

Researching Occupations

Some people who research their family history spend much effort getting birth, death, and marriage facts, but give little notice to what their ancestors did to provide for their “keep”. Our ancestors were exactly like us in that they spent most of their waking hours in some type of work or occupation. Whether they kept house, farmed the land, or worked in a factory, they had a job to do. You might want to consider spending some time on your ancestors’ resumes. Why did they do that job? Did they have more than one? Were there historical events that affected their occupational choices? Is their workplace still around?

The first task of course is discovering what your ancestor did. Some sources include:

- U.S. Census records: Starting in 1850, the occupation of each member of the household is listed. This is the best place to start and what’s neat is that you can check successive censuses to see if their occupation changed.
- Social Security Administrations SS-5 records: If your ancestor applied and received a Social Security number, then there is an SS-5 application form on file that will list, among other things, their employer’s name and address. See the end of this newsletter for a form letter you can use to request a copy of this record.
- City Directories: These are helpful because they often list the occupation in addition to a home address. Like the census records, checking successive editions can show changes. Check you local library for old editions.
- Obituaries: These contain a multitude of biographical information, including jobs.
- Wills, Probate records, Military Pension records, and death certificates can also contain occupation information.
- Your Name: Are you a Baker or Carpenter? If so then you probably had an ancestor with that occupation. In colonial times, most people had two names, not our three today. Often their name was listed followed by a comma and their occupation. In 1780, Henry Robert Baker was probably Henry Robert, baker. So be watchful of records where an occupation may be part of the identification.

If you come across an occupation that you don’t understand, check out one of the links at the end of this article for descriptions of old occupations. Perhaps your ancestor was an “ankle beater” (young person who helped drive cattle to market) or a “fower” (street cleaner or sweeper). How about a “pettifogger” (shyster lawyer) or “chandler” (makes or sells candles). Many of the ancestors in

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our families were farmers, which was a common father to son type of transition. But we also have a tailor, shoemaker, minister, and doctor. What a variety!

Once you have a resume of your ancestor, you can begin to interweave it with their life events and the events that happened around them. Try to look for reasons that might explain why they had that occupation. Our grandfather, for example, migrated at the end of WW I to a larger town to find work and ended up a street car driver. Then when the Depression came and work was scarce, he started a small grocery store on his farm to help provide more income. These "larger" historical events shaped his occupation at the time.

A nice touch for your heritage album would be to get pictures of where your ancestors worked. Whether it's the old family farm, or the bank where grandpa worked, it may not be there forever, so now is the time. Whether you have a picture or not, think about highlighting your ancestor's resume in your album, after all, they spent a lot of time at it to provide a living for themselves and their families.

Related info:

Listings of old occupations & trades:

<http://cpcug.org/user/jlacombe/terms.html>

<http://www.usgenweb.org/researchers/occupations.html>

<http://www.gendocs.demon.co.uk/trades.html>

To get a copy of an ancestor's SS-5 form, you can use the suggested form letter at the end of this newsletter.

If you enjoyed this article, please forward it to a friend. Thanks.

Your Family Legacy

"Discover and Preserve Your Family Heritage"

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

To get a copy of an ancestor's SS-5 application, you can use this form letter:

Social Security Administration
Office of Earnings Operations
FOIA Workgroup
300 N. Greene Street
P.O. Box 33022
Baltimore, Maryland 21290

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Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Officer,

Under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. Section 552., I am requesting a copy of the SS-5, Application for Social Security Card, for the following individual:

Name:

SS#:

Birth Date:

Death Date:

This individual is deceased and is listed in the Social Security Administration's Death Master File. I understand the fee for this service is \$7.00 per individual when the Social Security Number is provided and enclosed is a check for \$7.00 made out to the Social Security Administration.

Thank you for your help in this matter.

Sincerely,