

Finding the Elusive Maiden Name

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Blank marriage certificate, Currier & Ives, 1877 (Library of Congress)

Many family historians despair about finding their ancestress's maiden name. The American custom of wives adopting their husbands' surnames hides their pre-marriage identities. Without her maiden name, researchers can't identify a woman's parents or discover information about her life before marriage. If they are lucky, her given name is known, but often the ancestress is just Mrs. John Smith. Fortunately, there is a hierarchy of strategies for pursuing the maiden name.

First, attempt to locate the marriage record, in any of its forms. Second, review other types of records that may contain the maiden name, such as her death records or her children's vital records. If the first two strategies fail to yield results, learn as much as possible about the husband. After all, the couple had to meet somewhere, and the geographic location of records generated by the husband's family may lead to records of the bride's family. Finally, family historians should immerse themselves in local history to understand the settlement and migration patterns of families, which might provide clues to a woman's origins.

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Find the marriage record

As always, work from the known to the unknown. In this case, the “known” is that a marriage took place. Thus, the first record to seek is a marriage record. To locate it, a researcher needs to know

- where the couple married
- when the couple married
- whether the ancestress married more than once

Where the couple married was often the town of the bride’s family. Of course, if her maiden name is unknown, the residence of her birth family may not be known either. However, the places where the couple lived immediately after they married or where their first child was born may have been identified, and these locations may be close to where the couple married. Check maps and finding aids for boundary and community name changes, since they dictate where to look for records.¹ The name of a place from family lore may be outdated or obsolete. Another possibility is that the couple may have married in a “Gretna Green” town with fewer marriage restrictions.²

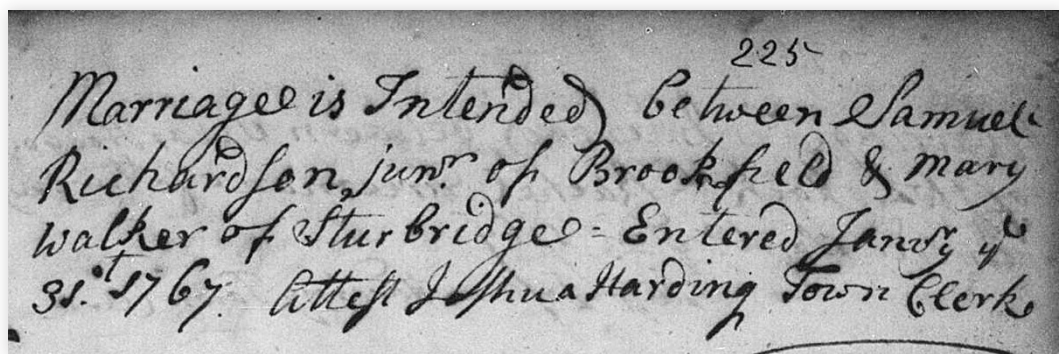
Next, determine when the couple married. Use the birth year of the first known child as a starting point and work backward. The 1900 and 1910 censuses ask about the length of the present marriage, and the 1930 census records the age at first marriage. It may be helpful to learn about the average age at first marriage in the area at the time. For example, in the Puritan colonies women tended to marry at twenty-three, while in the Chesapeake colonies most girls married at seventeen.³

Finally, try to establish whether the woman married more than once. If the record of a later marriage is found, it most likely shows the surname the ancestress used during her marriage to the previous husband. The record of the first marriage is needed to document her maiden name.

Types of marriage records

Two types of records indicate a marriage: declaration of the intention to marry and evidence that the marriage took place. Before the mid-1800s, evidence of the intention to marry included documents such as marriage intentions, marriage banns, marriage contracts including prenuptial agreements, and marriage bonds.

Marriage intentions were typically recorded by a town clerk and coincided with a local church proclaiming the banns. Banns announcing the upcoming marriage were read in church on three consecutive Sundays or posted on the church door for three weeks; they offered a chance for local citizens to identify any impediments to the nuptials. Banns may appear in the church register or in the county’s probate court records.



