

# Using Court Records to Trace Ancestry

## RootsTech by FamilySearch 2022

### **Presenters**

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### **Description**

Many beginning genealogists shy away from using early court records due to their handwritten format, but court records hold a wealth of genealogical information if you know how to approach them. Researchers having difficulty finding information about an individual will want to look at these records because people from all rungs of society appeared in court for civil as well as criminal matters. Consequently, a court case may be the only record that document someone's existence, particularly if they were poor or marginalized. Court cases, wills, and probate records frequently provide names of African American, Black, and Indigenous individuals. Under chattel slavery, estate inventories and accounts listed enslaved people. Debt cases can also provide a lot of information about people and their daily lives. This class will look at New Haven County Court records, 1666-1855, currently being processed under a federal grant, that are uncovering the stories of people from all walks of life.

### **Objectives**

- Learn why court records can be useful for genealogical research.
- Learn about the components of early colonial and pre-Civil War court records.

## **Key Points**

### Why Court Records:

- People from all rungs of society appeared in court.
- A court case may be the only documented record of someone's existence, particularly if they were poor or marginalized.
- Debt cases can provide a lot of information about people and their lives.
- Under chattel slavery, enslaved people were listed in estate inventories and accounts.
- Court cases, wills, and probate records are more likely to provide names of African American, Black, and Indigenous individuals.

### Important Information for Investigators:

- Last names are primarily English, with a few French, Scottish, Dutch, German, Irish, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese surnames.
- Prior to the 1790s, few African-descended or Indigenous individuals had surnames.
- Race was often noted if a plaintiff, defendant, subject, or witness was not of Anglo or non-Hispanic European descent.
- Please be advised these records contain outdated descriptions for ancestral, racial, ethnic, and gender identity.
- "Indian" may refer to Indigenous Native American ancestry OR West Indies.

### Anatomy of a Court Record:

- Writ (summons to trial)
- Promissory note, bond agreement, list of book debts
- Summaries of court proceedings
- Witness summons, depositions, testimonies
- Pleadings by lawyers
- Power of attorney designations
- Court cost account lists
- Jury verdicts or arbitration consensus

## **Useful Links**

Connecticut Digital Archive (CTDA):

<http://hdl.handle.net/11134/30002:RG003>

Subject Guide:

<https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/archives/uncoveringnewhaven/main>

Glossary of Terms:

[https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/ld.php?content\\_id=60857101](https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/ld.php?content_id=60857101)

Blog:

<https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/archives/uncoveringnewhaven/blog>

Guides for the New London County Court Records:

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/70>

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/68>

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/69>

Guides for the Litchfield County Court Records:

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/65>

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/67>

<https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/66>