

# FOLLOW THE MONEY!

## RECORDS OF THE RECORD MAKERS



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**Introduction:** Researching the lives of our ancestors takes us through a wide variety of census, land, tax, court, probate and related records. But conducting reasonably exhaustive research—the kind best designed to produce the results we need—means we not only have to find the *records*; we need to find the *record-makers*. By following the money trail to the doctors, lawyers, preachers, teachers, bankers, merchants and others in their communities who made and kept records may well lead us to details they recorded about our ancestors that no-one else did.

### Why looking for “our” records is often just not enough

Effective genealogical research never means looking for and finding the one record that our ancestor left that gives us the answers to all our questions. That one record may never have been created. It may not have been preserved. Even if created and preserved, it may not be accurate. Doing genealogy right, then, means understanding that we will often find far more information about our ancestors in records created by others, even naming others among their friends, family, associates and neighbors (their FAN club). Finding answers to specific questions means looking at the records created by all the record-makers whose lives intersected with our research target.

*Example:* No official death record exists for William M. Robertson, recorded as a 66-year-old North Carolina-born hatter on the 1860 census of Attala County, Mississippi. He was not recorded on an 1864-65 Attala County Descriptive Register, nor on the 1870 census. No Robertson record provides the answer to the question: when exactly did he die? The answer does exist, in the records of one of the area record-makers. Judge Jason Niles left a diary, now in the holdings of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, recording among others the death of “Old man Robertson (hatter)” on 25 June 1864.

### Who are the record makers?

Two basic characteristics mark the record-makers of a community: they’re literate, and they’re usually in business of some sort. It’s their job, directly or indirectly, to keep records that may impact our families. That’s why we follow the money to find the records.

To be sure that we're finding these people, think about the professions that make up part of a community where records are made and kept, by doctors, lawyers, bankers, merchants, union leaders and heads of business associations, midwives, schoolteachers, preachers, postmasters/postmistresses, funeral directors, and sextons of burial grounds.

We can then go beyond the paid record-keepers to those who may have kept records for other reasons, including church leaders, local area historians—some paid and some purely amateurs, leaders of area social and civic organizations, and even diarists and letter-writers.

After compiling our lists of the kinds of people who may have created records, we need to find those records. That's where we run into the reality that these tend to be manuscript records, not often digitized, rarely indexed and catalogued—if at all—by the surname of the creator and in geographic or subject categories.

### **Where can we find the names of the record makers?**

So if needing the names of the record makers in the places where our ancestors lived is so important to finding the records they left, how do we do that? The three best sources to identify the record makers in our communities are:

- **Census records.** Starting in 1850, occupations were specifically recorded in individual entries on the population schedules. Search engines such as those on *Ancestry.com* allow searches for specific occupations, sometimes as a keyword search (1850) and sometimes in a separate search field (1860 and after). Before 1850, some record makers may be identified by the category of occupation (as, for example, the tick marks for learned professions).
- **Newspapers:** Local newspapers are often the best sources to find the record makers of a community. Reading through the news columns will help identify those who were the area's "big men on campus." Looking at the advertising columns and legal notices can identify merchants, doctors, lawyers or teachers. Digitized newspapers can be word-searched for occupation categories. Subscription sites such as *Newspapers.com* and *GenealogyBank* are helpful, but don't forget the free *Chronicling America* collection from the Library of Congress, as well as many free online regional or state historical newspaper collections.
- **City / county directories:** Directories for urban and rural areas collectively known as city directories will generally include occupation information in the alphabetical listings of residents. Many also have separate sections for professionals and include advertisements as well. Use word search in digitized versions where possible.

### **What kinds of records did the record makers leave?**

The possibilities are endless. A doctor may have recorded every visit he made, who he treated and for what condition. In the case of births and deaths, details may be recorded. Physicians often kept ledgers of births of enslaved children on plantations. A midwife may have recorded every delivery she attended, and sometimes details not just as to the child

but as to the parents as well. Bankers and merchants kept account books and ledgers. Merchants' ledgers often indicated not only what was purchased and when, but how the merchandise was paid for (cash, barter, labor) and who picked up the goods on behalf of the buyer. Hotel keepers kept registers of guests. Local newspaper publishers kept subscription lists. And anyone may have kept a diary or written letters.

### **What these records may be found today**

The possible repositories for the records of the record makers are almost endless. To be thorough, we need to check national and state archives, public and private local archives, local genealogical and historical societies, local public and private libraries, churches and church archives, archives of civic and business groups, community preservation groups, museums at all levels, and academic institutions of all kinds.

### **Key tools for archival research**

The sheer scope of possible archival holdings can be daunting. Some key tools to help find archives and begin to review their holdings are:

- **ArchiveGrid** (resource list #1): a search engine for more than seven million records (primary source materials such as historical documents, personal papers, family histories, and more) from more than 1400 archives, libraries, museums and historical societies.
- **JSTOR** (resource list #10): a digital library providing access to more than 12 million academic journal articles, books, and primary sources.
- **Library of Congress, “Gateway to Library Catalogs”** (resource list #12): a search engine for the catalogs of the Library of Congress and more than 390 international public and academic libraries.
- **National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections** (resource list #16): an entry point for a free cooperative cataloging program covering manuscript and related archival holdings of roughly 1800 participating archives and libraries in the United States.



Make sure to do a search using your favorite search engine for manuscript collections located in or relevant to the areas where your research subject lived, worked, or traveled. Search terms like “Louisa County Virginia manuscripts” can turn up surprising results, not merely from libraries such as those at the College of William & Mary and the University of Virginia, but also from the archival holdings at Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania and the maps collection at the Library of Congress.

## RESOURCES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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**Website URLs verified 14 December 2022**

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