

The 12 Days of Genealogy

Finding Ancestors in Holiday Records

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Have you considered what traditions and associated records can tell you about your ancestors? And how to track your ancestors?

Before starting the search for holiday records, gaining an understanding of your ancestor's religious and secular celebrations of Christmas is important in understanding where to find holiday themed records.

[Note: Most of the records discussed revolve around the Christmas holidays. If your ancestors were of a different faith, determine what similar records exist based on their specific religious holidays and customs.]

On the First Day of Christmas, the Genie Santa gave me...

1. Oral Histories

The holidays are a popular time for gathering oral history and also creating oral history recordings. Family is gathering, telling stories and re-living earlier days. Don't rush this! A cup of coffee is often your best genealogy tool in the toolbox! You may be surprised at what you learn.

Additionally, ask your family members if any oral history recordings or videos in your family exist. If so, take them out and listen/watch. Make your own oral history recordings. Today's smartphone technology makes it easier than ever.

2. Christmas Cards & Letters

Love them or hate them, Christmas cards and letters have been around for a long time! Why? Christmas cards place family members in time and often in place. Be sure and check any envelopes for return addresses and postmarks. You can track your ancestor's location through the postmark.

Christmas cards with photographs are even better! These can be the only photograph you have of an ancestor. Those holiday letters provide family details and stories that let you really get to know your ancestors.

3. A Family Address Book

Carefully, go through the old family address book. Make note of family member addresses and any extra notes by a name.

4. Christmas Ornaments

Does your family have special heirloom ornaments? What is the story behind those ornaments? Are they unique to a specific culture? Do you understand the family culture and how it impacts your research? Ask! You can learn important social history from your family's answers.

5. Special Holiday Recipes

What does your family eat for Christmas dinner? Are there culturally specific dishes that you have each year? Do you know the history of these dishes and why they are important to your family? Finding the answers to these questions can reveal more about a family's cultural heritage and socioeconomic status.

6. Church Pageant Programs

Who remembers being a part of a church Christmas pageant? Your ancestors likely did, too! Seek out those old Christmas programs that were saved either in your family or in the church archives. Find not only your ancestor(s), but also collateral ancestors and families. Use these to place ancestors in place and time.

7. Church Event News in the Local Newspapers

During the holiday season, your ancestors traveled to visit family and friends just as we often do today. Society pages in newspapers often wrote blurbs on who went visiting and who had visitors. Names, relationships and locations about families and individuals can be found in these blurbs. These society pages are excellent sources of family information.

8. School Programs

What parent does not save some of their child's school artwork? School programs?

Just like church programs, school Christmas and holiday programs provide information on the community as well as placing families and children in time and place.

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10. Vertical Files

Vertical files are like a "box of chocolates". You never know what you are going to get! [I hope Tom Hanks from Forrest Gump forgives me for taking liberties with that phrase.]

But, it's true. Vertical files can hold a wide variety of genealogy related materials, including church histories, town histories, newspaper articles, written family histories, photos, holiday programs and much more.

If you make a visit back to where your ancestors lived this holiday, take time to visit the vertical files in the local library.

11. Family Photographs

Family photographs hold clues to your family history search. While you may have hundreds of photos on your smartphone right now, your ancestors did things a bit differently. Photographs were taken on more special occasions like Christmas. Ask your relatives to bring out the old family photos. Nothing sparks a family history conversation like an old family photo!

12. Family Reunions

Family reunions – whether big or small – are the place to reconnect with your family including past generations. Share your findings and ask your genealogy questions. You never know who has the answer to your burning genealogy question.

Take time out this holiday season to find your ancestors and reconnect with your family and heritage.

Merry Christmas!!!