

Jurisdictions Explained

Finding New Avenues of Research for Your Family

Diana Elder, AG

Family Locket Genealogists



FamilyLocket.com

Diana@FamilyLocket.com

Records can be kept on the personal, town, city, county, state, regional, and federal levels. Exploring each level of record-keeping for a locality can reveal additional records for a research subject. Creating a personal locality guide for your research that includes each appropriate jurisdiction and links to the records and repositories will significantly enhance any research project.

Understanding Jurisdiction and its Value for Research

A jurisdiction is the political, administrative, religious, or private body that had authority over a region or people and kept records for a specific purpose. In the face of record loss at one jurisdiction, records from another can fill the gap. The following table suggests record types at various jurisdictions but is not all inclusive. Notice the overlap. Although a type of record could have been mandated by several different jurisdictions, availability will vary widely.

Private	Town/City	County/District	State/Province	Federal
Church	Vital	Vital	Land	Land
Cemetery	School	Court	Military	Military
Newspapers	Cemetery	Probate	Tax	Tax
Business	Histories	Tax	Vital	Vital
Societies	Poor	Land	Census	Immigration
Directories	Voter	Naturalization	Naturalization	Census
Schools	School	Histories	Legislative	Cemetery
Manuscripts	Militia	Cemetery	Court	Petitions
Funeral Homes	Census	Military	Cemetery	Pensions
Family	Probate	Voter	Pensions	Legislative

Historical Boundary Changes and Overlapping Jurisdictions

Study the history of a location to discover what political body had jurisdiction at any point of time in history. For example, colonial powers in North America such as the Spanish, French, and British, created records before Canada, the United States, and Mexico formed present-day borders.

Learn of any county, state, or country boundary changes. When did the boundary change? Where are the records held? What courthouse would the ancestor have used to record a deed or return a marriage certificate?

Within any given jurisdiction such as political or church, various levels will be responsible for creating and holding the records. Understanding the hierarchy of the institution will help to locate the appropriate records. For example, the ecclesiastical divisions of the Catholic church include the Archdiocese, Diocese, Parish, and Auxiliary Parish.

Civil Law or Common Law

The majority of the United States falls under the common law jurisdiction, following the British system set up in the colonial era. However, if researching in states that France or Spain governed, the jurisdiction was governed by civil law. Understanding what laws our ancestors lived under will help to locate and interpret the records. If researching in another country, be aware of what type of law governed the area at the time of the ancestor's residence.

Each state in the United States has its own court system with a variety of courts such as probate, chancery, civil, criminal, circuit, state supreme court, etc. Research the types of cases heard by each level of court in an area and seek out the records for those that apply to the research question.

The Value of Locality Research

Roadblocks in genealogy are often of the researcher's making – failing to understand the locality of a research subject. Scale brick wall research problems by studying the location and learning the records available in a region. Explore jurisdictions for any locality using two valuable tools available at FamilySearch: the FamilySearch Research Wiki and Catalog

The FamilySearch Research Wiki

The FamilySearch Research Wiki offers help for researching localities worldwide with methodology for each locality, research tools, and links to record collections. The Wiki is a free, online genealogical guide created by FamilySearch. It includes guidance to assist genealogists of all expertise and offers over 91,000 articles.

By definition, the Wiki is a collaborative effort by many individuals and groups. Content can be submitted via the "FamilySearch Wiki: Content Submission Form," linked to on the left sidebar. Simply fill out the provided form and a volunteer will review the submission and if appropriate add it to the Wiki. With the internet ever changing, this is an opportunity for all researchers to submit updated links to societies or libraries, new online

databases, or resources found in a repository. Any inaccurate historical or geographical information can also be corrected. To request permission to edit a Wiki page directly, fill out the appropriate form.

A society, archive or other organization may want to adopt a page. For specific instructions, see <https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Help:Adopt-a-page>.

Tips for Searching the FamilySearch Research Wiki

- The Wiki provides resources for research. Use it to search places and topics, not people.
- Use keywords, not phrases. For example, try "California Probate Records," not "how do I locate probate records for California?"
- Search by multiple jurisdictions: country, state, county/province, city. Each level of jurisdiction will have different information on that page.
- Start with broad localities such as a country or state, then click through to smaller ones such as a county or city.
- Use the FamilySearch Research Wiki to find information on:
 - History and geography of a locality.
 - Timelines for major events may be listed.
 - Published histories for the location with a link to the Family History Library Catalog entry will be included.
 - Links to maps and gazetteers with historical place names can serve to pinpoint the specific area of research for an ancestor.
 - Record availability
 - A records table for all United State counties will give the beginning date for basic records such as land, probate, census, etc.
 - For international research, the Wiki will guide the researcher to the appropriate page for information on the records.
 - Links to online databases
 - Each international page and state page for "United States Genealogy" includes a link to a page for online records. For that state.
 - Separated by record type, this will include listings for a variety of websites. If the website is subscription-based a (\$) will be listed after the title.