Marriage intention, Town of Sturbridge, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1767 (FamilySearch)

In civil law jurisdictions like Louisiana and Québec, marriage contracts drawn up by a notary spell out what each party would bring to the marriage and provide detailed information about both families. Prenuptial agreements in common law jurisdictions are usually filed in deed books, court records, or marriage records.

Particularly popular in the South, marriage bonds promised payment of a certain sum to a government official if the marriage could not legally proceed. The bond announced the upcoming nuptials and was contracted by the groom and his surety. Often related to the bride, this person who guaranteed payment may have been her father or brother.

Websites cited in this article were viewed on 25 July 2023.

1. “State Maps,” *Maps of US* (<https://www.mapofus.org/state-maps>), and “Atlas of Historical County Boundaries,” *Newberry Library* (<https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb>).

2. “Gretna Greens in the United States,” *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Gretna_Greens_in_the_United_States).

3. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 75, 284.

KNOW all Men by these presents, That we Charles Reab and William Whitfield are held and firmly bound unto Esquire, Governor or Chief Magistrate of the Commonwealth of Virginia, in the just and full sum of One Hundred and Fifty Dollars, to which payment well and truly to be made to the said Governor and his successors, for the use of the Commonwealth, we bind ourselves, and each of us, our and each of our Heirs, Executors, and Administrators, jointly and severally, firmly by these presents, Sealed with our Seals and dated this 12th day of February 1803

THE CONDITION of the above Obligation is such, That whereas there is a Marriage shortly intended to be had and solemnized between the above bound Charles Reab and Patsy Whitfield Now Therefore, If there be no lawful cause to obstruct said Marriage, then the above Obligation to be void, otherwise to remain in full force and virtue.

Signed, Sealed, and delivered in the presence of Christ Lee Beale (SEAL.) Wm. Whitfield (SEAL.)

Marriage bond, City of Norfolk, Virginia, 1803 (FamilySearch)

Some jurisdictions required signed verification of parental consent for underage brides or grooms. The threshold for legal age depended on the jurisdiction. Most often, however, the consent was integrated into the banns or bonds. By the mid-1800s in many areas, these documents were replaced by the modern marriage license.

Actual evidence of marriage may take the form of a certificate or register kept by a church, county, town, or city; a personal record, such as a family bible; or a newspaper announcement. Generally, when a minister performed a marriage, he was then required to report or "return" the marriage to the government clerk.

Search for records at the appropriate jurisdictional level, and use the Periodical Source Index⁴ and separate journal indexes as finding aids. Two large regional indexes may be helpful:

- New England Marriages Prior to 1700 by Clarence Almon Torrey, which identifies approximately 99 percent of the more than thirty-seven thousand pre-1700 marriages in New England, including nearly 70 percent of the maiden names. Torrey's book and three supplements by Melinde Lutz Sanborn are available in many libraries and digitized on Ancestry.⁵

- Western States Marriage Records Index⁶ extracted by Brigham Young University-Idaho. "Most of the pre-1900 marriages are included in the index for Arizona, Idaho, and Nevada." Significant numbers of marriages from eight other western states bring the current total in the database to over nine hundred thousand.

Other records that may have the maiden name

If the hunt for the marriage record is unsuccessful, or it doesn't yield the maiden name, try following the woman through her various roles as an individual, mother, and sibling. Devise a search strategy that moves from likely sources for discovering a maiden name to less well-known sources, in the following order:

1. the woman's death record (especially in the twentieth century)
2. her children's birth, baptism, marriage, and death records
3. less familiar sources

Form V. S. No. 11-200M-1-14-16

STATE OF OHIO
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

PLACE OF DEATH Cuyahoga County of Cuyahoga Township of Cleveland Registration District No. 5118 File No. 994

Village of Cleveland Primary Registration District No. 5118 Registered No. 2558

City of Cleveland (No. 5118 St. 18 Ward) [If death occurred in a hospital, give the number.]

