

Researching Marriages

When the custom of marriage first started is not clear. Most ancient societies needed stability in male and female relationships, not only for propagation of people, but for dealing with issues such as property rights. During the Roman Empire, lower classes had common law or “free” marriages. The father would deliver the bride and an agreement would be reached between the two parties. Wealthy Romans signed agreements listing property and letting others know that this was a legal union, rather than a common law one. This can be considered the first official recording of marriages.

Finding marriage information will be an important part of your heritage activity. Besides getting the obvious date information, your search could lead you to parent information, who married them, and where. Primary and alternate sources of information include:

Marriage certificate: This is the document that proves that the marriage actually took place. It is usually found in the vital records office for the marriage location, such as a county courthouse. An alternate source could be a religious archive. Many local genealogical groups have published marriage summaries in book form, which can be found in local or state libraries. Remember that these books would be secondary sources as they are subject to error by the compiler.

Marriage license: This is an official document, usually issued by the state, authorizing a marriage to take place. It signifies that the couple has met the legal requirements for marriage. It does not prove that the marriage occurred, however. As a related item, consent affidavits are sometimes issued to give permission by a parent or legal guardian for the individual to be wed. This often occurs with an underage person. These documents can provide valuable information in identifying parents or the age of the couple, for example. Sources are the same as with a certificate.

Marriage Bann: A public proclamation of a couple's intent to marry, a bann is an ecclesiastical custom several centuries old. It gives the public an opportunity to come forward with reasons for the marriage not to occur. Look to church archives for these records.

Marriage Bond: An agreement, with a financial amount usually paid by a male relative, where two parties agree to marry. Bonds were posted before a license would be issued. If a reason was discovered that would void the marriage, the bond would be forfeited, offsetting the cost of any legal action.

Marriage contract: Like a bond, this is an agreement between two parties that primarily deals with property of the individuals. These were common when the persons were “well-to-do” and were remarrying. In today's lingo, we would call this a pre-nuptial agreement. A contract would provide rich detail about the couple, but it does not prove they were married. Used in conjunction with probate records (like a will), however, would prove a that marriage occurred.

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Newspapers: If no religious or civic records can be found, newspaper announcements would be a good secondary source. These articles could also provide added information about the couple's parents, guests at the event, social standing, and details about the wedding.

IGI: The International Genealogical Index, found at Family History Libraries, is a database containing marriage records of people from many nationalities who are now deceased.

Divorce and annulments: Unfortunately, not all marriages are successful. Don't overlook these documents in your research. We had great grandparents who were granted a divorce in 1910. The papers, obtained from the county courthouse, contained an insight into the couple and the family not found through other official records.

Lastly, make an effort to preserve the marriage records you now possess. Whether your own marriage license, for example, or grandma's certificate. De-acidify and store them in acid-free materials.

For more information:

Finding marriage places through Bible records:
<http://www.genealogy.com/00000506.html>

Research and post marriage info up to 1899:
<http://sweetblueroses.tripod.com/worldgen/worldgenwed.html>

Preserving documents:
<http://www.webyfl.com/generic.jhtml?pid=17>

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