

Using Social History to Enhance Family Stories

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This presentation will help you to find sources to help you to understand the context in which your family lived, celebrated, cooked, listened to music, and other daily activities that help provide the stories that make our families come alive. Family history research put in context goes beyond just a name, date and place on a pedigree chart. Social history helps us to better understand lives, provides a background to our research, adds interest to the pedigree chart and can also lead to additional records.

When we look at our pedigree charts, so many questions begin to swirl in our heads.

We want to know what the day was like for those names.

What did they wear, how did they cook, what did they cook, how did they grieve, how did they get to the place they were, what was their environment like, what challenges did they have?

What were their fashions, how did they get from one place to another?

What was the trip across the ocean like?

What hardships did they live through?

Were they persecuted?

What happened to them as they settled? How did they, why did they have to defend themselves? We want to know what role society played in their lives...and what role they played in society.

What is social history and why should we care?

Social history is history on the micro level, examining how families fit into, were part of, and can help answer the impact society had on them. Social history helps us to better understand lives providing context to our research. Social history fills in the gaps between the birth, marriage and death of an ancestor. It helps us to understand how they worked, how they played, and who they were.

It is the study of ordinary people's lives. It is the stories we were told as children, heard as adults, and the memories we share. These are the stories of life. Our families live in social context, with a circle of relatives, friends, acquaintances all placed in a world of activity. These stories are the fabric that weaves and creates a "family history" We want to know how our ancestors lived and what life was like for them. This creates a picture in our mind of who and what they were.

Researching the historical context of your family gives us broader picture of what our families thought about, what events were impacting their lives, how they worked, events that were part of their lives. In addition, as a bonus, it might even make the most reluctant person who is not even interested in "genealogy" become interested in "family history"

How, why, and what questions

These questions are what drives us to begin the search for our ancestors. Finding information to fill in the dashes is not as difficult as it might seem. Beginning your search by doing a Google search and entering a question can return many matches that will give you history of what you are looking for.

As an example: “What did people eat for dinner in 1880?” Read:

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/everyday-life-food> or blog posts like <https://blogs.ancestry.com/cm/whats-for-dinner-what-your-ancestors-ate-back-in-the-day/>

The questions that generate after the dates of events are placed on our pedigree charts might include, as a sample:

- Why did they come?
- What did the neighborhood look like?
- What was the experience like?
- What did they eat?
- How did they learn?
- What was daily life like?

These are leading questions that begin to weave the family narrative as you discover answers to those questions.

Planning your search

As always, examining your pedigree chart and your background research should give you clues on where to look. The dates and places that put your ancestor in a specific location are the guideposts to further research. You might have an ancestor who moved to Kentucky who was a coal miner. Not sure where he settled? Learning about and searching for coal mining history not only will educate you on the topic, but it gives you history of your ancestor’s life beyond the dashes listed on the pedigree chart. <http://kycoal.homestead.com/>

What sources can help you? (not an exhaustive list)

- Local newspapers of the times
- Local Histories
- Interviewing relatives
- Books, Periodicals, Microfilm
- Online Sources
- Museums
- Historical societies
- Libraries

Learning about using Social History

Understanding what social history is and how it can benefit your family story can be found in many places. The listed sources below are just a few of the articles and blogs that are helpful in becoming educated about social history. Continued searches using library catalogs both locally and through WorldCat, an online worldwide library catalog that lists books, articles and much more www.worldcat.org should return other publications for background research.

Cooke, Lisa. "Tell Your Ancestor's Story: Use Social History for Genealogy." *Genealogy Gems*, 21 Sept. 2017, lisalouiscooke.com/2015/09/21/social-history-for-genealogy/

Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway, 2000.

"What Is Social History?" | History Today. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2017.
www.historytoday.com/raphael-samuel/what-social-history

Fallon, Jennifer.

"Give Your Ancestors a Place in History." *FamilySearch Blog*, FamilySearch.org, 10 Apr. 2017, www.familysearch.org/blog/en/give-ancestors-place-history/

Select list of sources to help you create your family's story

At your library

Online magazines, books, music and more from your library

Ask your librarian what type of digital media the library subscribes to. Finding books and magazines, both popular and scholarly can help you create a life story. You might find historical fiction to get ideas, ethnic music, videos, languages, encyclopedias and other databases that can help fill in information. When you use the online sources, you might have to look outside of the "genealogy" online resources into the categories of almanacs, encyclopedias, social studies, history or other non-traditional topic categories. Remember the quest is social history, not genealogy research. Always ask a staff member if you are not sure about a resource.