FULL NAME Jennie W. Homer

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS				MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
1 SEX <u>F</u>	2 COLOR OR RACE <u>W</u>	3 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED <u>Widowed</u>	4 DATE OF BIRTH <u>July 11 1867</u>	5 DATE OF DEATH <u>Jan 6 1917</u>	6 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended death from <u>Jan 6 1917</u> to <u>Jan 7 1917</u>
7 AGE <u>49</u> yrs. <u>3</u> mos. <u>27</u> ds.	8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work <u>at home</u>	9 BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <u>Pennsylvania</u>	10 NAME OF FATHER <u>John Stinson</u>	11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country) <u>Pennsylvania</u>	12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER <u>Sarah Braddy</u>
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country) <u>Pennsylvania</u>	14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE (Informant) <u>A. J. Cannon</u> (Address) <u>1416 Williamsburg Road</u>				
15 JAN 8 1917	16 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>Crematorium, Pa.</u> DATE OF BURIAL <u>January 8 1917</u>				
17 UNDERTAKER <u>Beck & Co.</u> ADDRESS <u>1000 Broadway</u>					

Death certificate with names of parents, Cleveland, Cuyahoga, Ohio, 1917 (FamilySearch)

4. "Periodical Source Index," Genealogy Center, Allen County Public Library (<https://www.genealogycenter.info/persi>).
5. "U.S., New England Marriages Prior to 1700," Ancestry (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3824>).
6. "About the Western States Marriage Record Index," BYU Idaho (<http://abish.byui.edu/specialCollections/westernStates/aboutWesternStates.cfm>).

If the ancestress died in the twentieth century, her maiden name may appear on her death certificate. Of course, the information on a death certificate is only as good as the knowledge of the informant. Some late nineteenth-century death records may state the woman's maiden name, but it depends on the record-keeping practices of the jurisdiction.

Records of the children of the ancestress—for birth, baptism, marriage, and death—may include their mother's maiden name. Baptismal sponsors were often related to one of the parents. The recording of births in the colonial period tended not to furnish the mother's maiden name. For that era, records may simply say "Jonathan, son of Abel and Sarah," or just "Jonathan, son of Abel." Unusual first or middle names given to the children could be surnames from the families of the parents and are worth investigating. If not in the father's line, they might be clues to the mother's family.

In marriage records, identification of the parents of the couple was not common until the late nineteenth century, but if a child of the ancestress married in or after that time, be sure to seek out the record. If any of the woman's children died in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, the mother's maiden name may be reported on the child's death certificate.

Other sources that may provide a maiden name are listed in table 1. The order for searching them depends on the era.

