

**Interpreting Church Records<sup>1</sup>**  
Sun City Lincoln Hills Genealogy Club  
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- **Church records are an invaluable resource.**
  - Church records generally predate civil records.
  - Early church records may be the best available documents providing birth, marriage, and death information.
  - In addition to names and dates, they may reveal relationships between people and depict a family's status in the community.
  
- **Locating and interpreting church records is complex.**
  - You need to determine what the religious group was called in the time period you are searching.
  - Within each religious group, numerous changes, splits, and mergers have occurred.
  - Consider my church pedigree:
    - The United Methodist Church – Formed in 1968 with the merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church (E.U.B).
    - The Evangelical United Brethren Church was a merger in 1946 of The United Brethren in Christ Church (organized in 1800) and The Evangelical Church (organized in 1861).
    - The Methodist Church was a merger in 1938 of The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and The Methodist Protestant Church.
      - The Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1784.
      - The Methodist Protestant Church broke away from The M.E. Church in 1828.
      - The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, broke away from The M.E. Church in 1844.
    - Church of England
      - Church of England was formed in the Sixteenth Century under Henry VIII from under the control of the Roman papacy.
      - The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) was formed in the Seventeenth Century.
      - Methodism began as a reform movement within the Church of England in Eighteenth Century under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley.
        - \* In 1784, John Wesley “set apart” Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke to “superintend” the American Methodists.
  - Ethnic groups maintained congregational records in their native/traditional languages.
  - Theological and philosophical differences have resulted in different interpretations and terminology for what some may see as the same event.

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- Each religious group may maintain records:
  - individually (i.e., individual clergy held records)
  - the local organization (i.e., local church, congregation, or circuit)
  - a regional organization (i.e., association, synod, conference, diocese)
  
- **Baptismal Records**
  - “Baptism” is the initiatory rite whereby a person is made a member of the church.
  - Baptism has particular reference to the water rite, but it can be used in reference to Christian initiation as a whole and may therefore, on occasion, include both the water rite and confirmation.
  - Christian Churches differ in their theology (beliefs), interpretation, and type of baptism that is practiced:
    - **Those who practice infant and adult baptism** include: Anglican Communion (including Church of England), The Assyrian Church of the East, The Church of the Nazarene, Eastern Orthodox Church/Eastern Catholic, Lutherans, Methodists, Oriental Orthodoxy, Presbyterians, most Reformed Churches, Reformed Church in America, Roman Catholic Church, and United Church of Christ.
    - **Those who only practice adult baptism** include: Amish, Baptists, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Missionary Alliance, Assemblies of God, Mennonites, most Pentecostals, Plymouth Brethren, Seventh-Day Adventists, and most non-denominational churches.
    - **Those who do not practice baptism** include: The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and The Salvation Army.
    - **Baptism for the dead**, vicarious baptism, or proxy baptism, is a religious practice of baptizing a living person on behalf of an individual who is dead; the living person is acting as the deceased person’s proxy. With this practice, an individual is baptized to give those beyond the grave the opportunity of baptism by proxy. This is practiced in the Church of the Latter-Day Saints.
  
  - **Interpreting Baptismal Records**
    - When an infant is baptized, generally the clergy person records the name of the child and parents. Some records may include names of sponsors or godparents, who were often close friends or relatives of the parents. A place of residence may appear.
    - The baptism date should not be confused with the birth date. These are two distinct events!
      - Infants, children, or adults may be baptized.
      - Days, weeks, months, or years may divide birth and baptism events.
      - Sometimes whole families or all of the children may be baptized on the same occasion.
    - There may be multiple baptism records for an individual.
      - Some groups require all newcomers to be baptized even if a previous baptism had occurred in a previous denomination or within that denomination.

