

Museums and Such

In your search for family history you probably visit cemeteries and genealogy libraries, talk to family members, and search through court house records, but there are other places you should put on your must visit list for family history research.

When visiting towns where ancestors or family members lived, be sure to visit the local museum if one exists. You will be surprised by the wealth of information you find, particularly in small town museums. Small towns focus greatly on their local culture, schools and organizations, and their museums reflect this with old school yearbooks, rosters from sports teams, and member lists from organizations and social groups. We were surprised while visiting a small town in search of family history that the local museum had the college diploma of an ancestor hung prominently on the wall of a display room. And the people who run the museums usually know everything there is to know about the town and its people, possibly right down to stories about your family.

Another place to visit is the local historical society. You may have already thought to search their genealogical records and their past city directories but be sure to ask what other information they have. Often local historical societies have information and pictures of homes, institutions and prominent businesses on file. So if you've found an ancestor's address from an old city directory, the historical society may have a photograph of the house from that time period as well as a history of the house. This is particularly valuable if the house is no longer standing. The same is true of institutions and businesses.

Historical societies usually have old maps you can view as well. It's a wonderful way to see the city or town during the time of your ancestor and it's particularly valuable in locating streets and city areas that have vanished or been gobbled up by industries.

As with local museums, the staff at historical societies are extremely knowledgeable about the town and will likely be able to help you locate a source for records from schools and churches that no longer exists that your ancestors attended in that town.

Even if you don't find anything on your family at the museum or historical society, you can discover how your ancestor lived, the local customs and the community atmosphere that embodied his or her every day life.

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You might also consider visiting the local newspaper office in your ancestor's town. This could be very helpful in getting articles or an old obituary about your family. Call ahead to make sure they have someone who can talk with you as the staff can be a valuable source for locating records as well as knowing local people who may have the information you need.

Remember to thank everyone along the way and keep a list of the contacts you make. They may prove invaluable later in your research.

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