

# Unlocking the Secrets of U. S. Church Records

## ☞ Handout List ☞

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### Why Bother Chasing Down Church Records?

Exercise is good for you and your brain. You never know what tasty tidbits you might find.

- Church records are often the only form of a vital record you are likely to consistently find until 1900 in the United States. They may help fill in a gap.
- Depending on the denomination and local trends, you might find that elusive place in Europe or the United States where your ancestor was born or when that family moved into a town or where they went to after they left a church.
- You're likely to find confirmation of a vital record or of a fact you already knew, but you might also find a second marriage or a maiden name or a long lost brother who was a sponsor for a child's baptism. And of course, you might find illegitimate offspring.

### Basic Church Record Help

(FamilySearch) [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/U.S. Church Records Class Handout](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/U.S._Church_Records_Class_Handout)

(Ancestry.com) Using Religious Records

<https://www.ancestrycdn.com/institution/Pdf/researchAids/using-religious-records-a94e89f8.pdf> the last page of this online handout includes a step-by-step approach to finding religious organizational (church) records on Ancestry.com

### Establishing Religious Affiliation

☞ **Starter Idea:** Have the name of a church from a family document? Or think you know the religious affiliation already? Try Google to see if it still exists. If that is not a good match, *call the local library in that city/town*. Librarians are nice people and want to help you!!

☞ **Idea: What is the historical context?**

This approach can help narrow things down in a hurry. For instance, in our area we have identified waves of immigration by decade. First the Yankees migrated here from the East Coast, followed closely by United Kingdom immigrants; then Germans and Norwegians which takes us generally up to about 1890s when we have more "modern" immigrant groups settling in La Crosse. At this point, many of the Yankee and UK have gone farther west. As a result of the number of Norwegians, there were many different sects of Norwegian Lutherans in La Crosse. We even had a sect of "Scandinavian Baptists" who were really Quakers. Who knew?? On the other hand, we had a very small Jewish community so there has only been one Synagogue.

If a couple of different faith backgrounds married, a spouse may have converted and thus belong to a faith different than his/her parents or siblings.

*Geography* also plays a part in affiliation – if a church of a preferred denomination was considered too far, the family may have joined a church closer to them physically for practical purposes. Barriers might include rivers, lakes and mountains. Remember the transportation issues of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century!

#### ☞ Idea: Find an Obituary

(FamilySearch) <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list?qgs=obituaries> then filter by collection title for “obituaries”

(Ancestry) once you are logged in:

<https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/category.aspx?cat=125> to specifically search death, burials, cemetery and obituary information

Joe Beine's handy tool gives links to death record indexes of all kinds, including obituaries specifically. Not all of them are free sites--some are databases on Ancestry.

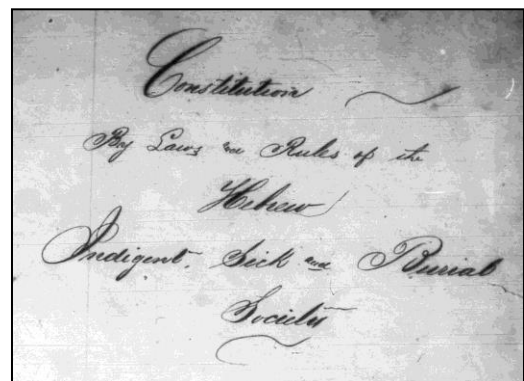
<https://www.deathindexes.com/>

*Try the local library* of the place where the ancestor died! Not everything is on the internet nor digitized.

If the obituary of the ancestor was unhelpful for determining religious denomination, check that of the spouse. Still no help? What about the affiliation of the parents or a sibling? This is not a silver bullet to your problem, but might give you a clue.

#### ☞ Idea: Find the Burial Place

Was the ancestor buried in a cemetery with a religious affiliation? Many older burial grounds were associated with a religious body and that congregation may have dissolved over time but the burial ground remains a silent sentinel to the past. In the example to the right, there had been a Hebrew Indigent, Sick & Burial Society in La Crosse that was associated with the a local Jewish congregation. Over time, this congregation dissolved but the modern Jewish Synagogue has taken it over.



#### ☞ Idea: Find the Marriage Certificate

If the ancestor was married, who performed the ceremony? The original marriage certificate will include who performed the ceremony. Larger cities will have city directories to help identify with what church the officiant was aligned. *A call to the local library* where the marriage took place might give you the answer you're looking for. If it is a JP or Justice of the Peace, your ancestor has again given you the slip!