Reach out to the library in the area you are researching. There you might find local history that can offer historical information about the area, buildings, businesses and more that will be able to put your family in context in the area they resided in.

Don't forget to check out university libraries. Often, they have resources that are applicable to social and historical research.

As with Google searching, a key in working with non-genealogy librarians to be most efficient is how you formulate your question. Often initially saying "I am here to do family history research" will sometimes send the librarian down the path of genealogy. In doing social history research remember the entry is history of a subject, time period or a place.

Selected Websites

Victoriana: The 19th Century online

<http://www.victoriana.com/>

Victoriana offers information on everything Victorian from homes, decoration, fashion, food and even the private lives of the Victorians.

American Memory

<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

American Memory provides free and open access through the Internet to written and spoken words, sound recordings, still and moving images, prints, maps, and sheet music that document the American experience.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections>

Digital Public Library of America

<https://dp.la/>

DPLA connects people to the riches held within America's libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions. All of the materials found through DPLA—photographs, books, maps, news footage, oral histories, personal letters, museum objects, artwork, government documents, and so much more—are free and immediately available in digital format.

HistoryLines

<https://historylines.com/>

The site allows anyone to better understand the lives of their forebears by describing the historical events and cultural influences that surrounded their lives. Users see their relatives in historical context with a personalized timeline and map, and can read a detailed, editable life sketch based on when and where your ancestor lived in history.

Feeding America

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/index.html>

The *Feeding America* project has created an online collection of some of the most important and influential American cookbooks from the late 18th to early 20th century.

Chronicling America

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

is a Website providing access to information about historic newspapers and select digitized newspaper pages is a long-term effort to develop an Internet-based, searchable database of U.S. newspapers with descriptive information and select digitization of historic pages. Supported by the NEH, this rich digital resource will be developed and permanently maintained at the Library of Congress. An NEH award program will fund the contribution of content from, eventually, all U.S. states and territories.

A Pictorial History of Kentucky Coal Mining

<http://kycoal.homestead.com/>

New York Public Library Digital Collections

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>

The New York Public Library Digital Collections contains [884,351 items](#) and counting. While that is a small fraction of the Library's overall holdings, it is representative of the diversity of our vast collections—from books to videos, maps to manuscripts, illustrations to photos, and more.

State Memory Projects

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/statememory/>

<https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2013/09/71-digital-portals-to-state-history/>

This Day in History

<http://www.onthisday.com/film-tv/>

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history>

JStor

<https://www.jstor.org/>

Scholarly journal, books and primary source archive covering information in the arts, science, business, history, education and much more. A subscription website usually through libraries and universities, there are individual researcher accounts available.

Fashion Era

www.fashion-era.com

Fashion-era looks at women's costume and fashion history and analyses the mood of an era. Changes in technology, leisure, work, cultural and moral values, homelife and politics have all contributed to lifestyle trends which influence the clothes women choose to wear. These are the changes that make any era of society special in relation to the study of the costume of a period.

Further Readings

Adding social history to your family narrative. *Genealogical Tips (Harlingen, TX) Tip O' Texas* Genealogical Society Harlingen Public Library. v.49 no.1 2009

Book Series: *The Writers Guide to Everyday Life*. Various titles, authors and publishers. Check this link on WorldCat and then check with your local library.

https://www.worldcat.org/search?qt=worldcat_org_all&q=Writer%27s+Guides+to+Everyday+Life

Books Series: *The Social History of Europe*

<https://www.worldcat.org/search?qt=hotseries&q=se%3A%22Social+history+of+Europe.%22>

But who were they? Social history tips. *Family Tree Magazine* (Great Britain) Warners Group Publication, Plc. v.7 no.1 1990

Country newspapers as a source of social history. *Indiana Magazine of History*. Indiana Historical Society. v.48 no.3 1952

Philibert-Ortega, Gena. *From the family kitchen: discover your food heritage and preserve favorite family recipes*. Cincinnati, Ohio : Family Tree Books, 2012.

Starmans, Barbara J. *Tracing your ancestors' lives: a guide to social history for family historians* South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Family History, an imprint of Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2017