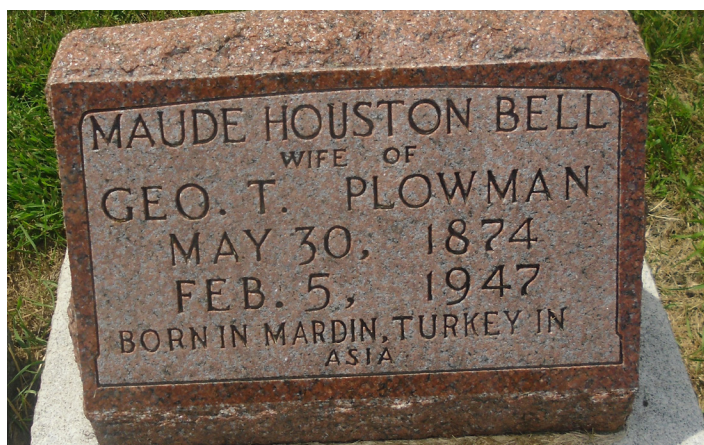
TABLE 1: LESS WELL-KNOWN SOURCES FOR THE MAIDEN NAME

Resource	Research Strategy
Cemetery	A woman's maiden name may be on her grave marker or in the cemetery's records.
Deeds	When a parcel of land has been left to children and then sold, the daughter may be listed in the index under her married name. A reading of the deed then reveals her maiden name. Other deeds may record the gift of a father to his married daughter and her husband, or the sale of property she inherited from her father.
Letters and diaries	Seek materials written by residents of the community of the ancestress. These items may reference her parents or siblings.
Military pension file	Search for a widow's pension related to her husband's service in the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican War, Civil War (Union), Indian Wars, and Spanish-American War. The widow had to prove her marriage to the soldier, and the documentation may give her maiden name.
Newspapers	Search for the woman's death announcement and possibly a wedding anniversary article as well as the marriage and death announcements of her children published after about 1880; later articles are more likely to have detailed information. Check religious and ethnic newspapers in addition to secular newspapers. Even if an obituary doesn't divulge the woman's maiden name, it may report her siblings.
Social Security Application (SS-5)	Look for the SS-5 filed by the woman's children. The form specifies the name of the applicant's father and the mother's maiden name. Ancestry has indexed these names through 2007. ⁷ For information about requesting a copy of the original application, see https://www.ssa.gov/foia/request.html .
US federal census ⁸	Starting with the 1880 census and going forward, look for "mother-in-law" or "son-in-law" or "sister" (with a different surname in the household of her brother). A person in the woman's household with a different surname from 1850 on may be related to her. Because the informant is not identified until 1940, seek confirmation in other records.
Will	The will of a woman's father or mother may identify her as a daughter and provide her married name. This strategy is most successful if the researcher has a hypothesis about the maiden name and is seeking confirmation. It also works when using a search engine or published index that encompasses all of the names and relationships in a locality's wills. Ancestry is gradually indexing all names in its collections of wills. ⁹

7. "U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007," *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60901>).

8. The 1925 Iowa state census records the maiden name of each adult's mother.

9. In Ancestry's Card Catalog (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog>), enter the name of the state and "wills" to choose a collection and search it individually.



Tombstone with maiden name of deceased woman, Mound Cemetery, Le Sueur, Minnesota (Find A Grave)

Important strategies for maiden name research

If none of these records reveal the maiden name, explore information about the husband and his family, associates, and neighbors—his FAN club. Then get immersed in the local history of the couple's first community.

Learn as much as possible about the husband

Before the twentieth century, men tended to generate more records than women, so it's generally easier to track the husband than his wife. Wives were legally subordinate to their husbands until the gradual passage of married women's property acts and other laws granting them rights.¹⁰

County and town histories often contain clues that cannot be found elsewhere. Seek a digital or print version of the couple's town or county history to read about the families who settled the town. The husband may be named with other associates. For example, the maiden name of Mary, first wife of Revolutionary War patriot, Jacob Homer, is mentioned only in the *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania*.¹¹

In addition to seeking information about all of the wife's husbands, if she married more than once, locate records about their FAN clubs. Hunt for clues such as the migration patterns of the husband and his ancestors, as families tended to move in groups and

the families of the bride and groom may have traveled together before the couple married. Determine the family's religion and the husband's occupation, which may lead to information in church records and occupation-specific business records.

Focus on local history

Understanding the history of a location is critical for finding and interpreting records. When was the town settled? When did record-keeping begin? What were the first churches and cemeteries? Which systems (such as government, court, church) handled land transactions, and which handled probate matters? Did the locality experience any major record losses, and do alternatives exist? The FamilySearch Research Wiki can answer some of these questions.¹²

Look for information about patterns of settlement. Early histories reveal not only the names of the first settlers but also clues to their origins. Identifying the surnames in the town of origin and the town of later settlement can be a helpful strategy for discovering a maiden name, as illustrated by the following case study.