## Idea: Browse Newspapers

Beyond obituaries, browsing microfilm or searching online newspapers may yield a connection to a church or religious group. Perhaps the wife of the household hosted a garden party for the Ladies Guild or poured tea at the Baptist Church event?

## Finding U. S. Church Records

**FamilySearch:** <https://www.familysearch.org>

Online church records can be listed in the FamilySearch Catalog state-wide, county-wide, or for a town. Some records might have viewing restrictions, and can only be viewed at a Family History Center near you, and/or by members of supporting organizations. The La Crosse Public Library is an affiliate member so by using the library's wifi or using their computers, you should be able to access most of these restricted records.

To find records statewide records:

- a. Enter your state name in the "Place" search field of FamilySearch Catalog. You will see a list of topics and, at the top, the phrase "Places within United States, [STATE]".
- b. Click on "Church records" in the topic list. Click on the blue links to specific record titles.

To find county-wide records:

- c. From the original page, click on Places within United States, [STATE] and a list of counties will appear.
- d. Click on your county.
- e. Click on the "Church records" topic. Click on the blue links to specific record titles.

To find town records:

- f. From the list of counties, click on Places within United States, [STATE], [COUNTY] and a list of towns will appear.
- g. Click on your town if it appears, or the location which you believe was the parish which served your town or village.
- h. Click on the "Church records" topic. Click on the blue links to specific record titles.
- i. Some combination of these icons will appear at the far right of the listing for the record. FHL icons.png. The magnifying glass indicates that the record is indexed. Clicking on the magnifying glass will take you to the index. Clicking on the camera will take you to an online digital copy of the records.

Ancestry \$: <https://www.ancestry.com/>

- From any page on Ancestry®, click the Search tab and select Card Catalog.
- On the left side of the page under Filter by Category, select Directories & Member Lists.
- Under Filter by Category again, select Church Records & Histories.
- If you're looking for records in a certain denomination, type the name of the denomination (like "Presbyterian") in the Keyword(s) field and click Search. If you're not looking for a certain denomination, skip this step.
- To search within a denomination record collection, select a record collection from the list. To search all church records, click Search entire "Church Histories & Records" Category above the list on the right side of the page.
- Enter information and click Search.

Ancestry also has a collection of U. S. Evangelical Lutheran Church of America records which contain sacramental records from more than 2,000 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations:

[https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60722/?\\_ga=2.65800169.610948549.1618948485-16578312.1581704020](https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60722/?_ga=2.65800169.610948549.1618948485-16578312.1581704020). The date range is mid-19<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Finding European Church Records

FamilySearch: <https://www.familysearch.org>

Ancestry \$: <https://www.ancestry.com/>

Archion \$: <https://www.archion.de/en/>

Matricula: <http://data.matricula-online.eu/en/>

Norway and Sweden had state churches so go to their national archives sites.

### Other considerations even in U. S. church records

Language and vocabulary

Written script

Døpte.				Døpte.		Bemærkninger.	
No.	Fødsels-datum.	Daabsdatum.	Barnets Navn.	Forældrenes Navne	Fæddernes Navne.	Hjemmedøbte.	Fremmede.
13	7 <sup>de</sup> Aug. 1888	18 <sup>de</sup> Dec. 1888	Inga Lovise	Thorvald Johansen Marie Johansen (født Larsen)	Lars Gaarden, Marie Gaarden Joh. Nielsen, Lovise Nielsen		Fremmed
14	26 <sup>de</sup> Okt. 1888	2 <sup>de</sup> Dec. 1888	Eggeth Amanda	Thomas v. Pedersen Kora Amalia Pedersen (f. Petersen)	Henry Hansen, Lyset Hansen Alburtine Hansen, Petra Johansen		Fremmed
15	30 <sup>de</sup> Aug. 1888	23 <sup>de</sup> Dec. 1888	Edora Auguste	Ole L. Olsen Kristine Nielsen	Ole H. Selviert, Jenny Selviert John E. Hansen, Pauline Hansen		Fremmed
16	2 <sup>de</sup> Okt. 1888	11 <sup>de</sup> Dec. 1888	John Edwin	Halvar E. Strand Anne Marie Strand	John Christen, Jølle Christen Carl Christen, Anne Christen		Fremmed

German Genealogical Word List:

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/German\\_Genealogical\\_Word\\_List](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/German_Genealogical_Word_List)

Latin Genealogical Word List: [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Latin\\_Genealogical\\_Word\\_List](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List)

Prepared for the La Crosse Area Genealogical Society

April 27, 2021