- **Confirmation and Membership Records**

- **Confirmation** is practiced in many Christian Churches.
  - Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Anglican Churches, view it as a sacrament. In the East, confirmation is conferred on infants immediately after baptism, but in the West it is usually administered at the age of reason or in early adolescence.
  - According to canon law for the Latin or Western Catholic Church, the sacrament is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion (generally taken to be about seven), or if there is danger of death, or, in the judgment of the minister, a grave reason suggests otherwise.
  - In Protestant Churches, the rite tends to be seen as a mature statement of faith by an already baptized person, usually an adolescent, and thus as a rite of passage.
  - In the Latter-Day Saints movement, confirmation is an ordinance (sacrament) that takes place soon after baptism.
- Most churches have a **membership roll** or **membership list**.
  - Each denomination dictates how the record is kept and who is responsible for its maintenance and updating.
  - In searching these lists:
    - Note when the person was recorded as a member, how the person became a member, and how the membership was terminated.
    - If the person was received on membership transfer, note the person's previous membership.
    - Look for common surnames and changes of names (i.e., marriage name changes).
    - It may record where the person lived and/or when s/he changed residence.

- **Marriage**

- "Marriage" or "wedlock" is an interpersonal relationship (usually intimate and sexual) with governmental, social, and/or religious recognition.
  - The most common form of marriage unites one man and one woman as husband and wife.
  - Other forms of marriage include: polygamy (a person takes more than one marriage partner) and same-sex marriage.
  - A marriage is often declared by a wedding ceremony and may be performed either by a religious officiator, by a secular government-sanctioned officiator, or (in weddings that have no church or state affiliation) by a trusted friend of the wedding participants.
- A **marriage license** (in American English) or **marriage licence** (in British English) is permission from a legal authority (either church or state) for the marriage of two people to be performed.

- **Marriage licences in the United Kingdom**
  - In England and Wales, the Church **introduced the practice of “calling the banns” in 1215.**
    - This was a public announcement of a forthcoming marriage, in the couple’s parish church, for three Sundays prior to the event, and gave an opportunity for any objections to the marriage to be voiced.
    - The purpose of banns is to enable anyone to raise any legal impediment to it, so as to prevent marriages that are legally invalid, either under canon law or under civil law.
    - Impediments would normally include a pre-existing marriage (having been neither dissolved nor annulled), a vow of celibacy, lack of consent, or the couple’s being related within the prohibited degrees of kinship.
  - **In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century marriage licences were introduced**, allowing this usual notice period to be waived, on payment of a fee and accompanied by a sworn declaration that there was no legal impediment to the marriage.
    - To obtain a **marriage licence** the couple, or more usually the bridegroom, had to swear that there was no just cause or impediment why they should not marry. This was the **marriage allegation**.
    - A **bond** was also lodged with the church authorities for a sum of money to be paid if it turned out that the marriage was contrary to Canon Law.
    - The bishop kept the **allegation** and **bond** and **issued the licence** to the groom, who then gave it to the vicar of the church where they were to be married. There was no obligation for the vicar to keep the **licence**, and many were simply destroyed. Hence, few historical examples of marriage licences in England and Wales survive.
    - However, the **allegations** and **bonds** were usually retained and are an important source for English genealogy.
  - **Hardwicke’s Marriage Act 1753** affirmed existing ecclesiastical law and built it into statutory law. From this date, a marriage was only legally valid if it followed the calling of banns in church, or the obtaining of a licence.
    - The only exceptions being Jewish and Quaker marriages, whose legality were also recognized.
  - **Since 1837, civil marriages have been a legal alternative to church marriages** so today a couple has a choice between being married in the Anglican Church, after the calling of banns or obtaining a licence, or else they can give “Notice of Marriage” to a civil registrar. In this latter case, the notice is publicly posted for fifteen days, after which a civil marriage can take place.

- The **licence does not record the marriage itself**, only the permission for a marriage to take place. **Since 1837, the proof of a marriage** has been by a **marriage certificate**, issued at the ceremony; before then, it was by the recording of the marriage in a parish register.
  
