parents. The more recent the death record, the more information can be gleaned.

Census Records

Since 1790, the US Federal Census has been conducted every ten years. Data is available for all censuses conducted at least 72 years prior to the current year. Most of the records are handwritten and digitally scanned from microfilm, so you may encounter issues with legibility and/or errors in how the data was transcribed.

Easily search census records with HeritageQuest and Ancestry Library Edition. These databases are available onsite for use by visitors. Museum staff, interns, fellows, and volunteer tour guides may access HeritageQuest remotely or onsite, but Ancestry Library Edition is restricted to onsite use only. For more details on these databases, see the subsequent sections of this research guide.

When searching census records, keep in mind:

- Ninety-nine percent of the 1890 US census records were destroyed in a fire in 1921. Only 6,160 people out of the 1890 population of 62,979,766 are listed. Ancestry Library Edition has developed an 1890 Census Substitute using an assortment of data from national and local sources.
- The first six censuses (1790–1840) list only the names of the heads of household, with age brackets for males and females in each household.
- The 1830–1850 censuses are not indexed, and therefore can only be browsed by locality (ex: Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County NY, 1840)
- From 1850 on, the names of ALL members of a household should be listed, along with age, sex, race, and birthplace of each person (except for the 1890 census). From 1880

on, the relationship of each member of the household to the head and the birthplaces of parents are listed.

Primary Databases for Genealogy Research

HeritageQuest*

[HeritageQuest](#) contains the complete set of U.S. Federal Census Records from 1790-1950 and the searchable full-text of over 25,000 family and local histories. This collection also assembles banking, military, and other primary source records, as well as genealogical and local history serials.

Click “Search US Census,” “Search Canada Census” (both toward the bottom of the homepage), or “U.S. Indian Census Rolls” (toward the top of the homepage) to arrive at these respective search interfaces. If you would like to browse the US Census or Canada Census data, click on one of the “Included data collections” listed toward the bottom of the page, and locate the “Browse this collection” box in the right sidebar. The “Browse this collection” box should appear from the initial search page of the U.S. Indian Census Rolls.

You may want to refer to the [United States Census Bureau Index of Questions](#) webpage as you search or browse the census data in HeritageQuest to determine the questions that were asked for each census.

Other HeritageQuest resources include:

- **Search Books** – An extensive catalogue of family and local histories.
- **Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files** – Applications filed by officers and enlisted men who served in the war in the army, navy, and the marines.
- **Freedman’s Bank Records** (1861-1874) – A bank established for freed slaves during the Reconstruction Era. These records are particularly important because enslaved people didn’t have legal rights prior to 1865 and they may be difficult to find in early censuses or birth, marriage, and death records.
- **City Directories** – Alphabetical lists of city citizens, typically indicating heads of household, addresses, and occupations.
- **Annual Census Schedules** – Mortality, agriculture, industry/manufacturers, social statistics, and supplemental from 1850-1880.

Ancestry Library Edition (Onsite use only)

Ancestry Library Edition is one of the principal websites for genealogy research and contains databases of vital, census, military, and immigration records from around the world, with extensive holdings for the United States and the United Kingdom. Ancestry and HeritageQuest content overlap somewhat; both include U.S. Census data, but much of the other content differs.

Click on “Begin searching” to conduct a broad search across the Ancestry collections for an individual of interest. If you want to search through a specific collection, select it from the list in the right sidebar and then conduct your search.

For more detailed instruction on how use Ancestry Library Edition, access the Learning Center from the menu across the top of the webpage. The Learning Center offers tutorials on how to get started, how to read records, and an FAQ.

Newspapers and Periodicals

Historical [newspapers and periodicals](#) can provide valuable clues in genealogical research. Search for particular newspaper or periodical titles from the homepage of Watsonline to find both print and electronic material. To access online databases of historical newspapers and periodicals, select “E-Resources” from the menu across the top of the Watsonline homepage. Then, scroll down to the bottom of the page and select “Newspapers & Magazines” under “By Material Type.”

Some of the newspaper databases that Watson Library provides access to include:

- [American Periodicals Series*](#) (1740-1900)
- [Brooklyn Newsstand](#) (Brooklyn-based local newspapers) (Freely available)
- [Chronicling America](#) (1777-1963) (Freely available)
- [Gale Primary Sources*](#) (Use this link to search across the databases listed below)
 - [The Illustrated London News*](#) (1842-2003)
 - [The Times \(London\)*](#) (1785-Present)
 - [Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*](#)
 - [Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals*](#)
 - [British Library Newspapers*](#)
 - [Eighteenth Century Collections Online*](#)
 - [Photography: The World Through the Lens*](#)
 - [World's Fairs and Expositions: Visions of Tomorrow*](#)
- [The New York Times*](#) (1851-Four years prior to the current year)

Biographical Resources

To find electronic resources that concentrate on biographical information, select “E-Resources” in the menu across the top of the Watsonline homepage. Then scroll down to the bottom of the webpage and select “[Biography](#)” under the list of topic headings.