Case Study: Maiden name of Ann Grosvenor of Pomfret, Connecticut

Ann (____) Grosvenor, the widow of Ebenezer Grosvenor, died 30 July 1743 "in the 56th year of her age" and is buried in the Wappaquians Burial Ground, at Pomfret, Connecticut.¹³ This age places her birth about 1687. The town of Pomfret was not settled until nearly 1699,¹⁴ so she could not have been born there. The research question is: Where was she born and who were her parents?

In the absence of a marriage record, the question can be answered by tracing the settlement of Pomfret. Its land was purchased in 1686 by twelve men from Roxbury, Massachusetts, but remained unsettled for the next thirteen years. Woodstock, the town immediately north of Pomfret, was also purchased by men from Roxbury; it was settled in 1686.¹⁵

Ann married Ebenezer Grosvenor about 1707, based on the birth of her first child, Susanna, at

10. "Timeline of Legal History of Women in the United States," *National Women's History Alliance* (<https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/resources/womens-rights-movement/detailed-timeline>).

11. J. Fraise Richard, editor, *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania*, (Chicago: Brown, Runk & Co., 1888), 1180. The preface notes that William S. Garvin began the history but died before completing the work.

12. "FamilySearch Research Wiki," *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page).

13. "Inscriptions in the Wappaquians Burial Ground, Pomfret, Conn., 1723-1861," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 73 (1919): 111.

14. Richard M. Bayles, editor, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (New York: Preston, 1889), 522.

15. Bayles, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 837.

Pomfret on 31 October 1708.¹⁶ Her husband arrived in Pomfret about 1700 with his mother, Esther Grosvenor of Roxbury.¹⁷ Since the settlers of both Pomfret and Woodstock hailed from Roxbury, it is highly likely that Ann's family was also from Roxbury.

A search for female children named Ann, born in Roxbury between 1685 and 1689 (the approximate time of Ann Grosvenor's birth), identified four girls.¹⁸ The surnames of the girls were matched to a list of Woodstock settlers,¹⁹ and two candidates for Ebenezer's wife emerged: Anna Lyon, daughter of Thomas and Abigail, born in 1689, and Anne Massey, daughter of John and Sarah, born in 1687. Anna Lyon died in 1693,²⁰ leaving Anne Massey as the only viable candidate. Thus, Ann Grosvenor's maiden name was likely Massey (a known version of Marcy²¹). By using this surname, more records can be sought to bolster the proof of her identity.

Conclusion

As always, work from the known to the unknown. A woman had a life and a name before her

marriage, and when she married her family didn't go away—they probably lived in the area. If records such as marriage bonds, intentions, licenses, and certificates do not exist, learn all about the husband and his family; most likely they interacted with the bride's family. Finally, delve into the history, geography, and record-keeping of the area where the couple first settled, for clues about available records that might lead to the woman's maiden name. 🌳

Resources

- FamilySearch. "Maiden Names in the United States," *FamilySearch Research Wiki*. https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Maiden_Names_in_the_United_States
- Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Finding Female Ancestors*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2013.
- _____. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestors: Special Strategies for Uncovering Hard-to-Find Information About Your Female Lineage*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1998.
- Schaefer, Christina Kassabian. *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999.

16. "Connecticut, U.S., Town Birth Records, pre-1870 (Barbour Collection)," *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1034>), record for Susana Grosvenor; citing records of Pomfret, Connecticut.
17. Bayles, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 522.
18. "Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620-1850," *American Ancestors* (www.americanancestors.org). Search by Name: Ann* (exact), Location: Roxbury (exact), Record Type: Birth, Years: 1685 - 1689; move the slider for Years from broad to exact, in Search Filters on the left side of the screen.
19. Bayles, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 840-841.
20. "Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620-1850," *American Ancestors* (www.americanancestors.org), record for death of Anna Lyon, 16 October 1693; citing records of Roxbury, Massachusetts.
21. Mrs. Calvin D. Paige, "The Marcy Family," read before the Quinabaug Historical Society, 1902, first page (unnumbered); digital images, *FamilySearch Digital Library* (<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/523589>).



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