- **Marriage licenses in the United States**
  - Today, every state in the United States issues marriage licenses.
  - After the marriage ceremony, both spouses and the officiant sign the marriage license (some states require a witness).
  - The officiant or couple may then file the signed marriage license.
  - The couple may apply for a certified copy of the marriage license and a marriage certificate from the appropriate governmental office.
  - When the marriage ceremony was performed by a clergyperson, it may be recorded in the church's records.
  
- **Interpreting marriage records**
  - Most denominations have recorded the marriages of their members and/or those married in their church and/or by their pastor.
  - Exceptions include the early Puritans, who viewed marriage as a civil contract.
    - Puritan marriages were performed by a civil magistrate and were not generally recorded in the church register.
  - Church marriage records may only provide the names of the bride and groom, the date, and the officiator.
  - The bride's new name might also appear in the church membership records.
  - There may be a record of the marriage in a minister's private papers or diary.
  
- **Death, Funeral, Burial, and Historical Records**
  - **Death records** in church documents vary in length and detail.
    - They may contain an immigrant ancestor's birthplace, birth and death dates, and burial information, names and number of spouses, marriage dates, number of children, and cause of death.
  - **Funeral and Burial Records**
    - Few churches in the western United States permit burials on their premises today.
    - In the eastern states, many churches permitted burials on their premises in earlier times continuing until today.
    - Because these burials may pre-date the keeping of official county records, a church burial record may be the only evidence of death and interment.
      - This record may include a transcript of the eulogy delivered by the minister at the funeral or memorial service.
    - Tombstones also are an important resource for birth and death information.
      - It is not unusual to find several family members buried in close proximity to one another in the church graveyard.
    - Memorial church windows are another source of information.

- **Historical Records**
  - Churches often retain Minutes of their official actions which may give clues to an individual's role in the local church.
  - Occasionally local churches produce/publish a local church history/directory.
    - These may include pictures, history of the church, leadership lists, a "membership" list with addresses, and/or a list of pastors who served that church.
  
- **Clergy Records**
  - "Ordination" is the process by which individuals are consecrated, that is, set apart, as clergy to perform various religious rites and ceremonies. The process and ceremonies of ordination varies by religion and denomination.
  - The regional organization (i.e., association, synod, conference, diocese) may have specific records relating to the clergy.
  - Those records may include (examples from the United Methodist Tradition):
    - Ordination – Name, date, location
    - Service record – Dates, locations of service, and places of residence
    - Roll of the Honored Dead of Clergy and Spouses – Historical chronological listing by name and death date of clergy and spouses.
    - Memoirs of Clergy and Spouses – These are often prepared by their family.
  
- **Finding Church Records**
  - With what church/denomination was the individual affiliated?
    - Personal family records, i.e., letters, birth records, baptism and marriage records, death information, family Bible
    - Family surname genealogies and family histories
      - Public and privately published genealogies
      - Ancestry.com (card catalogue)
      - FamilySearch.com and Family History Library
    - Published Church records
    - Published County histories
  - Identify the local church(es) with which the individual most likely was affiliated.
    - Consult a County History, Farm Maps, topographic maps, Google maps.
  - Identify the denomination, including the name when the individual lived and the present name.
  - Determine if that local church is still in the community.
    - Is that local church still functioning?
    - What records do they still retain?
    - Obtain permission to gather information from those records.
    - Has that local church merged with another church?
      - Where are their local church records?

- Has that local church ceased to exist?
  - Contact another church of the same denomination in the area and inquire about the location of the records.
  - Are the records retained by a local clerk for safekeeping, or deposited with a merged church, or forwarded to a central depository?
  - The records may be in the hands of a local person who had been a part of that church prior to its closing or merger.
- Determine the depository or central archive that may have the local church's records.
- Determine if a local public library, community historical society, genealogical society, or university library has the records.
- Many college and public libraries, universities, and archives have significant historical or religious collections.

### Resources

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