Why Use the FamilySearch Catalog?

- Billions of records, many digitized and available online for free
- Numerous Family History Centers worldwide provide access to records not available from home
- Learn about possible records in any locality to further research and break through brick walls

Types of Searches

- **Place** – use this search to locate all of the records for a specific locality.
 - U.S. searches: enter United States, then name of state, county, or city; don't use "county" in the search.
 - Alternately, enter the county or city and select from the options that appear.
 - Other countries: enter the name of the country in English, then the state, province, and town name in the country's language.
 - For the British Isles, search with and without "shire" for complete results.
 - Alternately, enter the city or town name and select from the options that appear.
 - Tip #1: Spell place names correctly, the catalog will not recognize incorrect place names.
 - Tip #2: Search for records at each jurisdictional level: country, state, county, and town.
 - Tip #3: Use the "Places within" feature on the results page to see other jurisdictions such as state, county, or city/township.
- **Surnames**– use this search to find histories, biographies, or genealogies that mention a specific surname; the search will also find the surname used in a title.
 - Enter several variants of the name for the best results.
 - Combine the surname search with another search such as place or keywords if the surname is common.
- **Title** – find specific titles of books, journals, microfilm, maps.
 - Enter words in the title, can be out of order or missing words.
 - Similar to a keyword search, but the search terms must be in the title.
- **Author** – locate all titles attributed to individual authors.
 - Enter first name and surname for best results.
 - Can enter just a surname or first name if needed – will have more results.
 - Authors can be listed in multiple ways, complete names or just initials.
- **Subjects** – uses the Library of Congress subject headings.
 - Use for broad searches: Native Americans, Civil War, Quakers.
 - Think of known ancestor information such as religion, nationality, language.
- **Keywords** – will search all catalog entries containing the search terms: authors, titles, subjects, film notes, etc.
 - Enter search terms then filter by year, category, or language to reduce the number of results.
 - Tip: Use the keyword search for finding family histories for a common surname.
- **Call Number** – use if you already have the call number to locate specific information for publication such as the author, title, date and place published.
 - Helpful to quickly locate the catalog entry for a specific book, journal, or other publication.
 - Tip: if searching locally at the Family History Library, jot down the call # for each book searched. At home use the catalog to quickly locate the book and create a full source citation.

- **Film/Fiches Number** – use this if you have the microfilm number from an indexed record to locate the original image.
- **Book Search** – to find all books or periodicals that have been digitized by FamilySearch, click "Books" under "Search" on the FamilySearch home page.
 - Search by author, title, or key word such as a surname or place.
 - Some publications are copyrighted and can only be viewed at the Family History Library or at a Family History Center. Keep a list of the publications to view when at one of these locations.

Tips for Better Research Using the FamilySearch Catalog

- **Locate and look at the original image:** Many indexed records on FamilySearch do not have the image attached. To find the original microfilm follow these steps:
 - Find the FHL microfilm number in the source citation.
 - Copy and paste this number into the Film/Fiches category on the FamilySearch Catalog.
 - From the results page, click on the camera icon to view the digitized microfilm.
 - View the first image in the microfilm to see the physical source.
 - Create a source citation for the image: who created the source, what is the source, when was the source created, where in the microfilm is the source (image number), where in the world is the source (location of physical source).
 - Use the indexed date to locate the record in the digitized microfilm. Skip ahead in the film by entering specific image numbers.
- **Use the catalog to find new sources to search**
 - When researching in any location, do a place search to see what records are available.
 - Browse the titles looking for information that will help your research progress.
 - Pay attention to histories, gazetteers, maps, and other books or microfilm that give context to the location.
 - Books that are only available at the Family History Library can often be viewed at other libraries. Click "view this catalog record in WorldCat for other possible copy locations" to see if it is at a library nearby. Use interlibrary loan at your local library to order a copy.
- **View WorldCat** from the home page of the catalog to search books, DVDs, CDs, and articles.
 - Search collections and services of more than 10,000 libraries worldwide.
- **View Archive Grid** from the home page of the catalog to find archives and libraries worldwide
 - Zoom in or out on the world map.
 - Search by keyword to find possible unique collections for your surname or locality.

Additional Resources

Videos / Webinars

Batson, Danielle, Jenny Hansen, Jeff Svare, "Unlocking the Power of the FamilySearch Wiki." *RootsTech* 27 February 2020. <https://www.rootstech.org/video/unlocking-the-power-of-the-familysearch-wiki>.