Maps and Geography

Maps can be used as aids in your genealogical research; for example, historical maps can be used to find locations that no longer exist or have changed names. To find e-resources in this area, select “E-Resources” in the menu across the top of the Watsonline homepage. Then scroll down to the bottom of the webpage and select “[Maps & Geography](#)” under the list of material types.

Other Helpful Databases in Watsonline

[Farber Gravestone Collection](#) (American Antiquarian Society) (Freely available)

The Farber Gravestone Collection is an unusual resource containing over 13,500 images documenting the sculpture on more than 9,000 gravestones, most of which were erected prior to 1800 in the Northeastern part of the United States. Though this database pertains to the sculpture on gravestones, the images are very high quality and the information on the gravestones can be easily read, which may be helpful in researching names, birth, and death dates.

[Oxford Reference Online*](#)

This resource provides full-text versions of many Oxford reference books that may be helpful in a genealogy search. For example:

- [The Oxford dictionary of local and family history](#) / David Hey; A UK-focused guide to genealogical terms that may come up during your research.
- [The concise dictionary of world place-names](#) / Everett-Heath, John; “This dictionary gives the history, meanings, and origin of an enormous range of country, region, island, city, and town names from around the world.”
- [Dynasties of the world](#) / John E. Morby; Lists of ruling families from around the world and throughout history.

The full list of titles available through Oxford Reference Online Premium is available on Watsonline at [this link](#) (or run a title search from the Watsonline homepage for “Oxford Reference.”)

Helpful Recommended Websites

[Association of Professional Genealogists \(APG\)](#)

The APG provides a directory of thousands of professional genealogists.

[Ellis Island – Port of New York Passenger Search](#)

A database of ships' registries and passenger lists. Free, but requires registration.

[Handbooks for Foreign Genealogical Research](#)

An annotated bibliography of genealogy publications by geographical region from The Library of Congress.

[The Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy at the New York Public Library](#)

The New York Public Library's Milstein Division collects publications documenting American history on the national, state, and local levels, with a particular focus on the New York region. Located in Room 121 of the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.

[JewishGen](#)

A portal and online community for researching Jewish ancestry. Access to much of the database requires the creation of a free personal user account and profile, though the InfoFiles Index portion of the website does not and provides various links to libraries, vital records databases, immigration information, and other sites

[FamilySearch](#)

FamilySearch, a project of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, contains an extensive collection of digitized microfilm and microfiche, books, serials, and other materials. Records come from the United States, Canada, the British Isles, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. A majority of the records contain information about persons who lived before 1930. This resource requires the creation of a free personal user account.

[National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\) - Resources for Genealogists](#)

National Archives Regional Facilities provide access to both federal and area-specific microfilm and original records at branches across the United States. Locations of facilities in the Northeastern U.S. include New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

[National Archives of the United Kingdom Discovery Catalogue](#)

The National Archives retains records created and collected by UK central government departments and major courts of law. Online materials are available through the Discovery catalogue, which includes wills (1384-1858), Cabinet papers (1915-1982), British Army medal index cards (1914-1920), Irish maps (c1558-c1610), Royal Navy (1853-1928) and Marines service records (1842-1925), and RAF combat reports (1939-1945). Instructions for searching some of their specific online collections are available [here](#).

[National Genealogical Society \(NGS\)](#)

The website of NGS, a non-profit organization based in Virginia, provides various educational resources for genealogical research.

[New York Genealogical and Biographical Society](#)

The NYG&B online records provide access to the archive of *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* periodical, New York religious record transcriptions, cemetery abstracts, state vital record indexes, and more. Descriptions of the various collections can be found [here](#).

Have a question?

Reach a reference librarian at watson.library@metmuseum.org or use our virtual chat service, Ask a Librarian, Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm, from the [Watsonline](#) homepage.

***Visitors must be onsite at The Met Cloisters or The Met Fifth Avenue to access this resource. Met staff, volunteer tour guides, interns, and fellows may access onsite or remotely.**

Last updated 01/2023