

Online Sources Now a Treasure Trove for Family History



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The archives coming online today, through which one can discover family history, are truly amazing. Well beyond the commercialized services such as Ancestry.com, primary sources including newspaper archives, court records, military documents, business records such as tax rolls and deeds and census reports are now widely available on the Internet. They provide an opportunity to reconstruct family events as never before.

It's fascinating to delve into this material. From online sources, I now know the ship on which my first ancestor sailed from Rotterdam to Philadelphia in 1750 to join William Penn's colony. I learned that, when he arrived, he was required to sign an oath of allegiance to the English King, as many immigrant Germans were when the 18th Century German diaspora flooded into the English colonies in the new world. Heinrich Redinger was so weak upon his arrival, after a likely horrendous months-long voyage where food and water ran short and disease plagued the passengers, that he was barely able to sign the oath.

Skipping forward a few generations, I've learned from online sources where and when my great-grandfather mustered in and out of his Union Army regiment in the Civil War, what his duty consisted of, and the terrible conditions in which his brother was held at Andersonville Prison after being captured by the South.

It is especially interesting to discern patterns as a family evolves over time. The records show my family members moving further and further west over the generations, pursuing first agriculture, then business and professional opportunities. Starting in Germany, thence to Philadelphia, then to Berks County, Pennsylvania, from there to Armstrong County in Western Pennsylvania, to Pasadena in California, to Puerto Rico, and finally to the Bay Area.

Our family reflected a common pattern, accounting for much of the migration from Europe to the United States, and then westward across our nation. In particular, they responded in the 1890s when cheap land in Southern California was offered to farmers in the East, part of the mass migration so colorfully documented by the historian Carey McWilliams in *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*.

The trials and tribulations our ancestors faced, and overcame, come through loud and clear from the records they left behind. In 1895, my great-grandparents left their comfortable home and farm in Pennsylvania, taking their younger children, including my nine-year-old grandmother, west to Pasadena. They went out to join their older son Camden, who had started a business as a citrus grower and wholesaler. No sooner had they arrived than the whole family became ill with typhoid fever, probably from improper public sanitation in what were then primitive conditions in Los Angeles. One of their cherished younger sons died in the epidemic.

One of their challenges in LA that recently came to light from newspaper records was a complete surprise to me. In 1896, another fruit distributor at the LA Central Market apparently appropriated some of our family's fruit crates. My great grandfather set out to rectify this situation with the ostensible thief. Harsh words followed, and the other fellow hit my great-grandfather over the head with a monkey wrench. The charge, perhaps a bit overblown, that my great-grandfather filed against the other guy, for assault with a deadly weapon, was covered by the *Los Angeles Herald*.

Seen through our family's experiences, Los Angeles in the 1890s was a rough-and-tumble place. Now I understand why my great-grandparents fled back to their peaceful farm in Pennsylvania a few years later, with my grandmother in tow.

Great-uncle Camden stayed on in the West, though, expanding the citrus-growing business from Los Angeles to Puerto Rico. The conditions on this new frontier were as challenging as they had been in Los Angeles. In records of the Puerto Rico Supreme Court that have recently come online, I read about Camden's 1912 case after a neighboring farmer's cattle and goats committed "depredations" against 40 of the orange trees at his Puerto Rico farm. The Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that an owner of animals is responsible for damages they create, and affirmed Camden's damage award of \$400 from his neighbor. *Redinger v. Crespo* is still cited in cases regarding animal misbehavior.

Reconstructing family history can be endlessly fascinating. It creates new respect for what our ancestors endured – hardship during immigration, war, imprisonment, illness, assault, death, and even animal "depredations."

The records left behind, such as legal and press reports, obviously don't tell the whole story about our family members. But one can learn enormously from these new online sources. The information contributes to an understanding not only of family history, but provides a real window into the larger social trends of which our ancestors were a part. 🍷

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