Monson, Sharon D. "Its All In There – Navigating the FamilySearch Catalog." *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*. 9 March 2018. https://familytreewebinars.com/download.php?webinar_id=827.

Podcasts

Dyer, Nicole, and Diana Elder. "RLP 4: Locality Research Part 1." *FamilyLocket*. 6 August 2018. <https://familylocket.com/rlp-4-locality-research-part-1/>.

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----- "RLP 18: How to Create a Locality Guide." *FamilyLocket*. 12 November 2018. <https://familylocket.com/rlp-18-how-to-create-a-locality-guide/>.

----- "RLP 21: The FamilySearch Catalog." *FamilyLocket*. 3 December 2018. <https://familylocket.com/rlp-21-the-familysearch-catalog/>.

Articles

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----- "Research Like a Pro, Part 3: Where Did They Live?" *FamilyLocket*. 29 June 2017. <https://familylocket.com/research-like-a-pro-part-3-where-did-they-live/>

----- "The FamilySearch Catalog: A Researcher's Best Friend." *FamilyLocket*. 23 March 2017. <https://familylocket.com/the-familysearch-catalog-a-researchers-best-friend/>.

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Morton, Sunny. How to Use the FamilySearch Catalog: Your Ultimate Portal to Free Genealogy Records." *Lisa Louise Cooke's Genealogy Gems*. 5 May 2018. <https://lusalouisecooke.com/2018/05/05/familysearch-catalog/>.

Tanner, James. "How to Analyze Genealogical Sources: Part Three." *The Family History Guide Blog*. 15 May 2020. <https://www.thefhguide.com/blog/how-to-analyze-genealogical-sources-part-three/>

LOCALITY GUIDE TEMPLATE

Background

Quick Facts

Capital, dates of county formation, state formation, type of land (state land vs. federal land) when registration of births and deaths began, etc.

Online Research Guides

Links to the FamilySearch wiki guides about this locality and other guides online

Geography and Maps

Boundary changes, neighboring counties/towns, links to gazetteers, historical maps

Timeline of Major Events

Timeline of the area including major government changes and events

History

History of settlement, links to history articles and books about the locality, major periods, military engagements,

Migration Routes

Describe main migration routes through your locality and link to maps and articles about the subject.

Law and Government

Old books that have been digitized (via Google Books, Internet Archive, Geneanet, etc.) that contain the laws and statues of the particular locality that you are researching; blog posts and articles about laws in your locality (check out the Legal Genealogist blog and library websites)

Libraries and Archives

Repositories, courthouses, public libraries, genealogical libraries, etc. that are within the locality or specific to the locality, research aids. "America's Best Genealogy Resource Centers" by William Dollarhide and Ronald A. Bremer identifies the top 10 in each state and includes contact information and a summary of the record collections.

Genealogical Societies and Publications

List the genealogical societies and their publications about the locality.

Record Loss

List any record sets that have been lost due to courthouse fires, floods, etc. and any record substitutes.

Local History

Local history books: county histories, town histories, etc.

Reference Books

Additional books pertaining to research in this locality.

Record Collections

General Collections

Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, MyHeritage.com, FindMyPast.com etc. catalog titles about the locality

Bible Records and Compiled Genealogies

Links to websites that have Bible records for the locality

Cemetery Records

Links to cemetery records in the locality

Census Records and Substitutes

Links to different types of censuses: federal, state, town, colonial, territorial, census substitutes, etc.

Church Records

List the various denominations and where their records are kept.

Court Records

Links to court record collections and descriptions of what they contain

Ethnic Records

List the various ethnic groups in the locality and what unique record collections are available about them.

Immigration and Naturalization

Describe immigration in the locality and link to the associated record collections.

Land Records

Link to collections about land grants, patents, bounty lands, and other land records.

Legislative Records

Link to collections about legislative records, if applicable, i.e. Virginia's legislative petitions.

Military Records

Colonial, militia, war, regimental histories, etc.

Newspapers and Directories

Link to websites which contain digitized newspapers for your locality or how to find them if they are not digitized.

Probate Records

Link to record collections about will administration, probate, etc.

Vital Records (Birth, Marriage, Death)

List the start of registration for birth, marriage, and death records. List any Gretna greens.

Tax Records

Link to tax record collections, personal property tax, land tax, etc.

[Add Additional Sections depending on your locality and what types of records exist]

About

This template was created by Nicole Dyer and Diana Elder. They can be reached by emailing Nicole@FamilyLocket.com and Diana@FamilyLocket.com.

A link to this template is found in the book "Research Like a Pro: A Genealogist's Guide."

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